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# KIERKEGAARD AND THE CLASSICAL VIRTUE TRADITION

Mark A. Tietjen

This paper affirms the thesis that Kierkegaard can be properly and profitably read in light of the virtue tradition, broadly construed. I consider several objections to this thesis, including the idea that Kierkegaard largely opposes the culture of antiquity out of which the virtue tradition comes, that Kierkegaard's emphasis on duty and the commanded nature of love is incompatible with genuine concerns of virtue ethics, and that Kierkegaard's concept of faith is incompatible with a strong concern for the virtues. Then I offer two avenues for broadening our thinking about his ethical philosophy in light of the attention he pays to the virtues. First, I argue that we may beneficially read Kierkegaard alongside Jane Austen, as someone whose writings reflect both the Christian and Aristotelian traditions. Second, in terms of contemporary moral philosophy, I suggest that Kierkegaard be placed in conversation with "radical virtue ethics," a category recently introduced by David Solomon.

Any sympathies with ancient philosophy that might be present in Kierkegaard's thought have undoubtedly been overshadowed in the twentieth century by existentialist interpretations<sup>1</sup> (where Kierkegaard anticipates Sartre et al.) and more recently by postmodern, literary deconstructionist ones (where Kierkegaard anticipates Derrida et al.).<sup>2</sup> Scholars have not been entirely blind to the appreciation for and debt to certain features of Greek philosophy Kierkegaard's writings betray, however. His fondness for Socrates—as much a thinker concerned with virtue as Aristotle—was popularly vocalized by one of the early translators of Kierkegaard into English, David Swenson, who referred to Kierkegaard as the "Danish Socrates."<sup>3</sup> More recently, the collection of essays *Kierkegaard after*

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<sup>1</sup>For a definitive rejection of the 'existentialist Kierkegaard' see Robert C. Roberts, "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), pp. 181–203.

<sup>2</sup>I do not mean to suggest that these are the only views that have been available to Kierkegaard's readers, but just that these interpretations have had, in my view, a measure of (popular) dominance. For a more detailed (and literary) take on the variety of interpretations of Kierkegaard in the last century, see Roger Poole's "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 48–75.

<sup>3</sup>See David Swenson, *Something about Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1941).



MacIntyre<sup>4</sup> indirectly brought this connection to the fore in its exploration of Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of Kierkegaard in chapter four of *After Virtue*. In this paper I wish to advance the thesis that Kierkegaard can and ought to be read as a member of the western virtue tradition that extends, according to theologian David Gouwens, "from Plato and Aristotle through Plutarch, orthodox Christianity and [is] addressed anew in Pietism and in moral philosophers such as Kant."<sup>5</sup> It is a tradition that has, in the last fifty years, been reinvigorated by figures such as Elizabeth Anscombe and MacIntyre.

In his essay in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, historian Bruce Kirmmse contrasts the respective criticisms of modernity offered a century and one-half ago by Kierkegaard, and more recently by MacIntyre. In the course of the article, Kirmmse raises two problems for those of us who would offer an interpretation of Kierkegaard as a kind of virtue ethicist. The basis of these concerns is Kierkegaard's Christianity, which Kirmmse takes to be at odds both with classical Greek culture in general and its conception of a virtue in particular. I will take up both issues, as well as the objection that Kierkegaard's emphasis on duty and the commanded nature of love is incompatible with genuine concerns of virtue ethics. Upon addressing potential problems with this association, I suggest two ways to think of Kierkegaard in light of the virtue tradition by juxtaposing themes central to his writings with those of the novelist Jane Austen and an approach to the virtues David Solomon has labeled "radical virtue ethics."

### *Objection One: Kierkegaard Opposes the Classical Tradition*

An important part of MacIntyre's critique of modernity in *After Virtue* involves accusations he makes against Kierkegaard as a proponent of an ethic of radical choice. Robert C. Roberts places MacIntyre's view of Kierkegaard in context: "This Sartrean Kierkegaard is the anti-hero of Alasdair MacIntyre's saga of the Enlightenment project of finding a rational foundation for morality."<sup>6</sup> Kirmmse convincingly demonstrates how MacIntyre's charges rest on a misunderstanding. Kierkegaard, too, was highly critical of modernity—namely, the ethical theories that immediately preceded him in Kant and Hegel—and what Kirmmse calls "Romantic philhellenism."<sup>7</sup>

According to Kirmmse, Kierkegaard "was unable to feel much nostalgia" for the classical tradition and its forms of life that determine the roles

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<sup>4</sup>John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, ed., *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 94.

<sup>6</sup>Robert C. Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušítk and Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 148–149.

<sup>7</sup>Bruce Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, p. 193.

we humans play.<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard reads Greek life as full of anxiety based in significant part on the ancient conception of fate. While Socrates breaks with the traditional answer to the Euthyphro question, Kirmmse contends that mainstream Greek culture largely felt that its well-being was a function of the moods of the gods—what Kirmmse calls “‘zero-sum’ fatalism.”<sup>9</sup> Even Socrates, at times, represents the zero-sum approach when on his deathbed he asks Crito to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius. Kirmmse notes Socrates’ “witheringly ironic insistence that life itself is an illness, while death is deliverance, healing.”<sup>10</sup> On this view, it seems the ancients get no further than this bleak outlook on life. (Kirmmse agrees with MacIntyre that Kant gets no further, either.) Kirmmse believes that Kierkegaard would have criticized MacIntyre “for being insufficiently cognizant of the radical difference between Christianity and classical culture.”<sup>11</sup> For Kierkegaard, says Kirmmse, “the crisis of classical fatalism” can only be fixed by Christianity, “which teaches that existence is more than a zero-sum game.”<sup>12</sup> Christianity’s primary distinction from paganism is that God supplies the condition, something outside of us, that provides meaning for life. Kirmmse continues, “just as MacIntyre draws his great divide between the classical-medieval and modern periods, Kierkegaard draws his great divide between classical and Christian.”<sup>13</sup>

While distinctions Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms draw between Greek life and thought and Christianity should not be overlooked or downplayed, Kirmmse seems mistaken in this comment about Kierkegaard.<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard rarely polemicizes against the Greeks, but rather treats them as, at times, relatively innocent pagans (innocent in that they lacked the Christian revelation and especially the concept of sin).<sup>15</sup> While

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. I will withhold critique of Kirmmse’s view of the Greeks here, since my concern is more with what he thought Kierkegaard thought.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Kirmmse defends this reading of Kierkegaard’s view of the Greeks by depending almost exclusively (at least as far as references go) on *The Concept of Anxiety*. As Kierkegaard himself reminds us in “A First and Last Explanation” following the text of the pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, however, we should hesitate to allow Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms (in this case, Vigilius Haufniensis) to speak for Kierkegaard or to represent his views. While I am sympathetic to finding agreement between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, Kirmmse’s case would be stronger if he relied more on signed works (including the journals). In this paper I shall credit pseudonymous works to their respective pseudonym (e.g., *Fear and Trembling* to Johannes de silentio), though for the most part the ideas I shall take from the pseudonymous writings are ones I believe to be compatible with Kierkegaard’s own thoughts on the matter.

