ABSTRACT

Virtues, Divine Commands, and the Debt of Creation:
Towards a Kierkegaardian Christian Ethic

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Though Kierkegaard's ethic in *Works of Love* frequently has been a target of harsh—and often uncharitable—criticism, a number of recent treatments have sought to defend both its viability and its relevance to the contemporary discussion. Increasingly, the literature is replete with interpretations that situate it within the traditions of virtue ethics and/or divine command theory. I evaluate these readings, focusing primarily on the issue of moral obligation in Kierkegaard's writings. I argue that both the virtue and divine command interpretations are deficient, though Kierkegaard's ethic indeed shares significant points of contact with both traditions. I explicate and defend an alternative account of moral obligation that seems to me most to warrant the label, "Kierkegaardian," and attempt to expand the view, taking Kierkegaard's ethic as a foundation upon which to build a theoretically rigorous account of moral obligation. The resulting view, I argue, captures the best of both virtue ethics and divine command theory, while avoiding the most serious problems of each.

Virtues, Divine Commands, and the Debt of Creation:
Towards a Kierkegaardian Christian Ethic

by

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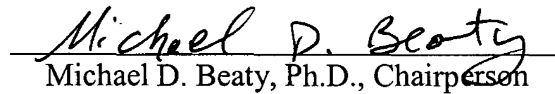
A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of Philosophy



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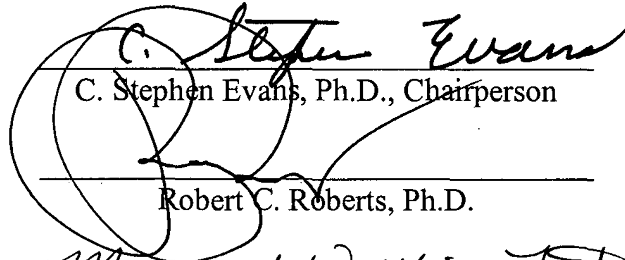

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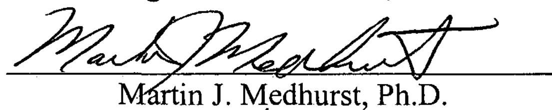

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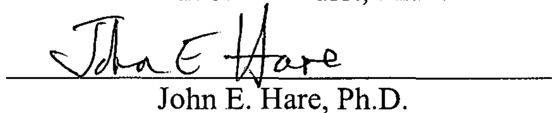

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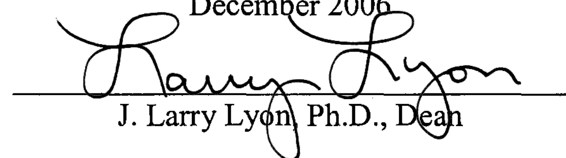

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PREFACE

The revival of interest in religious ethics in the past three decades is remarkable for several reasons, not the least of which is that it constitutes a rather surprising—and relatively sudden—shift away from the expected culmination of the historical progression of philosophical ethics leading up to it. As Linda Zagzebski notes, ". . . the history of Western ethics since the Enlightenment can be read as a series of attempts to ground morality in something other than God."[1] And yet, at present, academic philosophy is replete with attempts to ground morality in God.

The present project is one such attempt; it seeks not to explore or explain the shift, but rather to further its development. Though I will have little to say about general critiques of religious ethics, I will discuss at length problems that affect some particular versions of it. It seems to me that recent developments, especially those in theistic virtue ethics and divine command theory, have moved the discussion of religious ethics in the right direction, but that each of these approaches retains features that are unsatisfying. This seems to me especially true in the discussion of moral obligation, both in its normative and metaethical aspects. The present project is, in large part, an attempt to develop and defend a more satisfying ethic.

The view I advocate will be developed by way of an exploration of Kierkegaard's Christian ethic, especially as it is found in the signed writings of the so-called second authorship. Some important recent treatments of Kierkegaard have emphasized his

[1]Linda Zagzebski, "Religion and Morality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford, New York, et. al.: Oxford University Press, 2005), 345.

notable overlap with virtue ethics and/or divine command theory, and several commentators even have labeled him a "theorist" or "ethicist" of one or the other varieties. I will explore these possibilities towards the goal of explicating what, in my view, is the ethic Kierkegaard presents as his own, and I subsequently will defend a modified version of this ethic, arguing that it offers the most satisfying account of moral obligation for theists, in general, and for Christians, in particular.

Thus, my project has two goals that are overlapping, though not, in the end, reducible to one another. The first is an interpretive goal—to understand Kierkegaard's Christian ethic—and the second a "constructive" goal—to formulate a defensible account of moral obligation that preserves broadly orthodox Christian intuitions while avoiding the problems that plague the most prominent, contemporary alternatives. These projects are overlapping because—I will argue—the ethic that is best able to accomplish this is one that is broadly Kierkegaardian.

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There are many to whom I am indebted for the completion of this project: family, friends, and teachers at Hendrix, Texas A&M, Notre Dame, and Baylor, all have supported me in my studies and contributed in various ways to my philosophical development. I am grateful to my parents, who always encouraged my questions; to Doug Corbitt and Peg Falls-Corbett, who gave me the philosophy bug; to Hugh McCann and John McDermott, who mentored me during my time in College Station; and to my colleagues at Baylor, who made even Waco enjoyable.

I am greatly appreciative of those professors who made my studies at Baylor so rewarding. Todd Buras gave selflessly of his time during his first two, undoubtedly most demanding, years at Baylor. Margaret Tate offered helpful advice and comments on my dissertation and helped to make my semester of study at Notre Dame possible. The philosophy department at Baylor is blessed to have such outstanding junior faculty.

I would like to extend a special word of thanks and gratitude to Steve Evans and Bob Roberts, outstanding scholars and teachers who both encouraged me in my work and pushed me to become a better philosopher. Not many scholars, I think, would be as generous in allowing a doctoral student to pursue a project so focused on critical response to their own work, and even fewer would be as objective in assessing its merits. It has been a privilege to study with both and to write a dissertation under their direction.

Most of all, I am grateful for my wife Lisa, who always supported me in my studies, who patiently endured countless requests from the study to "just let me finish this

thought," who even braved a bitter South Bend winter—pregnant—for the sake of my education . . . and who loves me more than I deserve. It is to her that this work is dedicated.

To Lisa,
who told me she would follow me anywhere—
and then proved it.

CHAPTER ONE

Kierkegaard, Ethics, and Metaethics: A Survey of Objections and Preliminary Concerns

Introduction

Though Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation will be the primary focus of the discussion in the chapters to come, the question of the viability of Kierkegaard's ethic more broadly first needs to be addressed. This is the case for several reasons. First, Kierkegaard's view of obligation is interwoven into his broader ethic of love; thus any objection that inflicts a mortal wound to the latter—if there be such—can be expected to bear crucially on the former. Second, my reading of Kierkegaard's ethic largely is sympathetic, and thus the plausibility of my own view of obligation is tied, at least somewhat, to the viability of this ethic. Third, the sheer number and virulence of criticisms that have been aimed at Kierkegaard's ethic in the contemporary literature demand that any view that takes this ethic as a point of departure make some attempt to defend it.

In the first section of this chapter, I will say a word about caricatures of Kierkegaard's ethic that arise from ignoring or misunderstanding the pseudonymity of his authorship. In the second section, I will give a brief defense of Kierkegaard's ethic in *Works of Love* by responding to some of the most prevalent and influential objections. In the third section, I will address a concern about appropriating Kierkegaard's writings to construct a theoretical account of obligation—a project that, some may worry, is

disconsonant with the spirit of Kierkegaard's authorship. Addressing these preliminary concerns will, I hope, lay the groundwork sufficiently for the project ahead.

"Kierkegaard's Ethics": The Challenges of Pseudonymity

The objections that have been leveled against "Kierkegaard's ethics" in the literature are so many and varied that, at first glance, it is difficult to believe they are directed at the same view. And in fact, they often are not. What has been labeled "Kierkegaard's ethics" is in fact an array of views comprised of (1) the views represented and/or discussed by various Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, (2) Kierkegaard's own Christian ethic, presented primarily in *Works of Love* and other non-pseudonymous writings, and (3) caricatures of Kierkegaard's view. (1) and (3) often are closely connected. The pseudonymous authorship presents unique challenges to interpretation that—even after a formidable amount of scholarship in the last four decades emphasizing the need and importance of distinguishing Kierkegaard's own views from those of his pseudonyms—many critics continue to underestimate or ignore altogether.

The ethical views most often confused with Kierkegaard's own are Judge William's view, presented in *Either/Or* II and an essay in *Stages On Life's Way*, and the view Johannes de Silentio calls "the ethical" in *Fear and Trembling*. Both are views that fall within what Kierkegaard calls the ethical stage (or sphere) of existence—a form of existence whose fundamental commitments and orientation Kierkegaard himself does not entirely endorse. This is not to say that Kierkegaard rejects ethics altogether, of course. But his ethic is an ethic of the religious sphere; more specifically, it is a Christian ethic. The ethical outlook of those residing in the ethical sphere is characterized by a commitment to *immanence*—a commitment to grounding ethics in human capacities

and/or activities. Sometimes this is put in the language of universality;[1] other times it is put in the language of social norms.[2] The ethics endorsed by Judge William and discussed by de Silentio are in many ways very similar; both are likely some version of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, though the Judge's ethic may be more Kantian in certain respects.[3] We need not settle here the issue of which characterization of these ethics is most accurate; nor do we need to settle the question of how similar the two ethics really are. The relevant point is that neither is a religious ethic, in Kierkegaard's sense.

This is not to say that those in the ethical sphere are atheists. Judge William—like every other Kierkegaardian persona—clearly believes in God's existence. But the religious sphere of existence takes as its point of departure an absolute commitment to God, which is transformative of one's view of ethics. Ethics within the ethical sphere is grounded in immanence (the authority of reason and/or social norms) and is characterized fundamentally by universalizability[4] and transparency to other persons (disclosure);[5]

[1]Johannes de Silentio writes, "The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 54-5).

[2]E.g., the discussion of the three tragic heroes—Jephthah, Agamemnon, and Brutus—in Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57-9.