<sup>15</sup>One thinks of Johannes Climacus’s pagan who relates to the wrong deity in the right way, and in Climacus’s mind, is closer to truth than the Christian who relates in the wrong way to the right deity. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments,”* trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 201. C. Stephen Evans distinguishes between three of Kierkegaard’s targets in *Works of Love*: the unspoiled pagan, the spoiled pagan, and the deluded

Kierkegaard might not seem as nostalgic as Kirmmse implies MacIntyre to be, it seems too strong to attribute to Kierkegaard an out-and-out rejection of ancient Greece. For one thing, throughout his writings Kierkegaard views one of its monumental figures, Socrates, not as a zero-sum fatalist, but as a masterful ethicist: one who cares for virtue and whose life-work is devoted to persuading others to care for virtue.<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard holds Socrates in high esteem not just in the pseudonymous works<sup>17</sup> but in the signed, religious writings too.<sup>18</sup> Second, if Kierkegaard's 'great divide' is between Christianity and the classical world, what are we to do with the modern period? After all, Kierkegaard directs his 'attacks' not against the Greeks but against Hegelianism and its infiltration into the Danish Lutheran church. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus directs *his own* attacks against modern philosophy (especially Descartes and Hegel) *with the aid of* Greek philosophy and especially Socrates.<sup>19</sup>

If we must view Kierkegaard's thought in terms of a dichotomy, surely the modern era cannot be assimilated with classical thought, because, for one thing, it has developed within a "Christian" Europe. But modernity clearly does not fall on the Christian side of the divide, either. That is the primary problem Kierkegaard's works address: Christianity contaminated by modernity. It is probably a mistake for Kirmmse to set up a Kierkegaardian dichotomy at all,<sup>20</sup> but it is clearly wrong that he ignores

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pagan. Evans believes Kierkegaard places the Greeks, the innocent pagans, in the former category (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], pp. 114–115.)

<sup>16</sup>Again, Kirmmse's reading of Kierkegaard's view of Socrates depends almost exclusively on the view presented in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard's dissertation. Besides the fact that Kierkegaard does not consider this book part of his authorship proper, there is significant consensus that Kierkegaard's view of Socrates changes significantly after the dissertation. That is, after *The Concept of Irony* this negative view of Socrates rarely, if ever, surfaces. For an early example of this view, see James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 151 (originally published in 1953). See also David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, p. 44 n. 45; and John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 146.

<sup>17</sup>E.g., "Yet it is possible that in the Socratic ignorance there was more truth in Socrates than in the objective truth of the entire system that flirts with the demands of the times and adapts itself to assistant professors" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 202). See also pp. 131, 147, 162, and 207.

<sup>18</sup>E.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses; The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 241; *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 37, 133; *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 276–277; and *For Self-Examination / Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 9–10.

<sup>19</sup>"This much, however, is certain, that with speculative thought everything goes backward, back past the Socratic, which at least comprehended that for an existing person existing is the essential" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 212). And, "Socrates politely and indirectly took the untruth away from the learner and gave him the truth, whereas speculative thought politely and indirectly takes the truth away from the learner and gives him the untruth" (*Ibid.*, p. 219).

<sup>20</sup>I suspect that he does so to facilitate a comparison of Kierkegaard to MacIntyre.

modernity *here*, precisely because elsewhere in the article he argues that Kierkegaard is a more radical critic of modernity than MacIntyre himself.<sup>21</sup> I would argue that *if* one has to force Kierkegaard into positing some divide, it would be between Christianity and paganism, where paganism takes on all stripes that include the pre-Christian Greeks *as well as* the post-Christian Hegelians. But perhaps one is better off without such attempts at simplification.

Kirmmse is right to point out that many concepts of Christianity stand in opposition to classical ones (including classical virtue ethics) in many ways, but what about the similarities? Roberts points out several general features Kierkegaard's thought shares with that of both the ancient Greeks<sup>22</sup> and the church fathers. These features include the notions that humans are "capable of having a stable character," that they possess "a given human nature independently of our trait development," that "traits are dispositions to passive or quasi-passive episodic states of the subject such as emotions, perceptions, and thoughts," and that these traits are interconnected and "make or fail to make for the well-being, happiness, eudaimonia, or flourishing of those who possess them and those who associate with those who possess them."<sup>23</sup> Both Kierkegaard and classical virtue theorists "are typically preoccupied with moral and spiritual education, upbringing, upbuilding, formation, deep psychological development."<sup>24</sup> In addition to these features, David Gouwens notes "the development of ongoing intentions, dispositions, judgments, and motivations that characterize a person over time" that place Kierkegaard in the 'broad tradition.'<sup>25</sup> This is only a preliminary list, and yet to ignore these likenesses is to exaggerate Kierkegaard's differences with the classical virtue tradition. Certainly, as Roberts argues, Kierkegaard has more in common with Aristotle than he does with Camus or Sartre.

*Objection Two: Commanded Love is Incompatible with Virtue Ethics*

One might grant that Kierkegaard shares with virtue thinkers certain broad assumptions about human nature and existence, and yet point out that he seems to lack the sort of teleological vision of the good characteristic of a virtue ethic. Kierkegaard instead emphasizes concepts like duty and the right, and even love is a 'virtue' that is commanded. This objection is misguided, however. Kierkegaard does have a vision of the good that shapes his work, and this is evident particularly in *Works of Love*, arguably

<sup>21</sup>See Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," pp. 191, 193, 202–203.

<sup>22</sup>Julia Annas has argued that the theoretical structure of virtue ethics underlies not just Aristotle but "all of ancient ethical theory" ("Virtue Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 515). See also her *The Moral-ity of Happiness and Platonic Ethics Old and New*.

<sup>23</sup>Robert C. Roberts, "The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*," pp. 187–188.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>25</sup>Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, p. 94.

his most important work of ethics. Despite the emphasis there on the commanded nature of love, Kierkegaard's exegesis of that concept and many other virtue concepts elsewhere in his writings suggest a much more complex picture of the moral life that shares elements with human nature theories that tend to emphasize the actualization of certain potential traits within human nature.<sup>26</sup>

There are two sections of *Works of Love* that shed light on these issues: first, the 'deliberation' "Love is a Matter of Conscience," and second, the conclusion. Like most of the deliberations in *Works of Love*, 'Conscience' takes scripture as its point of departure: "But the sum of the commandment is love out of a pure heart and out of a good conscience and out of a sincere faith" (I Tim. 1:5). The command of Christ equates to a set of three dispositions, virtues, to be inculcated in the life of the Christian. Kierkegaard expounds the three in turn, emphasizing especially the second. His focus on the cultivation of these dispositions *as* the accomplishment of the commandment provides an important counterweight to the previous deliberation "Love is the Fulfilling of the Law" by placing the conscience as the locus of the God-human relationship. "[T]o relate to God is precisely to have a conscience."<sup>27</sup> Thus, the deontological notion of one's duty to follow God, to obey God's command to love, can also be viewed from the other side as a human developing a good conscience. The following quotation portrays how the very purpose of the command is to bring about within an individual a dispositional excellence:

The merely human point of view conceives of love *either* solely in terms of immediacy, as drives and inclination (erotic love), as inclination (friendship), as feeling and inclination, with one or another differentiating alloy of duty, natural relations, prescriptive rights, etc., *or* as something to be aspired to and attained because the understanding perceives that to be loved and favored . . . is an earthly good. Christianity is not really concerned with all this. . . . Christianity allows all this to remain in force and have its significance externally, but at the same time through its doctrine about love, which is not predicated on comfortableness, it wants to have infinity's change take place internally.<sup>28</sup>

For Kierkegaard then, Aristotle and Kant each have their place in drawing particular emphases on the reasons one is obliged to act in certain ways. For the Christian, the command of God is a necessary condition. And yet, the point of the command is not arbitrary but intimately tied to human nature—its flourishing and perfection.

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<sup>26</sup>C. Stephen Evans describes the ethic the pseudonym Johannes Climacus puts forth in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as a 'soul-making ethic' which, similarly to Kierkegaard's view in *Works of Love*, incorporates both Aristotelian themes of self-actualization and flourishing and a Kantian emphasis on duty. See chapter five of *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983).

<sup>27</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 143.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 143–144.



In "A Kierkegaardian View of the Foundations of Morality," C. Stephen Evans draws the following conclusion that bears directly on the objection that given Kierkegaard's emphasis on duty and commanded love, there is little room for the concerns that lie behind human nature theories such as virtue ethics:

the human nature and divine command elements in Kierkegaard's thinking are not in contradiction. . . . we could say that for Kierkegaard the self we must strive to become is a self that was created for a relationship with God and therefore that persons should strive to attain the faith in God that makes such a relationship possible. . . . This coincidence of the task of becoming yourself and achieving a God-relationship is expressed in *Fear and Trembling* when Abraham's motive for being willing to sacrifice Isaac is characterized: "Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake."<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the features of Kierkegaard's ethical thought that draw on Christian theology or some Kantian debt must not be understood as exclusive of other features that more closely resemble human nature theories such as virtue ethics.

More evidence that Kierkegaard's discussion of the commanded nature of Christian love is not just compatible but coincident with a view that emphasizes the virtues and a teleological vision of the good can be found in the conclusion to *Works of Love*, where the scriptural point of departure is the exhortation, not command: "Beloved, let us love one another" (I Jn. 4:7). Kierkegaard writes:

These words, which have apostolic authority, also have, if you consider them, an intermediate tone or an intermediate mood in connection with the contrasts in love itself. The basis of this is that they are by one who was perfected in love. You do not hear the rigorousness of duty in these words; the apostle does not say, "You *shall* love one another . . ." <sup>30</sup>

The assumption is that the aged apostle John has responded to the command of Christ in obedience, and what that looks like is a mature character quality, an excellence. Moreover, it is an excellence intimately tied with Kierkegaard's vision of the good for a human life: "The commandment is that you *shall* love, but ah, if you will understand yourself and your life, then it seems that it should not need to be commanded, because to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living."<sup>31</sup> Once again, while the objector is correct to point out Kierkegaard's emphasis on duty, this does not, for Kierkegaard, preclude those concerns most important to virtue ethicists: the cultivation of virtues in accordance with some teleological conception of the good. As to

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<sup>29</sup>C. Stephen Evans, "A Kierkegaardian View of the Foundations of Morality," in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher, and Mark Nelson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), p. 71.

<sup>30</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 375.

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



the content of the conception of the good, Kierkegaard like Aquinas will situate that in Christian revelation, whereas non-theistic teleological ethics will arrive at their conception without such appeal.

*Objection Three: Kierkegaardian Faith is Opposed to Virtue*

Kirmmse's second worry about reading Kierkegaard alongside virtue thinkers like MacIntyre involves the specific concept of a virtue. On an Aristotelian account, a moral virtue is a dispositional excellence one attains through repeatedly acting in an appropriate manner at an appropriate time for an appropriate reason. While, importantly, one needs the right sort of community—especially good teachers and parents—and external goods like wealth and even beauty to become virtuous, each person has within him or herself the power to attain virtuous character. Philip Quinn correctly anticipates an incongruity between this sort of conception of virtue and Christianity. Such a view of virtue implies that "Practical reason operating apart from religious influences offers humans their best shot at working out for themselves good lives."<sup>32</sup> We might ask, is a Christian virtue ethic possible in the first place? Kirmmse hints that, at least for a Lutheran like Kierkegaard, it is not: "one wonders indeed whether it is useful to speak of Christian "virtues" at all."<sup>33</sup>

Kirmmse wants to draw a categorical divide between the unique concepts of Christianity, e.g., grace and sin, and the concepts of classical morality represented, for instance, by Aristotle. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard's ideal Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus suggests such a sharp divide, exemplified by the Socratic definition of sin as ignorance. This view *is* profoundly different from the Christian view, sin as willful defiance, which Anti-Climacus contends was absent in the classical world. While, as stated above, Kirmmse affirms a few points of possible dialogue between a virtue ethicist like MacIntyre and Kierkegaard, he insists that Kierkegaard's radical Christian views are largely incompatible with a care for the virtues. "Kierkegaard's way of thinking does indeed come "after virtue," but only because he insists that everything after the arrival of Christianity is after virtue, and that faith is what Christianity puts forth instead of virtue."<sup>34</sup>

If Kirmmse and Quinn are correct that Christianity is incompatible with a classical conception of the virtues, what place *do* the "virtues" have in Christianity? What of faith, hope and love, and what of the Galatian "fruits of the Spirit" (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control)? Surely those who disallow the possibility of a Christian virtue ethic must give some account of the many apparent virtues present throughout Scripture. If there is a place for these

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<sup>32</sup>Philip Quinn, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, p. 280.