[3]For an analysis of the Kantian elements of Judge William's ethic, as well as an argument that ". . . the ethics Kierkegaard has in mind in *Fear and Trembling* is significantly Kantian," see Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 86-109. For an argument that it is crucial that "the ethical" in de Silentio's discussion be understood as *Sittlichkeit* rather than Kantian ethics, see Merold Westphal, "Abraham and Hegel," in *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 76-7.

[4]In the sense that, if it is right for me to perform some action, then it is right for anyone else in similar circumstances—where "circumstances" is limited to those features of a situation that are, in principle, discernable to an outside observer—to perform the same action.

[5]See, for example, *Fear and Trembling*, 82: "The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed."

ethics within the religious sphere is grounded in transcendence (the authority of God) and is characterized fundamentally by obedience to God's will and transparency to oneself before God (self-knowledge).[6] The differences between the two spheres explain why de Silentio must wrestle so hard with the question of the status of Abraham's act of being willing to sacrifice Isaac. From the perspective of the ethical sphere, Abraham's act is unethical—it is an act neither universalizable[7] nor objectively defensible to others. But from the perspective of the religious sphere, his act is righteous, because it is an act of obedience to God's expressed will. The key to reconciling these seemingly conflicting views is that "the ethical," as de Silentio is using the term, refers specifically to immanent ethics rather than to right action, broadly construed. Thus an action can be both right and "unethical," in de Silentio's sense of the term.[8] This makes it clear that Kierkegaard's own Christian ethic is not identical to "the ethical" of *Fear and Trembling*.[9]

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[6]"To become sober is: *to come to oneself in self-knowledge and before God as nothing before him, yet infinitely, unconditionally engaged*. . . . There is only one kind of knowing that brings a person completely to himself—self-knowledge; this is what it means to be sober, sheer transparency" (Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* / *Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 104-5).

[7]In the sense discussed in footnote 4, above. See also footnote 8, below.

[8]A major source of confusion for many readers on this point is created by de Silentio's talk of a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Many readers take de Silentio (and Kierkegaard himself) to be advocating the view that, in the religious sphere, one must be ready to do something immoral if God commands it. In such a case, one suspends a commitment to morality in order to obey God. This is not de Silentio's view—or, at any rate, it is not his view if by "immoral" one means "what one should not do, all things considered." A teleological suspension of the ethical occurs when God commands one to perform some action that is not *by itself* universalizable or objectively defensible (e.g., defensible according to the dictates of reason which are available to all rational persons as such, or defensible according to the universally accepted norms of one's society). Such an action is not immoral in the sense of being wrong to do *all things considered*—at least not according to one who accepts the fundamental commitments that characterize religious existence. The ethical sphere and the religious sphere employ different criteria for determining what constitutes right action, and thus a teleological suspension of the ethical involves a suspension of one's commitment to universalizability and objective defensibility *for the sake of* upholding one's absolute commitment to obeying God—which, according to one who accepts the fundamental commitments of the religious sphere, is the *right* thing to do.

[9]For more on the "the ethical" in *Fear and Trembling*, see Gene Outka, "Religious and Moral Duty: Notes on *Fear and Trembling*, " in *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Gene Outka

Failure to recognize such distinctions between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms has led to caricatures of Kierkegaard's ethic. But misunderstanding what the pseudonymity of the texts is meant to convey is equally problematic. An example of this mistake is found in the "existentialist" reading of Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre depicts Kierkegaard as being the first to present—and advocate—the "distinctively modern standpoint" which "envisages moral debate in terms of a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment as the expression of a criterionless choice between such premises, a type of choice for which no rational justification can be given."[10] On MacIntyre's reading, what Kierkegaard tries to show, by way of juxtaposing the incommensurate worldviews of the aesthete and Judge William in *Either/Or* and by offering no resolution to the conflict anywhere in the book, is that ethics must be based on a "radical choice." Basing ethics on a radical choice means the ethical perspective is a view for which no justifying reason can be given for its fundamental point of departure, which is "the choice whether or not to choose in terms of good and evil."[11]

MacIntyre has no trouble pointing out the "deep internal inconsistency" to be found in this view "between its concept of radical choice and its concept of the ethical." He writes,

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and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 204-54; C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: "Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition"* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 9-28, "Is the Concept of An Absolute Duty Toward God Morally Unintelligible?" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert Perkins (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 141-151, and "'The Ethical' in Fear and Trembling," chapter three of *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61-84.

[10]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 198), 38.

[11]Ibid., 39.

> the doctrine of *Enten-Eller* is plainly to the effect that the principles which depict the ethical way of life are to be adopted for no reason, but for a choice that lies beyond reason, just because it is the choice of what is to count for us as a reason. Yet the ethical is to have authority over us. But how can that which we adopt for no reason have any authority over us? The contradiction in Kierkegaard's doctrine is plain.[12]

Two questions need to be raised in response to this critique: First, does *Either/Or* advocate the doctrine of radical choice? And if so, does Kierkegaard himself advocate this doctrine? The first question is more difficult to answer than the second. As C. Stephen Evans points out, only one of the pseudonyms from *Either/Or*—the aesthete referred to as "A"—himself adopts the doctrine of radical choice; the Judge clearly does not, as demonstrated by his very protracted discussions in which he attempts to *defend*—that is, to offer *justifying reasons for*—ethical existence. Evans concludes that "it is only if we identify with the position of A that we can think that *Either/Or* defends a doctrine of radical choice."[13] However, this does not entirely settle the matter, as MacIntyre can insist that whether or not Judge William advocates the doctrine of radical choice is irrelevant—that what matters is the juxtaposition of the two views in *Either/Or* and the fact that there is no resolution to be found in the book. In other words, MacIntyre can claim that Kierkegaard is inviting us as readers to see that Judge William's defense of the

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[12]Ibid., 41. MacIntyre expresses essentially the same critique in *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966): "The choices made by the individual confronting the alternatives of the ethical and the aesthetic, or the ethical and the religious, are according to Kierkegaard criterionless. But if this were genuinely so, how could it be right to choose one rather than the other? Yet the whole point of such choices, and of the pain that the making of them involves, is that one may choose wrongly. Kierkegaard's conceptual framework makes it impossible to say this, although sometimes Kierkegaard himself is inconsistent enough to use this kind of language. He moves uneasily between speaking from within an order in which God's will provides criteria for action and speaking as the lonely individual outside all criteria" (218).

[13]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 57.

ethical fails and that this failure implies that the ethical perspective can be adopted only by a radical choice, Judge William's protests notwithstanding.

In fact, there is textual evidence against such a reading of *Either/Or* throughout the Kierkegaardian corpus.[14] But for our purposes, this issue can be set aside, for even if we grant that *Either/Or* as a whole advocates the doctrine of radical choice, it does not follow that Kierkegaard himself advocates it. In fact, there is compelling evidence that he rejects this doctrine. As Evans points out, Anti-Climacus, the one pseudonym whose views can be attributed without reservation to Kierkegaard, gives essentially the same critique of radical choice that MacIntyre does.[15] And a version of the objection shows up in Kierkegaard's journals, as well, directed specifically at Kant:

> Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy)—that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established. This is not being rigorously earnest any more than Sancho Panza's self-administered blows to his own bottom were vigorous.[16]

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[14]For example, Johannes Climacus argues in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that the views of A and Judge William are in no way equally valid and that the reader should be able to see clearly that A's standpoint is "perdition" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 296-8). In general, Kierkegaard's authorship suggests a kind of "hierarchy" of the existential spheres. On this point, see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, chapter two.

[15]Anti-Climacus argues that the self that tries to be a law to itself through a radical choice wants to be "its own master," but the problem is that ". . . this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment"—that is, the law he chooses by a radical choice cannot be binding, because it can be repealed (there can be a "rebellion") at any time (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 69).

[16]Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 1:76-7 (#188). Commenting on this entry, Evans notes that, "A law must be able to bind to be a law, but a law that I give myself cannot have this binding power, since the self that has the authority to issue the law would retain the authority to repeal it, and would of course be tempted to do just that precisely when the law constrains desires" ("Authority and Transcendence in *Works of Love*," in *Kierkegaard Studies 1998*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 27).

What these passages demonstrate is that MacIntyre's critique of "Kierkegaard's ethics" is actually one of Kierkegaard's own critiques of the ethics of immanence given in different forms by Kant, Hegel, and a host of other Enlightenment thinkers. A moral law grounded in immanence fails to be binding because those whom the law is supposed to bind retain the power to repeal it. MacIntyre's reading thus serves as an example of how far askew an interpretation of Kierkegaard's view of ethics can be, even by a major contemporary thinker, when the pseudonymity of the individual texts and the professed overall purpose of Kierkegaard's authorship[17] are ignored or misunderstood.[18]

In the remainder of this project, I intend to restrict my discussion to Kierkegaard's own, explicitly Christian ethic. This ethic is presented most systematically in *Works of Love*, though some important details are found in other discourses, as well as in the writings of the two pseudonyms whose views are closest to Kierkegaard's own: Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus. I will at times appropriate passages from these

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[17]As expressed in the autobiographical *The Point of View for My Work As an Author* (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work As an Author: A Report to History and Related Writings*, trans. Walter Lowrie; ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, et. al.: Harper Torchbooks, 1962)).

[18]MacIntyre admits that "My account of Kierkegaard's relationship to *Enten-Eller* is of course crucially different from that given by Kierkegaard himself later on, when he came to interpret his own writings retrospectively in terms of a single unchanging vocation; and the best Kierkegaard scholars of our own time, such as Louis Mackey and Gregor Malantschuk, have in this respect at least endorsed Kierkegaard's self-portrait" (*After Virtue*, 40). MacIntyre thinks Kierkegaard's own interpretation is "difficult to sustain," given what he takes to be crucial changes in Kierkegaard's view from *Either/Or* to *Fear and Trembling* and on to *Philosophical Fragments*. His confusion, I think, is the result of his understanding of the pseudonyms as various aspects of Kierkegaard's own self. He writes, "Kierkegaard was not the first author to divide up the self, to allocate it among a series of masks, each of which acts out the masquerade of an independent self, and so to create a new literary genre in which the author is present as himself more directly and intimately than in any form of traditional drama and yet by his partitioning of his self denies his own presence" (ibid., 38). MacIntyre retracts some of his claims in response to his critics in "Once More on Kierkegaard" (in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 339-55), but he retains his view that, for Kierkegaard, the transition to the ethical must ultimately be based on a criterionless choice, as well as his critique that ". . . Kierkegaard's presentation of [the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical] masks an underlying unresolved tension in his own thought. . ." (347). On this "unresolved tension," see footnote 12, above.

pseudonymous writings, but only where there is strong textual evidence for overlap between the views expressed by these pseudonyms and Kierkegaard's own view.