<sup>33</sup>Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," p. 198.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 197.

virtues in Christianity, can that place be significant in a way that still allows for God's grace?<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, one may ask whether Kierkegaard is opposed to a virtue ethic as Kirmmse suggests. If so, how does one make sense of the many virtues expounded throughout his works? Since Kierkegaard does value the distinct doctrines of sin and grace, can he give due importance to the virtues and still remain orthodox? Does it enfeeble the notion of virtue to claim that we can cultivate it only through an act of God's grace?

When Kirmmse says "faith is what Christianity puts forth instead of virtue," he refers to the Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus's (biblically-derived) claim in *The Sickness unto Death*: "the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith."<sup>36</sup> However, he ignores the fact that faith has long been viewed by Jews and Christians as a kind of virtue, a character trait that one should strive to cultivate and work out, albeit in fear and trembling. How might one reconcile this incongruity? Roberts views Anti-Climacus's claim as "a grammatical remark about sin," that understands by 'virtue' what Aristotle's magnanimous man might embody.<sup>37</sup> This view of virtue can be characterized by a high degree of pride and glory in one's moral character and accomplishments—a view where divine assistance is absent. However, as MacIntyre tells us, there are a wide array of "virtue collections" (each also containing its own definition of what a virtue is, generally speaking) including those of Aristotle, the New Testament, the Icelandic Sagas, Benjamin Franklin, and Nietzsche. As Roberts writes, "Once we acknowledge that different virtues, belonging to different traditions, have different grammars, it is quite natural to grant, with the broad Christian tradition, that the *virtue* of faith—the disposition to acknowledge, trust, and love God—is the opposite of sin."<sup>38</sup> If we can understand faith as a virtue in this sense, and yet salvation according to Paul comes through grace alone *by faith*, then it would seem that the possession of virtues is compatible with distinctive Christian concepts like grace and sin.

#### *Christian Virtue and the Christian Virtue of Faith*

Whether a Christian virtue ethic is possible depends on how loosely or how tightly one draws the bounds of virtue ethics, and this is largely a function of how one defines virtue. If one wishes to argue for reading Kierkegaard in this broad tradition, one must first be clear about how he departs from classical virtue thinking. Thus, Kirmmse is correct that Kierkegaard's views of virtue and the virtues are by no means identical to

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<sup>35</sup>Quinn suggests that Christian moral philosophers should "join Aquinas in holding that virtue consists chiefly in conformity with God's will and obedience to his commands," in "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," p. 284.

<sup>36</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 82. The scriptural source is Romans 14:23.

<sup>37</sup>Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" p. 151.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

Aristotle's (or Socrates'), just as they are not identical to Nietzsche's or Benjamin Franklin's.

One of the more constant ways Kierkegaard departs from the Aristotelian tradition (though his criticism is against his contemporaries, not the ancients) comes in his opposition to life-views anchored by the Delphic motto "all things in moderation."<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard regularly criticizes the "virtue" of *Klogskab*, translated 'sagacity' by the Hongs, but also suggesting shrewdness, prudence, or calculation.<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard calls the "deification of sagacity" the "idolatry of our age," and claims that "Christianly understood, sensibleness, levelheadedness, and sagacity are . . . intoxication!"<sup>41</sup> While in the end Aristotle's understanding of cleverness maps onto this idea of prudence or sagacity better than his notion of 'practical wisdom,' there is a kind of worldly wisdom (at times Kierkegaard calls it common sense) present in the Greeks that Kierkegaard strongly rejects.

Edward Mooney further distinguishes the kind of virtue thinker Kierkegaard is and is not through a consideration of categories MacIntyre introduces in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. A Traditionalist approach<sup>42</sup> to virtue "would typically set a goal we can achieve with effort and training. Yet some aims Kierkegaard will stress in his religious voice are aims we *cannot* achieve with effort and training. Attainment of these can only be welcomed as a gift from sources we cannot control."<sup>43</sup> Here Mooney points to the notion of grace that plays an important role in Kierkegaard's works generally speaking, but also in his conception of virtue, and of faith in particular. Another divergence from a classical conception of virtue involves Kierkegaard's understanding of the qualified role of striving in the moral life. According to Mooney, Kierkegaard's emphasis on "the strategy of releasing the will from striving (though not from passion), prevents us from placing him unequivocally within those versions of virtue ethics that place exclusive stress on the dynamic *pursuit* of virtue."<sup>44</sup> This idea of "releasing the will from striving" is exemplified in Anti-Climacus's formula for faith in *The Sickness unto Death*, where faith is described as the self's resting in the power that established it, God. However, this conception of virtue (and faith in particular) does not disallow striving altogether. In another pseudonymous work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes

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<sup>39</sup>"The purely human view is of the opposite opinion, that to be sober is specifically marked by exercising moderation in everything, by observing in everything this sober 'to a certain degree'" (Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination / Judge for Yourself!*, p. 106). This also gets expressed in the phrase "nothing too much."

<sup>40</sup>For more on Kierkegaard's conception of *Klogskab* and his relation to Aristotle, 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), pp. 165–189.

<sup>41</sup>Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination / Judge for Yourself!*, pp. 102–103.

<sup>42</sup>According to MacIntyre, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas represent this approach.

<sup>43</sup>Edward Mooney, "The Perils of Polarity: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre in Search of Moral Truth," in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, p. 250–251.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 253.

Climacus—who, notably, is *not* a Christian pseudonym—claims that faith itself involves *becoming* a particular sort of person, risking a bold venture, working strenuously. Of course Climacus's nuanced view, like Johannes de silentio's view of Abraham's faith in *Fear and Trembling*, is scripturally based insofar as one is told to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

That Kierkegaard's and his pseudonyms' views coincide is evident when one turns to the signed work *For Self-Examination* and its conception of faith that allows for striving. Unlike an Aristotelian view of striving, here one strives to become virtuous *in response to God's grace through God's grace*. Kierkegaard's comments are set in the context of the classic grace-versus-works debate that was a divisive issue in the days of St. Paul, as it was for Luther, and as it remains among many Christian theologians today.

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. . . . "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. If it is to be works and nevertheless grace, that is indeed foolishness." Yes, that is indeed foolishness; that would also be true Lutheranism; that would indeed be Christianity. Christianity's requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required—that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nevertheless grace.<sup>45</sup>

By rejecting the false dichotomy set up by those who want "to become Christian as cheaply as possible," Kierkegaard carves a space for the role of virtues as *dispositions to be achieved by works that one must strive to do in response to God's grace, with the help of God's grace*. These works are not meritorious, but rather are compatible with salvation by grace alone. Kierkegaard is explicit that salvation comes through grace, yet at this point one can see clearly *why* there is throughout his writings an emphasis on works, on virtues, on the cultivation of right character.

When one qualifies Kierkegaard's understanding of virtue, one can follow Quinn's advice to see how Aquinas, the great synthesizer of Athens and Jerusalem, conceives of virtue. Kierkegaard would likely agree to his definition of the theological virtues, in particular.<sup>46</sup> The reason faith, hope, and love are theological virtues is, "[F]irst, because they have God as their object, inasmuch as by them we are rightly ordered to God; secondly, because they are infused in us by God alone; and finally, because these virtues are made known to us only by divine revelation in Sacred Scripture."<sup>47</sup> Though Kierkegaard is right to point out how Kierkegaard's

<sup>45</sup>Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>46</sup>For a discussion of faith, hope, and love in Kierkegaard, see *For Self-Examination*, pp. 81–85.

<sup>47</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 119 (question LXII). MacIntyre is correct to point out

Christian conception of faith is unlike any concept of classical thought, through carefully attending to an appropriate definition of virtue that takes into account Kierkegaard's Christianity, one may better qualify the sort of virtue thinker Kierkegaard is and, therefore, facilitate more interesting conversation with other virtue thinkers of various stripes.

*MacIntyre, Austen, and Kierkegaard*

Kirmmse's intention in "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," is specifically to consider 'points of contact' between the two. In a similar spirit, I wish to spend the balance of the paper suggesting points of contact between Kierkegaard and the broader virtue tradition by juxtaposing themes of his writings with those of Jane Austen's and of contemporary 'radical virtue ethics,' a category enunciated by David Solomon.

The former comparison was suggested indirectly by MacIntyre himself in *After Virtue*. There he writes the following about Jane Austen:

Gilbert Ryle believed that her Aristotelianism—which he saw as the clue to the moral temper of her novels—may have derived from a reading of Shaftesbury. C.S. Lewis with equal justice saw in her an essentially Christian writer. It is her uniting of Christian and Aristotelian themes in a determinate social context that makes Jane Austen the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues which I have tried to identify.<sup>48</sup>

MacIntyre claims that not only does Austen "reproduce" the Aristotelian-Christian tradition, but she "extends" it in three significant ways.<sup>49</sup> I will briefly make mention of each of these ways—MacIntyre calls them "preoccupations"—to show the remarkable congruence of their concerns.<sup>50</sup> Central to my analysis is an assumption about the larger purpose of Kierkegaard's works, one that corresponds to MacIntyre's own claim about Austen's novels: that the author is largely concerned with the ethical and religious edification of the reader.<sup>51</sup> MacIntyre writes of Austen,

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that Kierkegaard and Aquinas have different conceptions of human depravity, but he seems to overstate their differences by claiming that they are "irreconcilable perspectives, systematically at odds both philosophically and theologically" ("Once More on Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, p. 353).

<sup>48</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 240.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>50</sup>My objective in this section is modest. The comparison with Austen is *not* part of my defense for reading Kierkegaard as a virtue ethicist. I intend it instead as an imaginative experiment contributing to my project of rethinking how we view Kierkegaard—who he is like and unlike as a thinker. Thus, if the comparison seems unfounded, this owes more to my forcing something inappropriate than to the thesis I have defended above that Kierkegaard is a kind of virtue thinker.

<sup>51</sup>In recounting his authorship Kierkegaard writes, "What I have wanted has been to contribute, with the aid of confessions, to bringing, if possible, into these incomplete lives as we lead them a little more truth (in the direction of being persons of ethical and ethical-religious character, of renouncing worldly sagacity, of being willing to suffer for the truth, etc.), which indeed is always something and in any case is the first condition for beginning to exist more

"Her irony resides in the way that she makes her characters and her readers see and say more and other than they intended to, so that they and we correct ourselves."<sup>52</sup>

Austen's first "preoccupation" involves her practice of exposing counterfeit virtues.<sup>53</sup> Her view of morality, according to MacIntyre, "is never the mere inhibition and regulation of the passions," but "is rather meant to educate the passions."<sup>54</sup> Clear illustrations of this can be found in the exposing of the superficial brand of romantic love shared by Lydia and Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, or—also in that novel—the unforgiving, judgmental contempt Lydia's sister Mary has in response to Lydia's frivolous relationship. In both cases, attributes conceived by the morally immature to be excellences are, in fact, found wanting.

Kierkegaard can be found doing similar things in his examination of virtue concepts and, more broadly, a host of other moral, psychological, and theological concepts. We have already noted his attention to *Klogskab*, a worldly form of wisdom or prudence. Kierkegaard's endless critique of the infiltration of Hegelianism in the Church involves exposing the counterfeit intellectual virtue of reflection or reflectiveness. Kierkegaard is not opposed to all philosophical or theological reflection. In fact, he describes part of his work as an author as casting Christianity into reflection.<sup>55</sup> Rather, he rejects the sort of reflection that moves one away from existence, that distances one's intellectual life from one's ethical and religious life in the world.<sup>56</sup> Like Austen, Kierkegaard also considers counterfeits to love, conceptions that compete with what he takes to be its highest form, Christian neighbor love. In *Either/Or I* numerous species of aesthetic love are presented in the well-known 'Seducer's Diary,' the review of Mozart's Don Juan and of Scribe's play *Les Premières Amours ou Les Souvenirs d'enfance*. The exposing of the views of love presented in these pieces comes in part in the texts themselves; Johannes the Seducer, by the end of the diary, is clearly a most pathetic character with a terribly perverse sense of love.