The Ethic of "Works of Love": Some Objections

If we follow Gene Outka in characterizing agapeistic ethics as a "subject [that] takes depictions of love in the Bible as its point of departure,"[19] then it is uncontroversial that Kierkegaard's ethic in *Works of Love* is an agapeistic ethic. As M. Jamie Ferreira puts it,

> Kierkegaard clearly distances his account from any strictly mutual account—we are not to love others only as they love us. Rather, Kierkegaard's ethic is considered to be a classic example of an agapeistic ethic, that is, an ethic that views love in terms of the Greek concept *agape* (a love that is contrasted with *eros* 'erotic love' and *philia* 'friendship') . . . .[20]

But affixing the label of "agapeistic ethic" can be misleading—especially if it is thought that an ethic's being agapeistic precludes its being a virtue ethic or a divine command ethic. Perusing the section on "Theism and Values" in a recent companion to philosophy of religion,[21] one finds successive entries on divine command ethics, natural law ethics, virtue ethics, narrative ethics, and agapeistic ethics. This can give the impression, at least to one unfamiliar with the substance of each category, that agapeistic ethics simply is another type of theistic ethics that rivals—and thus is incompatible with—each of the other types listed.

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[19]Gene Outka, "Agapeistic Ethics," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 481.

[20]M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's* Works of Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 40.

[21]*A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

But calling Kierkegaard's ethic an agapeistic ethic need not imply that it does not fall under one or more of these other categories. There is no compelling reason to think that an ethic built on the biblical conception of love is, in principle, incompatible with other theistic ethical theories—including divine command ethics and theistic virtue ethics. Whether any incompatibility occurs depends on the content and scope of these latter ethical theories. If by "divine command theory of ethics," one means to refer to a theory of obligation, then the two clearly are compatible: a divine command theory of obligation can be formulated in such a way that it is part of a broader, agapeistic ethic by holding that God obligates us to (agape) love the neighbor by commanding us. Those who read Kierkegaard as a divine command ethicist typically hold just this view.

Kierkegaard's analysis of Christian agape found in *Works of Love* is one of the richest in the history of Christian thought. It has, however, been the subject of vigorous controversy. Several of the objections have emerged as the "standard" ones, by virtue of a combination of the esteem of the critics who have raised them and the sheer number of times and variations in which they have been raised. I will address four of these objections. I do not wish to linger on these objections, as I think that, by and large, they have been refuted compellingly in Ferreira's excellent book, *Love's Grateful Striving*. However, since these objections have been so influential and widely accepted, it is worth addressing them here, briefly. Ferreira deals with each objection in much greater detail, but I think it will be helpful at least to remind the reader of (or perhaps introduce the reader to) the lines along which each objection can be met.

Objection One: An Ethic That Denies the Legitimacy of Erotic Love and Friendship

One of the most common objections to Kierkegaard's ethic is the charge that it denies the legitimacy of erotic love and friendship, that it regards such relationships as based on preference and thus as essentially unloving. On this reading, Kierkegaard thinks agape love is not only different from but positively opposed to and incompatible with friendship and erotic love. Thus many readers understand Kierkegaard to be claiming that all erotic loves and friendships should be abolished, replaced uniformly by a neighbor love that requires one to treat everyone one encounters exactly the same: that is, that one should treat one's wife exactly the same as one treats the stranger one passes on the street (and vice-versa), that one has exactly the same responsibilities to the homeless children in Calcutta that one has to one's own children, etc. Even some who are largely sympathetic to Kierkegaard's version of agape, such as Outka, read *Works of Love* in this way and voice this concern. Outka writes, "Kierkegaard does more than distinguish [friendship] from [neighbor love], while allowing for at least some sort of concordat between them. He sees them as incompatible."[22]

Yet there is substantial textual evidence against this reading.[23] In a crucial but often overlooked passage, Kierkegaard says that erotic love is "life's most beautiful happiness" and friendship "the greatest temporal good." The passage in which this occurs gives an important clue about how Kierkegaard thinks of these relations:

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[22]Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 18.

[23]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 44-52.

> See, therefore erotic love and friendship *as such* are only enhanced and augmented self-love, although erotic love is undeniably life's most beautiful happiness and friendship the greatest temporal good![24]

What is important to notice here is Kierkegaard's emphasis on the "as such," which indicates that erotic love and friendship can occur in a form compatible with neighbor love. Preference is the element that is essential to erotic love and friendship. This is why each *as such* is only a form of self-love. However, each *can* be "permeated" by neighbor love[25]—what Kierkegaard calls undergoing "the change of eternity by becoming duty"—in which case the relationship is no longer simply one of self-love.[26] Erotic love and friendship are permeated by neighbor love when preference is no longer the *basis* for one's love for the beloved and the friend. One's preferences are subject to change, so love that is based on preference is subject to change. But, Kierkegaard thinks, love that can change is not genuine love. It follows that erotic love and friendship *as such* are not genuine forms of love. The point, however, is not to rid oneself of one's passionate preference for one's spouse and friends.[27] The point is to love them with a love that has undergone the change of eternity—that is, to resolve that one's love will endure and remain steadfast, regardless of changing circumstances—so that, even if one's preference

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[24]Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 267.

[25]Ibid., 112. Kierkegaard also makes the point by saying that erotic love and friendship must be "dethroned" (45, 50, and 58).

[26]Ibid., 17-43.

[27]Kierkegaard makes this clear in "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing" when he writes, "the discourse does not ask you whether you really do love your wife; it hopes so. It does not ask if she really is the delight of your eyes and the desire of your heart; it wishes that for you" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 129; quoted in Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 46-7).

for the lover or the friend wanes or dissipates completely, one's love for him or her remains.

But what of the charge that, on Kierkegaard's ethic, our obligations to every person—friends, family, acquaintances, strangers—are exactly the same? As Ferreira points out, it is true that Kierkegaard understands the scope of the command to love the neighbor to extend to "the whole human race," but this does not imply that all are to be loved in the same way, or that the concrete content of what we owe each person is the same. We can reasonably interpret Kierkegaard's point to be simply that we are never justified in excluding someone from our love:

> . . . [L]ife presents us with people to love; they are what Kierkegaard calls the objects who are "once given or chosen." Some are "given" to us, and life offers us the opportunity to "choose" others. But once they are given (placed within our moral arena without our choice) or chosen, we are obligated to love them.[28]

This allows that our obligations to friends and family are different from our obligations to those halfway across the world whom we have never met. It allows for the fact that we have special obligations to some in virtue of our unique relationships to them. What is forbidden by the command to love "all people" is one's ever refusing to love someone whom God has brought into one's life (in one way or another) and who obviously stands in need of some help that we are able to offer.

Objection Two: An Unrealistic and Unhealthy Ethic

A number of critics charge that Kierkegaard's ethic is unrealistic and that the goal it sets is unattainable. The basis for this charge is Kierkegaard's insistence that we are "infinitely indebted" to the neighbor (and obligated to remain as such), which seems to

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[28]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 36.

imply that love of neighbor requires a level of self-sacrifice that admits of no upper bound. The objection takes two main forms: (1) that such self-sacrifice is practically impossible; (2) that such self-sacrifice is unhealthy and/or serves as the basis for abuse, either at the hands of others or by creating a martyr complex.

The first form of the objection focuses on the strenuousness of the amount of self-sacrifice required by Kierkegaard's ethic. Surely no finite creature can be responsible for an infinite debt to the neighbor; surely it is not practically possible to sacrifice oneself to the extent that Kierkegaard implies is required by the command to love. Finite creatures are capable of, at most, a finite responsibility and capable of repaying a finite debt to the neighbor.

In response to this objection, it is important to understand what Kierkegaard means by an "infinite debt." To say we are infinitely indebted to the neighbor is to say that, no matter how much we do for the neighbor (in the form of loving the neighbor, caring for the neighbor, etc.), we never are freed of our obligation to the neighbor. We never are "paid up," so to speak, on our debt to the neighbor. But this does not imply that an infinite self-sacrifice is required of one at any particular moment—a requirement that would be impossible for a finite creature to meet. In claiming that the command to love imposes an infinite debt, Kierkegaard means to convey that it precludes our taking a calculating stance toward our obligation to the neighbor. He holds that ". . . *everything that is to be kept alive must be kept in its element*, but love's element is infinitude, inexhaustibility, immeasurability."[29] For this reason, he concludes that "one who loves

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[29]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 180, Kierkegaard's emphasis.

cannot calculate . . . . To calculate with an infinite quantity is impossible, because to calculate is to make finite."[30]

The second form of the objection Outka calls "the question of the blank check"; this is the question of whether the command of agape "allow[s] for any way to differentiate between attention to another's needs and submission to his exploitation, and any warrant for resisting the latter."[31] Ferreira points out that this challenge "is not peculiar to Kierkegaard's ethic"; it applies "to any ethic that bases love on the model of God's love for us."[32] But sharing the guilt with other agapeistic ethics does not by itself suffice to dispel the problem.

Related to the blank check question is the worry that adopting Kierkegaard's ethic inevitably leads to the development of a martyr complex. One of most influential critics of Kierkegaard, Knud Ejler Løgstrup, suggests a version of this objection, and the re-presentation of his work to the English-speaking world in a publication co-edited by MacIntyre has made this objection all the more influential.[33] Løgstrup argues that, on Kierkegaard's model, love is understood as self-denial, and "Christian self-denial consists precisely . . . in being despised, insulted, and mocked . . . ."[34] Thus, the proof that one's love is genuine is worldly persecution:

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[30]Ibid., 178.

[31]Outka, *Agape*, 21.

[32]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 129.

[33]Knud Ejler Løgstrup, "Settling Accounts with Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," in *The Ethical Demand*, ed. Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 218-64. Originally published as "Opgør med Kierkegaard's *Kaerlighedens Gerninger*," in *Den Etiske Fordring* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1956).

[34]Ibid., 222.

> The ingratitude of the world, opposition and insult are the guarantee that the relationship to God is genuine. . . . It is not the case that opposition with all its hardships perhaps may arise—perhaps may not. If it fails to arise, what is Christian is missing.[35]

This suggests that one who understands love as Kierkegaard does will begin to *seek* persecution and suffering, regarding it as the confirmation that one is indeed a Christian. She will seek to be hated; she will want to suffer; she will encourage persecution—in short, she will develop a martyr complex.[36]

There are several aspects of Kierkegaard's ethic that answer this challenge.[37] First, Kierkegaard advocates loving the neighbor *as oneself*, which places limits on the amount of self-sacrifice that is justified in loving the neighbor.[38] In fact, Kierkegaard thinks that to love the neighbor more than oneself is idolatry: to do so is to obey the neighbor unconditionally, which is an expression of worship and adoration—responses appropriate only to God.[39] Further, as God's creations and bearers of His image, all

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Løgstrup goes on to point out the deep irony in this view. It ends up making the other's (negative) reaction an essential component of one's own genuine act of love. Since one becomes a self by learning to love rightly, this means that the actions of others in large part determine whether one becomes a self. Løgstrup explains: "Nevertheless, Kierkegaard ascribes such significance to the difference between the misunderstanding or understanding of others, the difference between their applause and admiration or scorn and contempt, that this difference actually plays a part in deciding which actions constitute love of one's neighbor and which do not. In reality everything depends on being misunderstood and hated. . . . How can it be that although Kierkegaard's thinking is concerned with setting the task of becoming a self, he still ends by ascribing such great significance to the opinions of others in deciding whether the individual in self-denial becomes a self, founded on God or not? How can it happen that the others' lack of understanding is awarded such a central role that one must ask: but what does self-denial depend on, on the individuals relationship to God or on the others—on their contempt, scorn, and mockery?" (226-7).

[37]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 129-36.

[38]This is an important point of difference between the views of Kierkegaard and Levinas, and it suggests that it is the latter for whom the question of the blank check is more pointed.

[39]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 19.

persons are equals before God;[40] thus we are not justified in excluding ourselves from the obligation to love. Self-sacrifice does not entail self-hatred or self-destruction; sacrifice is warranted only to the extent that it does not neglect proper self-love. In fact, one can love the neighbor only if one loves oneself properly:

> The commandment said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," but if the commandment is properly understood it also says the opposite: You shall love yourself in the right way. Therefore, if anyone is unwilling to learn from Christianity to love himself in the right way, he cannot love the neighbor either. . . . To love yourself in the right way and to love the neighbor correspond perfectly to one another; fundamentally they are one and the same thing.[41]

Nevertheless, it is true on Kierkegaard's view that Christians must be *prepared* to suffer for their beliefs; they must be *ready* to be scorned, hated, and persecuted by the world for their acts of agape love that are so alien to the world. Kierkegaard thinks this is the typical reaction the world has to Christians, though in Christendom this persecution typically will take the form of ridicule rather than imprisonment or execution. But, contrary to Løgstrup's accusation, there is nothing in Kierkegaard's view that entails such a reaction is required of the neighbor in order to legitimate one's acts of love.[42] One can remain *hopeful* that the neighbor will respond to one's acts of love with appropriate gratitude—and even, perhaps, eventually to reciprocate one's love—even when one doubts that this will in fact be the neighbor's response. Thus, loving one's neighbor properly does not bring about a martyr complex.

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[40]Ibid., 88-9.

[41]Ibid., 22.

[42]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 78-9 and 156-68.

Objection Three: An Ethic of the Abstract

The next two objections are a bit more involved. Many of Kierkegaard's most prominent critics have leveled some form of the objection that Kierkegaard's ethic does not adequately emphasize the concrete, that it focuses too much on the spiritual and on "hidden inwardness," resulting, ironically, in a one-sided, isolating ethic that does not deal with genuine, interpersonal relationships. This objection has a number of facets and has been put forward in some form by most of the major critics of Kierkegaard's ethic in *Works of Love*, but the passages on which these critics focus in order to make a case for this objection typically are the same: (1) the "desert island" scenario of "You *Shall* Love,"[43] (2) the passage on seeing the neighbor with closed eyes in "*You* Shall Love the Neighbor,"[44] and (3) the penultimate discourse, "The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who is Dead."[45] In the first of these discourses, Kierkegaard writes, infamously,

> As far as thought is concerned, the neighbor does not even need to exist. If someone living on a desert island mentally conformed to this commandment, by renouncing self-love he could be said to love the neighbor.[46]

Critics contend that this passage demonstrates that Kierkegaard's ethic really is not concerned with concrete others, at all. The whole focus is on the self—on personal spiritual development. Peter George concludes,

> Neighbour-love has more to do with self-renunciation than a genuine relationship to another person. But this makes neighbour-love essentially a self-relation. The person on a desert island loves his neighbour even though there is no neighbour.

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[43]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 21.

[44]Ibid., 68 ff.

[45]Ibid., 345-58.

[46]Ibid., 21.

> But if there is a relationship he is involved in, it is a relationship with only one term. This is not a model for a social relationship.[47]

Løgstrup focuses on Kierkegaard's contention that "to love the neighbor is to help the neighbor love God," a claim which, he thinks, demonstrates that Kierkegaard's version of love is empty of any concrete assistance for the neighbor. As previously discussed, for Løgstrup's Kierkegaard, love of neighbor really amounts to self-denial, and the culmination of this is the view that hatred and contempt are the responses of the neighbor that prove one's love for the neighbor is genuine.[48] In order to be hated, one cannot do anything for the other that the other would recognize as an act of love: ". . . a love which consists in fulfilling the other person's temporal wishes has nothing whatever to do with love."[49] But this puts Kierkegaard at odds with Jesus's teachings:

> In the parable of the good Samaritan, the man who fell among thieves and lay in the road, robbed and injured, wanted his wounds to be bound up and to be brought to an inn and taken care of. And the good Samaritan helped the victim of the attack in exactly the way he for his own part would wish to be helped. Which also means that in the teaching of Jesus there is a love of one's neighbor the content of which does not consist in helping one's neighbor to love God, but consists in helping one's neighbor in a temporal way.[50]

Løgstrup reads Kierkegaard as being so committed to the view that love consists in self-denial that "for its sake Kierkegaard is willing to accept the disagreement with the teaching of Jesus."[51] Kierkegaard is willing to accept this consequence, Løgstrup thinks,

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[47]Peter George, "Something Anti-social About *Works of Love*," in *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, ed. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (London: Macmillan, 1998), 75.

[48]Løgstrup, "Settling Accounts with Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 220-2 and 232.

[49]Ibid., 224. Nor can the neighbor recognize one's acts as genuine acts of love, done for the neighbor's own benefit: "If our neighbor understood that something was being done for his or her welfare, everything—from a Christian point of view—would be spoiled" (221).

[50]Ibid., 224-5.

[51]Ibid., 225.

because his view is really an elaborate system of justifying an individual's avoiding contact with other people—the implication, of course, being that Kierkegaard needed to justify *his own* avoidance of others. The counterintuitive consequences of Kierkegaard's view of love are

> all perfectly understandable if the relationship to God is meant to serve as a way of liberating people from having anything to do with others. Love of one's neighbor must be used, in the most efficient way, to keep other people at a distance. *Works of Love* is a brilliantly thought out system of safeguards against being forced into a close relationship with other people.[52]

Several critics have argued that Kierkegaard's ethic is not only impractical or impersonal, but actually dangerous. Emmanuel Levinas charges that it is an "isolationist" ethic that leads to "violence and passion," ultimately culminating in "contempt for the ethical foundation of being which has led, through Nietzsche, to the amoralism of recent philosophers."[53] Other critics have warned of the dangers of an ethic that is overly abstract. Theodor Adorno charges that Kierkegaard's spiritualization of ethics is an attempt to religiously devalue the world; the result is an ethic that can be used to justify

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[52]Ibid., 232.

[53]Emmanuel Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," trans. Jonathan Rée, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1998), 31. Much of Levinas's concern seems to be directed at the style of Kierkegaard's writing. He complains, "[W]hat shocks me about Kierkegaard is his violence. An impulsive and violent style, reckless of scandal and destruction, was added to the philosophical repertory by Kierkegaard, even before Nietzsche. Philosophers could now philosophize with a hammer. The new style aspired to permanent provocation, and the total rejection of everything, and I think we can see it as anticipating certain other verbal violences that once passed themselves off as pure and considered" (ibid., 34). It is unclear what passages Levinas has in mind here. Ferreira points out that "A first line of response to Levinas' ethical criticism of Kierkegaard consists in pointing out that Levinas' consideration seems to be limited to the account of the ethical fond in the pseudonymous writings, *Fear and Trembling* and *Either/Or*" ("Asymmetry and Self-Love: The Challenge to Reciprocity and Equality," in *Kierkegaard Studies 1998*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 43-4). It may be, then, that Levinas' critique falls under the first category that we discussed: that of caricatures of Kierkegaard's ethic based on a failure to recognize the purpose and/or significance of the pseudonyms. For more on the similarities and differences between Levinas's and Kierkegaard's respective views of ethics, see Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, and Merold Westphal, "Commanded Love and Divine Transcendence in Levinas and Kierkegaard," in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emanuel Levinas*, ed. Jeff Bloechl (New York: Fordam University Press, 2000), 200-23.

apathy toward the injustices and institutions of oppression in the world. He writes, "Kierkegaard is unaware of the demonic consequence that his insistence on inwardness actually leaves the world to the devil."[54]

Martin Buber criticizes Kierkegaard on a similar point, charging that Kierkegaard devalues creation by pitting our relationship to God against our relationship to other creatures. He reads Kierkegaard as encouraging each individual to become "the Single One," a task whose goal is not that of obtaining the "right" life, but rather of obtaining entry into a relation with God. The problem, Buber thinks, is that, on Kierkegaard's model, this relation

> is the excluding relation, excluding all others; more precisely, that it is the relation which in virtue of its unique, essential life expels all other relations into the realm of the unessential.[55]

Buber thus interprets Kierkegaard as saying that we must exclude other creatures in order to love God, that we must choose between God and creation—a view that "is sublimely to misunderstand God."[56] Since "God is not an object beside objects and hence cannot be reached by renunciation of objects,"[57] Buber rejects what he takes to be Kierkegaard's isolating religious ethic in favor of an ethic that sees the rest of creation as essential to one's own ethical development:

> Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself. We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. . . . God wants us to

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[54]Theodor Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8 (1939-40), 420.