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capably," (*The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], p. 17).

<sup>52</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 243 (emphasis mine). Besides the shared interest in edifying the reader, the literary nature of Kierkegaard's writings lends itself more easily than other philosophers' writings to comparison with novelists and literary figures such as Austen.

<sup>53</sup>The notion of counterfeit virtues seems to imply there are genuine virtues, and this in turn raises the question of whether genuine virtues can be understood as such only within a particular context or community, or whether there are objectively genuine virtues. In his consideration of Austen, MacIntyre seems to have in mind the contextual determination of virtues and their counterfeits. In *Dependent Rational Animals* it seems as though the virtues of acknowledged dependence hold without consideration of context. This sort of meta-ethical discussion is clearly beyond our current purposes, and so I will withhold concerns about the objectivity of ethics and assume that speaking of virtues *in particular contexts* does not entail moral relativism.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>55</sup>See *The Point of View*, pp. 7, 55–56.

<sup>56</sup>Kierkegaard speaks of and critiques this breed of reflection in the last section of *Two Ages*.



Critique also comes in the companion volume *Either/Or II*, whose pseudonymous author, Judge William, represents the ethical sphere of existence and aims to show how the aesthetic view of love is deficient and corrected by his own conception. The views of love in both volumes are at times directly, at times indirectly critiqued in Kierkegaard's signed *Works of Love*, particularly in those passages that distinguish between preferential love and neighbor love.

The second 'preoccupation' MacIntyre notes in Austen involves "the central place she assigns to self-knowledge, a Christian rather than a Socratic self-knowledge which can only be achieved through a kind of repentance."<sup>57</sup> This is perhaps epitomized most poignantly in Elizabeth Bennet's stark realization halfway through *Pride and Prejudice*, when she sees her vicious attitude toward Mr. Darcy for what it is: "Till this moment I never knew myself."<sup>58</sup> Or consider one of Emma's many moments of 'coming to herself':

To understand, thoroughly understand her own heart, was the first endeavour. To that point went every leisure moment which her father's claims on her allowed, and every moment of involuntary absence of mind. . . . She saw that there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear. She saw, that in persuading herself, in fancying, in acting to the contrary, she had been entirely under a delusion, totally ignorant of her own heart—and, in short, that she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all!

This was the conclusion of the first series of reflection. That was the knowledge of herself, on the first question of enquiry, which she reached; and without being long in reaching it—She was most sorrowfully indignant; ashamed of every sensation but the one revealed to her—her affection for Mr Knightley—Every other part of her mind was disgusting.<sup>59</sup>

Kierkegaard's concern with assisting readers toward self-knowledge is as obvious as the title of one work, *For Self-Examination*, and the similar subtitle of another, *Judge for Yourself! For Self-Examination Recommended to the Present Age*. There and elsewhere Kierkegaard writes scriptural devotions based on I Peter 4:7, "Therefore be sober." While Kierkegaard expresses his admiration for Socrates who, he notes, "did not know for certain whether he was a human being" and thus devoted his life to self-knowledge and examination, he too transforms the Socratic insight into a Christian one by directing his contemporaries toward a better understanding of and commitment to the ideals of Christian existence. Tying together the exposing of counterfeit virtues or inadequate spheres of existence with the interest in cultivating self-examination, we can better understand this entry from Kierkegaard's journal: "Using my diagram, a young person should be able to see very accurately beforehand, just as on a price-list if you venture this

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<sup>57</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 241.

<sup>58</sup>Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 156.

<sup>59</sup>Jane Austen, *Emma* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), pp. 494–495.



far out, the conditions are thus and so, this to win, and that to lose; and if you venture out this far these are the conditions, etc."<sup>60</sup>

The third way Austen extends the Aristotelian-Christian tradition, according to MacIntyre, pertains to the concept of constancy in her work. Especially in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, Austen writes about the virtue of constancy, hoping to convey as MacIntyre describes it "that unity can no longer be treated as a mere presupposition or context for a virtuous life."<sup>61</sup> For Austen constancy is a virtue that orders a life as *one* life. It involves a depth of character that includes steadfastness and ongoing commitment to one's ideals both when those ideals are tested and when they are untested. MacIntyre notes constancy's close, though distinct place beside other virtues like patience and courage.<sup>62</sup> In the context of his own moral philosophy, where MacIntyre emphasizes a life's having narrative structure and unity, he borrows this notion of constancy from Austen. Interestingly, however, he credits Kierkegaard with having distinguished between the kind of existence that is fragmented and lacks unity (i.e., the aesthetic) and that which, conversely, can be characterized by unity (i.e., the ethical) grounded in one's "commitments and responsibilities to the future."<sup>63</sup>

MacIntyre describes Austen's conception of constancy as "a recognition of a particular kind of threat to the integrity of the personality in the peculiarly modern social world."<sup>64</sup> Once again a similar concern may be found in Kierkegaard's attack on speculative reflectiveness as a kind of intellectual activity that threatens the integrity of the personality. This threat takes shape in speculative philosophy's backward orientation, which involves a kind of aestheticizing of life. This includes both an approach to world history as a disinterested spectator (the assumption is that there is nothing for the individual to learn from such study) and a difficulty viewing one's own life in terms of unity. Kierkegaard believes this "threat" has made its way from the ivory towers of academia to the common person, via the pulpit. "[A]n erroneous scholarship has confused Christianity, and from the scholarship the confusion has in turn sneaked into the religious address, so that one not infrequently hears pastors who in all scholarly naïveté *bona fide* prostitute Christianity."<sup>65</sup> For Kierkegaard, the unity of a human life—the possibility for integrity—can flourish only if it has a good

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<sup>60</sup>Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* v.1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 455.

<sup>61</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 242.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.* Of course, for Kierkegaard, the ethical has its own share of chinks in the armor. Perhaps the book that considers most directly a fragmented self is *The Sickness unto Death*, which directs the reader beyond the category of 'the ethical' ultimately to Christian faith (Religiousness B in Johannes Climacus's language).