[55]Martin Buber, "The Question to the Single One," in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), 50.

[56]Ibid., 52.

[57]Ibid., 58.

> come to him by means of the Reginas he has created and not by renunciation of them.[58]

Lending apparent further credence to the charge of abstraction is Kierkegaard's contention that "one sees the neighbor only with closed eyes, or by looking *away from* the dissimilarities,"[59] a claim that has led critics to charge Kierkegaard with creating an ethic that is directed toward the universally human (the category "neighbor") rather than toward concrete, individual persons. It is an ethic that, these critics contend, assigns no importance to the distinctive characteristics that make a particular neighbor unique and individual.

This objection seems further supported by the discourse on recollecting the dead, a discourse that Adorno suggests encapsulates Kierkegaard's entire ethic: "[P]erhaps one may most accurately summarize Kierkegaard's doctrine of love by saying that he demands that love behave toward all men as if they were dead."[60] What this discourse demonstrates, such critics contend, is the extent to which there is no room in Kierkegaard's ethic for reciprocity. As George puts it,

> Essentially Kierkegaard conceives of love as something that the self does on its own. . . . It is fitting that Kierkegaard uses the relationship to the dead as a criterion for the love-relationship to the living, for the relationship to the dead is the epitome of a one-termed relationship, where there is no interaction.[61]

Reciprocity is the essential element in concrete, interpersonal relationships, but on Kierkegaard's ethic, according to these critics, our relationship to nonexistent persons (the dead) is just as good as—in fact, better than—any other relationship in providing an

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[58]Ibid., 52.

[59]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 68.

[60]Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," 421.

[61]George, "Something Anti-social About *Works of Love*," 79.

object for neighbor love. But only on a perverse conception of "relationship" could the dead serve as paradigm others to whom we are related.

Ferreira demonstrates convincingly that these objections are based on unbalanced readings of Kierkegaard; they arise from taking passages out of context and reading them uncharitably, without considering them alongside other, mitigating claims that Kierkegaard makes. The desert island scenario is a thought experiment meant to show that neighbor love can be displayed dispositionally: one who exhibits agape is determined to love whomever she encounters, whenever she encounters an other, and this is a disposition that could be retained even if (counterfactually) one were alone for a time.[62] This is not meant to be a model of social relations; it is meant to demonstrate that circumstances—even extreme circumstances—neither revoke the command to love the neighbor nor make it impossible to uphold the command.

Nor is our relation to the dead meant to serve as a model of sociality. Rather, it is meant to be a test whereby we can determine the presence, or absence, of certain qualities of our love. Is our love for the other unchangeable—that is, has it undergone the change of eternity by becoming a duty? The way we recollect the dead helps us determine this. If our love towards one deceased diminishes over time (perhaps because we continually recollect those memories we have of them wronging us in various ways), we know that it is not in reaction to any change in the other. The way we remember the dead is a measure of the faithfulness of our love; it is meant to serve as a model for the way we should relate to the living only in this: that we are to remain steadfast in our love.

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[62]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 35.

Nor does Kierkegaard's ethic oppose involvement with concrete neighbors and institutions. In fact, it explicitly requires it: "Christian love," he says, "is sheer action."[63] As Ferreira points out, "Kierkegaard sees Christ as the prototype in meeting earthly needs. . . . Christ's pattern for us is a down-to-earth one, full of concrete content to be imitated."[64] To love only the universally human or the category "neighbor" is one way of loving the neighbor "at a distance," which Kierkegaard condemns.[65] "Hidden inwardness" is a theme of the pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, not of *Works of Love*, and there is strong evidence that Kierkegaard, at least in his late writings, does not endorse Climacus's view that inwardness has no essential external manifestations.[66] The charge that we must see the neighbor only with closed eyes is a

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[63]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 99.

[64]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 82.

[65]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 79-80.

[66]The discourse relating most to hidden inwardness in *Works of Love* is the first discourse, entitled "Love's Hidden Life *and* Its Recognizability by Its Fruits" (emphasis added). The "and" indicates that, even though an outward manifestation—an (external) action—is neither necessary nor sufficient for a particular work of love, a genuine love for others *in general* will manifest itself in concrete actions, even though others may misconstrue it or fail to notice it: ". . . [T]here is nothing, no 'thus and so,' that can unconditionally be said to demonstrate unconditionally the presence of love or to demonstrate unconditionally its absence. Yet it remains firm that love is to be known by its fruits" (*Works of Love*, 14). Climacus, on the other hand, seems—at least at times—to endorse the more radical position that a genuine "inwardness" might never manifest itself in outward actions. However, it may be that Climacus is only trying to paint one side of ethical existence, remaining silent about the other half. This seems to be Kierkegaard's own assessment of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, which shortly preceded *Works of Love*. He wrote the following journal entry just before publishing *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*:

> Despite everything people ought to have learned about my maieutic carefulness, by proceeding slowly and continually letting it seem as if I knew nothing more, not the next thing—now on the occasion of my new upbuilding discourses they will probably bawl out that I do not know what comes next, that I know nothing about sociality. The fools! Yet on the other hand I owe it to myself to confess before God that in a certain sense there is some truth in it, only not as people understand it—namely, that continually when I have first presented one aspect clearly and sharply, then the other affirms itself even more strongly.
>
> Now I have my theme of the new book. It will be called:
>
> Works of Love (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 5:368-9 (#5972); quoted in *Works of Love*, 409).

charge not to exclude anyone from the scope of ethical consideration on account of their differences, not a charge to love only humanity in the abstract.[67] It is a claim that can be properly understood only alongside Kierkegaard's counterpart claim that "*The truly loving one . . . loves every human being according to his distinctiveness*."[68]

Buber's critique is equally misguided: it fails to see the difference between resignation (the hallmark of what Climacus calls "Religiousness A") and faith. Johannes de Silentio claims that resignation is the necessary predecessor of faith, and Kierkegaard may well agree with him in this, but in faith, one receives the world back again. Thus Kierkegaard himself admits, "If I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regina."[69] On the Kierkegaardian model, there must be a severing of all worldly commitments that threaten to take precedence over one's commitment to God, but once this has been accomplished, one is freed to live in the world, enjoying God's creation, while holding all things with an open hand. Nothing in this model precludes God's teaching us and revealing Himself to us through aspects of His creation. Part of what I hope to show in the upcoming chapters is that this is, in fact, a crucial aspect of the Kierkegaardian view.

Objection Four: An Ethic of Love for God Alone

A fourth common objection is that, on Kierkegaard's ethic, one does not truly love the neighbor. Rather, one truly loves only God; one loves the neighbor merely as a means to the end of loving God.[70] Not only does Kierkegaard make certain claims in

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[67]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 55-64.

[68]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 269, Kierkegaard's emphasis.

[69]Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 5:233-4 (#5664).

[70]Robert M. Adams addresses a general version of this problem (that is, the general theological problem, as opposed to the problem for Kierkegaard's ethic) in "The Problem of Total Devotion," in

Works of Love in passing, such as, ". . . the only true object of a human being's love is *love*, which is God . . . ,"[71] he also makes a point to emphasize that in every genuinely loving relationship, God is the "middle term":

> *Worldly wisdom is of the opinion that love is a relationship between persons; Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person—God—a person, that is, that God is the middle term*. . . . This the world can never get into its head, that God in this way not only becomes the third party in every relationship of love but really becomes the sole object of love, so that it is not the husband who is the wife's beloved, but it is God, and it is the wife who is helped by the husband to love God, and conversely, and so on.[72]

In claiming that God is "the sole object of love," does not Kierkegaard implicitly deny that we truly are to love the neighbor? Or, at the very least, does he not imply that we are to love the neighbor only as a means to loving God, rather than as an end in herself?

This objection, it seems to me, is the most difficult of the standard objections, and responding to it adequately requires one to examine Kierkegaard's view in much more detail than do the responses to the previous three objections. For this reason, the response to this objection will be incomplete until chapter four. I will, however, sketch part of Ferreira's response, which seems to me a good start. Ferreira claims that

> . . . what is at stake in this idea [of God as the "middle term"] is that God should remain the judge of what true love is—for example, that the relationship between husband and wife should remain under God's judgment of what is truly good for each. This means that God's view of what is 'good' is the standard for what we should do for the other or want the other to do for us.[73]

Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 169-94. See also his essay, "Pure Love," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 174-92.

[71]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 264.

[72]Ibid., 106-7 and 120-1, Kierkegaard's emphasis.

[73]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 71.

Following this, she points to the passage in *Works of Love* that, she thinks, captures what is most important in the Kierkegaardian idea of God as the middle term:

> Therefore it is not the wife who is to teach the husband how he is to love her, or the husband the wife, or the friend, the friend . . . but it is God who is to teach each individual how he is to love if his love is to stand in the slightest relation to the Law the apostle refers to when he says, 'Love is the fulfilling of the Law.'[74]

In short, Ferreira thinks that what is at stake in the middle term thesis is the idea that God's conception of love must take precedence over the "merely human" conception, which is always preference-based.

Ferreira is right that part of what it means that God is the middle term is that we must learn what love is from God. But this is not, I think, the primary meaning. The primary meaning is found in the sentence that precedes the one Ferreira quotes, in which Kierkegaard claims that ". . . the person who in love belongs to a woman *shall first and foremost belong totally to God*, shall not seek first to please his wife but shall first do his utmost so that his love may please God"[75]—a point that, of course, Kierkegaard intends equally to apply to the wife towards her husband. The issue is one of priority of moral obligation: first and foremost, our obligation is to God. All other moral obligations are derivative from this one.

This does not remove the controversy surrounding Kierkegaard's view, of course: many will find it highly objectionable that our moral obligations to the neighbor are derived from our obligation to God, rather than being immediate. But the view, though controversial, is nevertheless reasonable, given Kierkegaard's Christian presuppositions, as I will try to demonstrate in chapter four. On Kierkegaard's view, the nature of

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[74]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 113.

[75]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 112-3, emphasis added.

creation, generally, and our status as creatures of God, more specifically, establishes a hierarchy of obligation that entails that one's duty to the neighbor derives from one's relationship to God.

Ferreira is well aware of the relation between the doctrine that we are God's creations and Kierkegaard's view that God is the middle term in every genuinely loving relationship. She argues that Kierkegaard's view of God as the middle term—understood as the view that we must learn what love is from God—follows directly from the combination of this doctrine and the doctrine that God is love.[76] The difference in our views is thus far primarily one of emphasis: Ferreira thinks the middle term thesis is primarily about learning what love is from God, and that it follows from the theological assumption of divine creation, whereas I think the middle term thesis primarily expresses the hierarchical status of our relationships with and obligations to God and the neighbor, and the fact that we must learn what love is from God follows from *this*, more basic, feature of creation.

There is, however, a third aspect of the middle term thesis that Ferreira does not mention, but that seems to me crucial. Underlying the thesis is a view about human teleology, about the end that God has established for us in creating us with the natures we have, and about the purpose for which God has created us.[77] At the end of the same paragraph in which Kierkegaard introduces the middle term thesis, he adds the following: "*To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love*

[76]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 72-3.

[77]I take it the end of a thing is not always the same as the purpose for which it is created. The end of an acorn is to become a flourishing oak tree, but this may not be the purpose for which the acorn (or the oak tree it becomes) is created. It seems to me a distinguishing feature of human nature, given Christian presuppositions, that our end (communion with God) is the same as the purpose for which we are created.

another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved."[78] It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this claim for Kierkegaard's ethic. Kierkegaard himself certainly tries to emphasize it, both by placing it in italics and by repeating it, almost verbatim, two more times elsewhere in the discourse.[79] But by itself, it is difficult to make sense of the claim that *what it is* to love the neighbor is to help the neighbor love God. In the following chapters, I will argue that this claim best makes sense within the broader context of Kierkegaard's teleology: specifically, his view that the human *telos* is communion with God. By helping the neighbor to love God, one helps the neighbor achieve her end, and thus to flourish as a human being. This further explains why God must be the middle term in every genuinely loving relationship: truly to love the neighbor is to help the neighbor love God, and thus every truly loving relationship between human persons involves God as a third member.

Ferreira's comments about Kierkegaard's view of creation, here and elsewhere in *Love's Grateful Striving*, are insightful and provocative. But they remain in skeletal form throughout the book: Ferreira compiles plenty of passages from *Works of Love* to demonstrate that creation is a central theme of Kierkegaard's ethic, but she does not explicate these passages sufficiently—either their significance or their full meaning. One of the most suggestive passages of *Love's Grateful Striving* comes in the chapter on "Love's Law—Obligation," where, following a critique of the divine command reading of Kierkegaard, she writes,

> the way in which God's gift is the background to the command is important to Kierkegaard's account of the authority of the love commandment insofar as its

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[78]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 107, italics in original.

[79]Ibid., 114 and 130.

> authority derives from the way in which it reflects the divinely created nature of things. We are created as kin (children of God), so the command to love is not arbitrarily imposed from outside but is grounded in the structure of our humanity. In other words, we can determine the justice of God's authority, and hence the legitimacy of obedience to the command, from the structure of the created world. This seems to echo Kierkegaard's own understanding of the relation between creation and law.[80]

In context, this seems like a promissory note, but it is one on which Ferreira never delivers. We find several passages in *Love's Grateful Striving* in which Ferreira assembles Kierkegaard's statements about our being "bond servants" to God, about His "creating us from nothing," about our being "bound" to Him, etc., but we are given insufficient explanation about the philosophical implications of these passages, especially in regard to Kierkegaard's view of what an obligation is and how it is grounded.

It seems to me that Ferreira's sympathetic reading of Kierkegaard's ethic is mostly right, but, for the aforementioned reason, incomplete. In the chapters to come, I will try to build on Ferreira's arguments, developing a view that, I think, she partially suggests but does not herself develop. Part of my project, then, will be to demonstrate *how* the command to love—and how moral obligation, more generally—is rooted in "the structure of the created world" and the "divinely created nature of things."

Kierkegaard, Metaethics, and Anti-theory

In the remainder of this project, I will focus primarily on Kierkegaard's understanding of obligation: more specifically, on his view of what a moral obligation is and how we come to be morally obligated in various ways. I intend to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's writings contain a view of moral obligation that is both powerful in its ability to synthesize a number of commitments of orthodox Christian ethics and quite

[80]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 41.

plausible, given theistic assumptions, despite the fact that it remains largely ignored in contemporary discussions of religious ethics. I will begin by situating Kierkegaard's view in relation to the two ethical views to which it is most akin: a theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic and a divine command ethic. A number of commentators have argued recently that Kierkegaard's ethic is, in fact, an ethic of one of these types. I will focus primarily on the views, first, of Robert C. Roberts and John J. Davenport, each of whom has argued that Kierkegaard is a kind of virtue ethicist, and, second, of Philip L. Quinn and C. Stephen Evans, each of whom has argued that a divine command ethic is to be found in *Works of Love*. I will try to bring out the strengths and weaknesses of each reading of Kierkegaard, arguing, ultimately, that Kierkegaard's view of obligation is best seen as belonging to neither of these traditions despite having significant overlap with each. In chapter four, I will argue for a new interpretation of Kierkegaard's view of obligation. Taking Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous writings as my point of departure, I subsequently will attempt to develop more fully the theory of obligation certain passages in these writings suggest.

Although I will present textual evidence that Kierkegaard's view is conceptually between a virtue theory and a divine command theory of the aforementioned types, the view of obligation that I eventually will formulate and defend is not one that Kierkegaard himself formulates explicitly, much less defends. The view I will defend is one that draws heavily on the rich resources and insights found in Kierkegaard's writings, and it is one that accords with the vast majority of what he writes about Christian ethics. It is thus a theory of obligation credit for whose foundation and basic structure is largely due to Kierkegaard.

By its very nature, this project is subject to the following two criticisms. First, Roberts has implied in a number of writings that Kierkegaard is a kind of anti-theorist in that he (Kierkegaard) deliberately and assiduously avoids ethical theorizing in order to focus on other projects—such as analysis of key Christian concepts—that are not only less analytically ambitious (searching for the necessary and sufficient conditions for obligation, for instance), but also more edifying to their intended readership. Roberts claims that Kierkegaard, like Wittgenstein,

> addresses himself to people he regards as conceptually confused, to the detriment of the quality of their lives, and calls himself a dialectician—something similar to a depth-grammarian—and a "corrective." And what Kierkegaard wishes to draw his readership back into is, like Wittgenstein's "everyday use" of words, something traditional, something that in itself needs no improvement.[81]

To support this claim, Roberts quotes Kierkegaard's assessment of the pseudonyms in "A First and Last Explanation," attached to the end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

> . . . their importance . . . absolutely does not consist in making any new proposal, any unheard of discovery, . . . but, precisely on the contrary, consists in wanting . . . to read solo the original text of the individual, human existence-relationship, the old text, well known, handed down from the fathers—to read it through yet once more, if possible in a more heartfelt way.[82]

The implication, then, is that Kierkegaard is not engaged in the project of introducing and defending new and novel philosophical *theories* ("any new proposal, any unheard of discovery"); rather, his project is that of conceptual clarification toward the end of making it clear what it means to exist as an individual—and, more specifically, what it means to be a Christian. The only "theory" Kierkegaard is interested in defending is

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[81]Robert C. Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matuštík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 146.

[82]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, unpaginated in the Lowrie translation cited here (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941); [629] – [630] in the Hong edition.

Christianity—and even then, calling what he does "defending" is probably a stretch, given that he deliberately tries to make being a Christian appear as difficult as possible.

The objection to my project, then, runs as follows: I am trying to impose a metaethical theory on a (more or less) professed anti-theorist. I am not respecting Kierkegaard's claim that there are no "new proposals" or "unheard of discoveries" to be found in his writings, but am trying, instead, to defend the view that this is exactly what we find in these writings.[83] I am, in short, a bad reader of Kierkegaard. Or, at the very least, my project is an awkward and artificial one, a kind of misguided treasure-hunt, and to that extent it is a project unlikely to find much success or to be very persuasive.

My response to this objection comes in two parts. First, I see no compelling reason to think Kierkegaard was averse to the project of theorizing in general. In fact, Climacus says in the *Postscript*,

> Honor be to speculative thought, praised be everyone who is truly occupied with it. To deny the value of speculative thought . . . would, in my eyes, be to prostitute oneself and would be especially foolish for one whose life in large part and at its humble best is devoted to its service, and especially foolish for one who admires the Greeks.[84]

Throughout the *Postscript*, Climacus critiques speculative thought run amuck—speculative thought that confuses itself with concrete existence—but, as this passage indicates, he recognizes its value when it is put to its (limited) proper use. In this, Climacus and Kierkegaard seem to be in agreement. Although Kierkegaard does not offer philosophical analyses that include phrases like "is necessary and sufficient for," we

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[83]Of course, Kierkegaard only claims this for the pseudonymous writings in "A First and Last Explanation"—not for his writings, more generally. But one can claim (plausibly, I think) that Kierkegaard views his entire authorship in much the same way, so I will not pursue this particular line of defense.

[84]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 55-6.

do, nevertheless, find throughout his writings explications, characterizations, and even definitions of a host of Christian concepts. We find in the closing passage of *The Sickness Unto Death*, for instance, an explicit definition of faith:

> . . . the formula for the state in which there is no despair at all: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith.[85]

Thus, while it is true that Kierkegaard does not offer an explicit definition or "formula" for moral obligation, it seems unlikely that he would have any principled reason for resisting the project of constructing and defending such a definition, since he does construct definitions of other, similar concepts.

Roberts apparently wants to draw a distinction between conceptual analysis, on the one hand (the project he identifies as Kierkegaard's), and theorizing, on the other, but it is difficult to see in what, exactly, the difference lies. It seems plausible to claim that wherever a philosophical *account* is given, or a philosophical explanation of some concept is offered, therein philosophical theorizing of some sort is being done. It may be that what Roberts has in his sights in critiquing ethical theorizing is not the relatively modest project that restricts itself to offering an account—or even a philosophical "formula"—of some individual ethical concept, like moral obligation, but rather the much more ambitious project, exemplified paradigmatically by Enlightenment figures like Kant, that tries to construct a grand, all-encompassing theory of ethics based on some foundation that is self-evident to all rational persons as such. We could call this latter project *strong ethical foundationalism* and define it as the attempt to find some

[85]Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 131.

foundational concept(s) and to give a reductive account of all other moral concepts in terms of this (or these) concept(s).