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 174.

start. However, the authority on moral upbringing, the Church, has failed, and the result is great confusion both about its own responsibility and about Christianity itself. The confusion rises to the surface when children are brought up to think that by virtue of being born in a 'Christian country' they are Christians.

the person who, without having received the slightest decisive impression of the essentially Christian, who from the very beginning is strengthened in the notion that he is a Christian—he is deceived. How in all the world will it occur to him to be concerned about whether he is, or about becoming, what he in his earliest recollection has been convinced that he is as a matter of course? Everything has strengthened him in this conviction. Nothing has brought him to a halt. The parents have never spoken about the essentially Christian; they have thought: The pastor must do that. And the pastor has thought: Instruct the lad in religion, that I can surely do, but actually convey to him the decisive impression, that must be the parents' affair.<sup>66</sup>

Kierkegaard goes on to say that the essential question to a grown-up Dane, "are you a Christian?" sounds as foolish as if one were to ask "are you a human?" The unified moral tradition of Christianity that, as MacIntyre says, is characterized by a unique set of practices and norms has been contaminated, and the result is the *disintegration* of the personality instead. The disintegration is not apparent given the illusion "that people are Christians—people whose vocabulary is Christian but whose concepts are roughly Hegelian, who discuss Christianity volubly but whose passions, emotions, and practice are left unshaped by Christian thoughts, who subtly defend themselves against the inroads of God's spirit by evaluating themselves solely with reference to the social herd in which they dwell."<sup>67</sup>

What the illusion hides is precisely the absence of integration of one's Christian beliefs and commitments with one's life. This integration is what is at stake in Johannes Climacus's well-known distinction between objective and subjective relations to ethical and religious truth in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. To relate to truth subjectively is precisely to make that which one believes to be objectively true inward, to appropriate it in one's life—'passions, emotions, and practice.' Of course such appropriation or inwardness occurs gradually over time through habituation, and yet like Austen, Kierkegaard believes it is largely absent in Christendom. Perhaps the best expression of Kierkegaard's particularly Christian concept of integrity, one compatible with Austen's view of constancy, comes from a selection in *Christian Discourses*: "What is honesty before God? It is that your life expresses what you say."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>67</sup>Robert C. Roberts, *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>68</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourse; The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 167.

*Kierkegaard and Radical Virtue Ethics*

While Austen opens the door to conceiving of Kierkegaard as a Christian virtue thinker by exemplifying how one might take both traditions seriously, David Solomon's category of radical virtue ethics expands the discussion in a different direction by offering a possible way of understanding Kierkegaard's ethical thought in relation to contemporary moral philosophy.<sup>69</sup> In "Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?" Solomon distinguishes between two divergent approaches to virtue ethics: radical and routine.<sup>70</sup> Though the context of Solomon's argument is an assessment of virtue epistemology, the distinction he draws is instructive for placing Kierkegaard in conversation with contemporary ethics.

For Solomon, routine virtue ethics is the product of those "who do ethics in such a way that their work fits neatly within the conventions of contemporary analytic normative theory."<sup>71</sup> The routine virtue ethicist conceives of the difference between virtue ethics and its deontological and consequentialist rivals as one about "which moral notion plays the primary role within the overall structure of the normative theory."<sup>72</sup> Yet, as Solomon points out, virtue ethics in this way bears much similarity to its rivals in virtue of being organized around one particular moral notion. He suggests, however, that in the work of Elizabeth Anscombe or Alasdair MacIntyre one finds something much different; their conception of moral philosophy involves not simply a disagreement about which moral concept is central to their theory but a 'radical' reconceiving of ethical theorizing altogether. Drawing on sources ranging from Aristotle to Bernard Williams, radical virtue ethics according to Solomon aims to rethink entirely how ethics should be done. What follows is a partial list of the themes of radical virtue ethics, according to Solomon:

3. A turn for an understanding of the ethical life to **concrete terms** like the virtue terms in preference to more abstract terms like 'good,' 'right,' and 'ought.'
4. A **critique of modernity** and especially the models of practical rationality that underlie such Enlightenment theories as Kantian deontology and Benthamite consequentialism . . . .
5. An emphasis on the **importance of community**, especially local communities, both in introducing human beings to the ethical life and sustaining their practice of central features of that life. This emphasis is typically contrasted with the individualism that seems to many advocates of virtue ethics to permeate Kantian and consequentialist approaches to ethics.

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<sup>69</sup>On the question of how Kierkegaard's ethical thought relates more generally to contemporary moral philosophy, see Evans's *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, which places a Kierkegaardian derived divine command ethic beside three alternative meta-ethical views.

<sup>70</sup>David Solomon, "Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?" in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 57–80.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66. He cites Michael Slote's work as an example of routine virtue ethics.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

6. A focus on the importance of **the whole life** as the primary object of ethical evaluation in contrast to the tendency of Kantian and consequentialist theorists to give primacy to the evaluation of actions or more fragmented features of human lives.
7. An emphasis on **the narrative structure of human life** as opposed to the more episodic picture of human life found in neo-Kantian and consequentialist approaches to ethics . . . .
10. A special emphasis on **thick moral education** understood as involving training in the virtues as opposed to models of moral education frequently associated with neo-Kantian and consequentialist moral theories which tend to emphasize growth in autonomy or in detached instrumental rationality.<sup>73</sup>

Each of these presents an opportunity for exploration of the ways in which Kierkegaard's approach to ethics stands in contrast to his modern counterparts and aligns more closely with those of the virtue tradition. I will focus on the third and tenth themes especially and then consider the fifth as a potential counterexample to viewing Kierkegaard in this vein.

Roberts has compared Kierkegaard's writing on the virtues and other concepts of moral psychology to a "microscopic travelogue" that carefully charts a diamond's intricacies and facets from countless different angles.<sup>74</sup> This metaphor speaks to Kierkegaard's non-reductive approach to ethics and ethical concepts. Just as a diamond has multiple facets and each facet looks a certain way from a certain angle, so do ethical concepts have multiple facets that appear in greater richness and complexity when they are approached dialectically, from the unique angles of other concepts.

Kierkegaard's endless attention to the clarification of ethical concepts, suggested already in his exposing of counterfeit virtues, extends throughout all of his writings, including both signed and pseudonymous writings. In *Either/Or II*, Judge William addresses a whole host of concepts that he feels the aesthete 'A' deeply misunderstands, e.g., love and duty. In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de silentio attempts to clarify what faith is and what it is not, even though he attests that he lacks faith himself. In the signed, upbuilding discourses published concurrently with the aforementioned pseudonymous pieces, we find discourse after discourse expounding concepts like faith, hope, courage, patience, obedience, long-suffering, humility, and joy. In *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard targets a particular instance where Christian language is misunderstood and thus misused—especially the concepts of revelation and authority. *Works of Love* offers a comprehensive elucidation of the concept of Christian love, particularly as it stands in contrast to erotic love and friendship. One might claim (with Kierkegaard), that the overall concept he aims to clarify throughout his works is what it means to become a Christian, itself. As he writes, "I do not

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p0. 68–69.

<sup>74</sup>See "Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: A Philosophical Engagement*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 72–92.

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>75</sup>

In *The Sickness unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard's pseudonyms take up despair and anxiety, respectively, concepts Roberts calls 'diagnostic emotions.' Though seemingly less 'concrete' than some virtue concepts such as love or generosity, even these explorations move beyond the standard normative theorizing of modernity that confine most of their attention to reductive rules or general states of affairs. Roberts describes another category of these more concrete concepts as 'dimensions,' which refer to subjectivity, inwardness, and passion, each of which garners significant attention in the pseudonymous *Postscript*.<sup>76</sup> Thus, in his analysis of all kinds of thick concepts of moral psychology, Kierkegaard seems to be performing the kind of philosophical activity Elizabeth Anscombe would later call for when she made clear the need for "an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all human 'flourishing'."<sup>77</sup> Of course Kierkegaard's moral psychology is Christian and its scope and appeal are limited accordingly; nevertheless, his attention to thick ethical concepts distinguishes his approach from many of his modern counterparts.

Kierkegaard also exemplifies the radical virtue ethicist's emphasis on 'thick moral education,' a view which incidentally places Kierkegaard closer beside classical Greek culture. This theme is especially transparent in a distinction Kierkegaard draws between 'instruction' and 'upbringing' in *The Book on Adler*. In this posthumously published work, Kierkegaard offers analysis of a revelation claim by a rural pastor and theologian, Adolph Peter Adler, to illustrate the religious confusion of the age. Central to Kierkegaard's critique of Adler is Adler's deficient moral and spiritual education.

On the whole it is certainly characteristic of our age that the concept of *up-bringing*, at least in the understanding of antiquity, is disappearing more and more from the speech and lives of people. In antiquity the importance of a person's upbringing was valued very highly, and it was understood as a harmonious development of that which will carry the various gifts and talents and the disposition of the personality ethically in the direction of character. In our day there seems to be an impatient desire to do away with this upbringing and on the other hand to emphasize *instruction*.<sup>78</sup>

The replacement of holistic education that has as a significant aim the cultivation of both moral and intellectual virtues by a model that presumes

<sup>75</sup>Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 138.

<sup>76</sup>See Roberts's entry on Kierkegaard in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan (New York: Routledge Press, 2007).

<sup>77</sup>G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 43–44.

<sup>78</sup>Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, p. 133.

a rationalistic conception of human nature and education, one more interested in ‘facts’ (cf. Dickens’s *Hard Times*) than the development of character and the relation of facts to concerns, rings eerily true in our age as it does for Kierkegaard’s. It is, in fact, the lack of “care for the soul” as Socrates would put it, plus the general absence of passion and presence of religious confusion that causes Kierkegaard to see the need for such an upbringing—both his own and his contemporaries.’ This emphasis on education as upbringing coincides with the noted emphasis on integrity. Only in the sort of moral and spiritual education that aims at the upbringing of a whole person can the integration of one’s mind, emotions, and actions be fostered.

### Conclusion

I conclude by considering one more objection to reading Kierkegaard as a member of the broad virtue tradition: the centrality of community in the ethical life (number five above). Many commentators who have no stake in a virtue thesis have critiqued Kierkegaard’s individualism, his inattention to community, and the misogynist threads that at times appear very glaring in his work. These commentators also correctly point to his thin ecclesiology, his apparent lack of interest in imagining a healthy Church. It is true that Kierkegaard places less emphasis than he should on the possible role of the community and the Church. In fact, he views the Church as more part of the problem than the solution. Nevertheless, his thought still focuses on the development of traits through relationships, even though the relation with God (which is for him a real relation) turns out to be crucial for the acquisition of these traits.<sup>79</sup> In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the individual is placed in the context of one’s moral and spiritual obligation to others. “The essentially Christian is this: truly to love oneself is to love God; truly to love another person is with every sacrifice . . . to help the other person to love God or in loving God.”<sup>80</sup> And Kierkegaard’s thought throughout *Works of Love* echoes I John 4:8: “Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.” Thus, Kierkegaard’s focus on the category of the individual cannot be considered outside of the obligation to care for and love the other. In one of the most moving passages in all of his writings, Kierkegaard’s emphasis on individuality is clearly placed in the context of that which forms the basis of all human relations, the relation to God (or eternity):

In being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, female, etc., we are not like each other—therein we are indeed different. But in being the neighbor we are all unconditionally like each other. Dissimilarity is temporality’s method of confusing that marks every human being differently, but the neighbor is eternity’s mark—on every human being. Take many sheets of paper, write something different on each one; then no one will be like another. But then

<sup>79</sup>Cf. Evans, “A Kierkegaardian View of the Foundations of Morality,” pp. 66–68.

<sup>80</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 114.



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 common watermark 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>81</sup>

That one's relation to others is mediated by a relation to God obviously implies that there is something quite different about Kierkegaard's form of virtue ethics, in comparison with many figures of the classical virtue tradition. But that is simply what one would expect when contrasting a Christian and a pagan thinker.

In the course of considering several objections to the thesis that Kierkegaard should be read alongside other virtue thinkers ranging from the ancient Greeks to MacIntyre, I have offered a preliminary definition of a virtue according to Kierkegaard: *dispositions to be achieved by works that one must strive to do in response to God's grace, with the help of God's grace*. I have noted how his emphasis on duty and God's commands are compatible with a like emphasis on moral striving and the virtues. I have also explored how Kierkegaard's thought shares key features with both popular and scholarly approaches to the virtues. Clearly more clarifying work on this topic must be done. For those like Kirmmse who take seriously Kierkegaard's Christianity, however, I have argued that one need not close the door so quickly to the ways in which Kierkegaard's philosophy might be read beside thinkers ranging from Plato to MacIntyre.

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 89.