This seems to be what Roberts has in mind in his critique of the contemporary trend in virtue ethics. He argues that, in the contemporary literature,

> we find authors preoccupied with *ordering* moral concepts in such a way that some of them are subordinated to or derived from other concepts or some single other concept so that some one or small number of moral concepts become the source, the ground, the foundation, the base, of the others.[86]

Though this is a "standard model for ethical theory,"[87] Roberts doubts that it is an effective one.

> In general, ethical theories differ from one another according to which concept is taken to be the foundational source for the other, derivative, concepts, but they tend to have this common basis-and-derivation structure. But why think ethics ought to have this structure? . . . It seems to me that moral concepts do, clearly, bear relations of logical or quasi-logical dependency on one another . . . . But the effort to find a single, exclusionary ordering of the hierarchical kind . . . appears always to generate implausible claims and paradoxes which are leapt on by theorists with contrasting agendas.[88]

Roberts worries, further, that "the theorist's exclusivist mind-set seems to close off promising avenues of analysis and insight."[89] Thus he concludes:

> Our understanding of moral concepts would be better served by not having a theory at all, if every theory is going to prevent our acknowledging some things about the way the moral concepts work. Much of moral theorists' energy is expended in trying to make plausible the implausibilities created by their conceptual reductions.[90]

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[86]Roberts, "Studying Virtues," chapter one of *Emotions and Virtues: An Essay in Moral Psychology* (unpublished), p. 2 in manuscript.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid., 5-6.

[89]Ibid., 10.

[90]Ibid., 12.

Roberts cites and discusses a number of these implausibilities that he finds, not just in the writings of Enlightenment thinkers, but also in those of contemporary ethicists such as Michael Slote, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Linda Zagzebski. I find Roberts's critique convincing, so long as its target is restricted to those models of ethics that strive to be all-encompassing and broadly reductive in the sense he describes. (I will not address the issue of whether Roberts's treatment of the aforementioned contemporary ethicists is accurate—that is, whether their respective views do, in fact, fall in this category of trying to be all-encompassing and broadly reductive.) But my own project is not susceptible to this critique, because it does not attempt anything like the strong foundationalist project.[91] What I will defend is a particular analysis of moral obligation, but I will not try to analyze all other moral concepts in terms of obligations, nor in terms of the conceptual apparatus I use to analyze obligations. For this reason, it seems to me that my project is consonant with Roberts's own model of philosophical analysis:

> Such a treatment will inevitably *focus* on the concept in question, but equally it will draw connections of that concept to other parts of the conceptual array. That is what analysis—and philosophical ethics in the mode that I am commending—would be. To focus on a concept, be it *responsibility*, or *God*, or *obligation*, or *virtue* (or one of the virtues) is quite different from trying to make that concept a foundation from which all the other concepts in the array can be derived.[92]

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[91]Most contemporary defenders of divine command theory are not suitable targets for this kind of critique, either. It certainly is possible to be a proponent of divine command theory without endorsing strong ethical foundationalism. As Mark Murphy notes, "a variety of DCM [divine command metaethics] might be more or less ambitious with respect to its attempt to explicate normative properties or states of affairs. A wide-ranging version of DCM might attempt to provide an account for all normative properties—*being good*, *being right*, *being a reason for*, *being virtuous*, *being valuable*, etc.—in terms of God's commands. A less wide-ranging view would focus on some proper subset of these normative concepts" (*An Essay on Divine Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 72). In fact, with the notable exception of some of Quinn's early work (in *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*), the vast majority of contemporary proponents of divine command theory have taken the "less ambitious" route, limiting their thesis to some claim about the nature of moral obligation (or to some related, limited set of deontological concepts).

[92]Ibid., 17. Another reason I am uncomfortable calling Kierkegaard an ethical anti-theorist is that it obscures one of Kierkegaard's own objections to Hegel's ethics. Hegel critiques the Kantian ethical project that culminates in a moral theory of the strong sort: a moral algorithm for discerning one's

There is, however, a second, related, concern for my project. Given that Kierkegaard does not explicitly give—much less defend—a definition or formula for moral obligation, my position is susceptible to the objection that it imposes a view on Kierkegaard's writings that is not contained in these writings, even if, as I have just argued, Kierkegaard is not opposed to such a project in principle.

There are two points I wish to make in response to this objection. First, there are a number of passages in Kierkegaard's writings—and several located at strategic points in

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obligations. Hegel's own project is to give a kind of genealogical description of the development of ethics in the dialectical movement of Spirit, while relegating the ethical "work"—the discernment, articulation, and defense of specific obligations, moral laws, etc.—to the level of the practices of a particular community. On his view, ethical judgments are made from within the practices of one's community, from the perspective of one's socially-established identity, and thus the beginning of ethics is practice rather than principles; the process of reflection and ethical theorizing comes later. In this way, Hegel's philosophical ethics is a kind of anti-theory: it holds that genuine ethical practice is not guided by normative theory. Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's ethics—largely through Climacus in the *Postscript*—is that Hegel actually "disregards the ethical" and that "the system lacks an ethics" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 307, footnote). In a number of his most important writings (including *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms wage a sustained attack on the Hegelian thesis that anything ethically significant in the inner life of individuals must be expressed externally, embodied in the social life of a community. For Kierkegaard, ethics is essentially concerned with the individual's inner life: as Climacus puts it, "the ethical is inwardness" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 143). The brunt of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's ethics is that, because of its focus on the external, on social forms of life, it is unedifying to the individual—a point Hegel likely would concede, given that he specifically warns in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* that "philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying" (*Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, New York, Toronto, et al.: Oxford University Press), 6). This unedifying aspect of Hegel's ethics can be viewed as a consequence of its being a kind of anti-theory: it does not give determinate ethical content to the individual, because a "finite spirit" is in no position to see its presence "in world history"—and, in fact, "wanting to see it there is a presumptuous and risky undertaking that can easily end with the observer's losing the ethical in himself" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 141). In other words, by trying to discern the ethical in *Sittlichkeit*, the individual risks missing out on the ethical project altogether, which is an individual project: "In order to study the ethical, every human being is assigned to himself" (ibid., 141). This project begins with ethical honesty and a recognition of one's own guilt before God, the proper response to which is an absolute commitment to uphold the divine will. *Sittlichkeit* gives form to ethics, but no specific content (the content varies from one community to another). Kierkegaard's religious ethic finds content in the will of God, which, in comparison to Hegel's view, makes it a kind of ethical theory. In this way, the ethical theory vs. anti-theory debate is, in part, behind the Kierkegaardian contention that Hegel does not have an ethics—and Kierkegaard is on the theory side of the debate, not the anti-theory side. There are, of course, a number of different and legitimate characterizations of "anti-theory"; Roberts's view suggests it can be taken to refer to the rejection of strong ethical foundationalism. This is a kind of anti-theory that seems consistent with the kind of ethical theory Kierkegaard endorses. Nevertheless, I still find the label "anti-theory" *unhelpful* when applied to Kierkegaard's ethics for the aforementioned reason: namely, that it obscures an important part of Kierkegaard's contention with Hegel.

Works of Love—that *at least* suggest the model of moral obligation I will defend. It is on the basis of these passages that I will argue that my view is a broadly Kierkegaardian one. It is unclear the extent to which Kierkegaard worked out this model of obligation for himself or intended to commit himself to this view in his writings. I think there is strong textual evidence that Kierkegaard assumed a model of obligation very much like the one I will defend, albeit in a less detailed form, and that this model operates in the background throughout his signed writings, especially in *Works of Love*. I thus consider myself to be clarifying and expanding what is, in fact, Kierkegaard's view. However, the textual evidence in support of this view, and against all rival views, certainly is not objectively compelling. In this regard, my reading of Kierkegaard on obligation is in more or less the same boat as most any controversial reading of any historical philosopher on any subject.[93]

Nevertheless, if the reader remains unconvinced by the end of this project that the view I defend is Kierkegaard's own view, my project will not, for that reason, be entirely in vain. I am more concerned to argue for the plausibility of a particular model of obligation that I find in Kierkegaard's writings, regardless of whether it is, in fact, Kierkegaard's own view. There is at least one precedent for this strategy in recent Kierkegaard scholarship. Evans writes the following concerning his own project of arguing for a divine command ethic of moral obligation in Kierkegaard's writings:

> If anyone thinks in the end that the view I shall expound is not Kierkegaard's, that will not for me be all that significant. It is enough for me that it is a powerful position that can be found in Kierkegaard's writings, and thus it can be called 'Kierkegaardian' whether or not someone recognizes it as Kierkegaard's own view. The question of the adequacy of this 'Kierkegaardian' view is much more

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[93]I am of course not claiming that there is as much textual evidence in support of my reading of Kierkegaard on obligation as there is in support of any controversial reading of any figure on any topic.

important to me than the question of whether it is to be attributed to Kierkegaard.[94] In this regard, my own project parallels Evans's project closely.

Conclusion

There certainly are many more objections that have been leveled at Kierkegaard's ethics than what I have addressed in this chapter, and there are other objections to my own project with which I will need to deal eventually. Many of the former objections must be saved for anther time, though some will be taken up in the discussion to come. In the next chapter, I will begin the project of trying to situate Kierkegaard's ethic—and his view of obligation, more specifically—within the contemporary discussion. I will first explore, in chapter two, Kierkegaard's relationship to contemporary, theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics; chapter three will address Kierkegaard's relationship to recent versions of divine command ethics.

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[94]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love,* 19.

CHAPTER TWO

Kierkegaard and Virtue Ethics

Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century experienced an explosion of interest both in Kierkegaard and in virtue ethics, and increasingly, scholars have been exploring seriously the convergence of the two. Although Alasdair MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard's ethic in *After Virtue* helped establish the standard reading of Kierkegaard as an existentialist who advocates a "radical"—and ultimately incoherent—choice of the ethical over the aesthetic, John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd report that "[v]irtually all interpreters now agree that Kierkegaard did not intend *Either/Or* to imply that responsible agents enter into the realm of moral action through arbitrary choice or Sartrean groundless passion."[1] In place of the unsophisticated[2] existentialist reading, two important—and apparently incompatible—camps of interpretation of Kierkegaard's ethic have emerged. One reads Kierkegaard as a virtue ethicist; the other interprets him as a divine command ethicist. In this chapter, I will explore the former by way of (1) considering the readings of several prominent scholars who defend this view, (2) evaluating both the points of affinity and points of discord with virtue ethics that appear in Kierkegaard's writings, and (3) assessing the overall adequacy of the virtue reading of

[1]John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, eds. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), xxx.

[2]I say "unsophisticated," because many scholars still view Kierkegaard as a *kind* of existentialist, albeit in a more nuanced way. Davenport's interpretation of Kierkegaard's "existential virtue ethics" is one example that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Kierkegaard's ethic. Throughout the chapter, I will be considering the possibility that Kierkegaard's ethic is best understood as being, specifically, within the tradition of theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics: a view to which I will refer, more succinctly, as "the virtue reading of Kierkegaard."

The objective of this chapter, however, is not merely a broad exploration of the relationship between Kierkegaard's ethic and virtue ethics. Ultimately, the goal is more specific: to evaluate whether virtue readings of Kierkegaard's ethic are adequate to account for the picture of moral obligation found in his writings. I will argue that they are not. The problem, I will contend, is that, depending on how they are formulated, virtue readings of Kierkegaard either do not say enough or say the wrong things about his view of moral obligation. I will explore a spectrum of rival versions of virtue readings of Kierkegaard—both actual versions (those having actual supporters in the contemporary literature) and merely possible versions—in order to try to show that virtue readings, in general, are inadequate to capture Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation, because in their weak versions, they say too little to account for crucial passages in Kierkegaard's writings that bear on the topic, whereas in their strong versions, they entail commitments that Kierkegaard would reject. Before I argue for this thesis, however, I first will develop the general case for a virtue reading of Kierkegaard.

The Case for a Virtue Reading of Kierkegaard, Part I: The Theme of Becoming a Self

The contemporary literature on Kierkegaard is becoming increasingly replete with interpretations that read him within the tradition of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. A strong case can be made for such readings by focusing on the Kierkegaardian theme of *becoming a self*. The importance of this Kierkegaardian motif hardly can be

overestimated: it is arguably the most central theme in his corpus, spanning throughout the aesthetic, ethical, and religious writings and explored by personae of all three existence spheres.[3] Although the discussion of becoming a self is most obvious and explicit in works such as *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life's Way*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Sickness Unto Death*, it is an underlying theme throughout the upbuilding discourses and many other pseudonymous works, as well.

But what is it to "become a self"? Is it not tautologous that every existing person already is a self? Obviously, Kierkegaard is not using "self" in the Cartesian sense: he does not use it to mean the same thing as "mind" or "one's present state of consciousness" or even "that to which one refers by uttering the word 'I.'" Such terms refer (either in part or in whole) to what we might call "the present self": that which one is at any given moment. It is clear that Kierkegaard takes the task of becoming a self to be an ethical task.[4] But the self that one has it as an ethical task to *become* cannot be simply one's present self; otherwise, there would be no ethical *task*.

In the *Postscript*, Climacus writes,

> Ethics focuses upon the individual, and ethically understood it is every individual's task to become a whole human being; just as it is the presupposition of ethics that every person is born in the state of being able to become that.[5]

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[3]As John W. Elrod notes, "The individual's moral obligation to become a self before God is clearly the guiding principle governing Kierkegaard's investigation of the complex terrain of human inwardness" ("Human Subjectivity and Divine Creativity in Kierkegaard's Thought," in *Creation and Method: Critical Essays on Christocentric Theology*, ed. Henry Vander Goot (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 47-8.

[4]C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1983), 74.

[5]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 346.

Becoming a self, then, is a matter of becoming "a whole human being." Put differently, it is the process by which one actualizes the human potential.[6] This is an ethic of character, a "self-actualization ethic," as Evans puts it.[7] Thus Kierkegaard's use of the phrase "becoming a self" is not especially idiosyncratic: the use of this phrase to denote the constructing of one's character is present in the contemporary literature on virtue ethics that is entirely removed from Kierkegaard's writings.[8]

Among Kierkegaard scholars, commentators—regardless of their broader interpretation of his ethics—generally agree that becoming a self is a matter of developing a stable character of some sort.[9] As Evans puts it,

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[6]In the ethical sphere, represented most clearly in Kierkegaard's writings by Judge William, one becomes a self by consciously and deliberately choosing the type of person one intends to become and by willing thereafter, in concrete ways, to become such a person: for example, by willing actions that are consistent with the type of character one has resolved to acquire and exemplify. The Judge argues at length that his aesthetic friend, "A," is not a genuine self, for "A" deliberately and systematically avoids all commitments and any kind of personal consistency. One's self is defined by the acts one has committed, the decisions one has made, the personal development one has undergone, and (most importantly from the ethical perspective) the commitments and ideals according to which one resolves to live one's life. Being a self requires acting consistently: to have an identity, a personality, one must have a character that is consistent through time. "A" acts randomly (without a defining pattern or characteristic), avoids decisive choices, resolves himself to undergo no personal edification or development, and religiously avoids all commitments. He systematically closes off all possibilities for the formation of a self in fear that such activities will undermine his absolute freedom. Since he regards consistency as a sign of determination and thus an infringement upon his freedom, he resolves himself to arbitrariness, and in so doing, he forfeits the possibility of being a self. There is a deep irony here: It is from a desire to keep open the full range of human possibilities—to preserve his absolute freedom—that "A" deliberately acts from the principle of arbitrariness. But in so doing, he makes impossible the development of a personality, a character, a *self*. In short, he shuts himself off from the possibility of actualizing the full human potential—the most significant possibility available to a person.

[7]See *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* especially Chapter V: "Existence and the Ethical: Becoming a Self," 73-93.

[8]E.g., Christine McKinnon, *Character, Virtue Theories, and the Vices* (Peterborough, Ont. and Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 1999), 24.

[9]I say "of some sort," because commentators disagree about whether this stable character must be a virtuous character.

> The essential self that you are to become is your ethical self; the person only realizes himself through ethical commitment. Ethical commitment is the decisive criterion of 'selfhood.'[10]

But how is it that one becomes a self, or "becomes a whole human being," as Climacus puts it? Climacus's answer, in short, is this: "The subjective thinker's task is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence the essentially human."[11] One becomes "whole" by acquiring those traits that facilitate those who possess them in achieving their full potential as human beings: in other words, by acquiring the virtues. The case for a virtue reading of Climacus's ethic is clear: the fundamental ethical task is becoming a self, and becoming a self is most fundamentally a matter of *developing virtuous character*.[12] The case for a virtue reading of *Kierkegaard*, then, is made by arguing that he agrees with Climacus in this general approach to ethics—a case that is fairly easy to make by comparing the respective views presented in *Postscript* and the signed writings on the issue of becoming a self.

A number of commentators have made a case for just such a view. David J. Gouwens argues that "Kierkegaard sees 'becoming religious' in terms of 'upbuilding' and 'forming the individual'" and that "[b]ecoming ethical or religious is gaining a unified self." [13] Gouwens explores in depth "Kierkegaard's vision of becoming religious as the shaping of the heart, the development of long-term personal emotions and

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[10]Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 82.

[11]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 356.

[12]As Evans puts it, "Climacus' view is decidedly in the line of those ethicists who have taught that life's task is 'soul-making.' In the final analysis the highest value in life is the cultivation of character—specifically, moral character. . . . This is the type of ethic that is associated with the great world religions, and it is the type of ethic found in Greek philosophy" (*Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 75).

[13]David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 93 and 95.

particularly virtues that characterize both ethical and religious existence."[14] Roberts notes that these themes are developed at length in Climacus's writings:

> Like traditional virtue-oriented thinkers about the moral and spiritual life, Climacus thinks of proper personal formation as in large part a matter of proper *passional* formation—the proper formation of interests, enthusiasms and concerns, and of the various emotions that arise from these.[15]

Which traits are recognized as virtues, however, will not necessarily remain the same from one existence sphere to another. In the ethical sphere, the traits likely to be counted are those that facilitate social cohesion and the effective functioning of each person in his or her social role or "station" in life. But in the religious sphere—the highest sphere for Kierkegaard—one becomes oneself by becoming the self that God intends one to become. What God intends one to become is not always the same as what society would like one to become, and sometimes the person God requires one to become will not even be recognized as a particularly ethical person by those within the ethical sphere. This is because, in Kierkegaard's view, what God requires is that one acquire the *Christian* virtues, and some of these virtues—such as humility, compassion, and meekness (expressed in such actions as "turning the other cheek")— very well may be considered subversive, self-destructive, or otherwise unethical by those who do not reside in this sphere.[16]

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[14]Ibid., 93.

[15]Roberts, "Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: "Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments,'"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 74. Again, the virtue reading is advanced by arguing that Kierkegaard agrees with Climacus on these points—a view Roberts holds.

[16]That Kierkegaard views the task of becoming a Christian primarily in terms of acquiring the virtues is evidenced by the following journal entry:

> The Socratic thesis is of utmost importance for Christianity: Virtue cannot be taught; that is, it is not a doctrine, it is a being-able, an exercising, an existing [*Existeren*], an existential [*existentiel*]

The virtue reading—according to which Kierkegaard thinks the highest ethical task is the acquisition of the Christian virtues—helps explain why Kierkegaard continually published non-pseudonymous discourses, often simultaneously with pseudonymous works, in which he explores the character traits central to the Christian life, thereby clarifying the goal toward which religious striving is aimed. In *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* alone, he explores at length the virtues of hope, gratitude, love, patience, humility, spiritual integrity, and courage.[17] The aim of these works is to aid the reader in coming to realize the ethical goal—and to realize how far short she is of that goal—and to prompt the reader to take the first steps of deeper commitment to the ethical task and the striving necessary to sustain it.

In expounding the theme of becoming a self, Kierkegaard explores other, related issues that play prominently in contemporary virtue ethics. One is the focus on the ethical goal of the internal harmony of the soul or self, a central theme in virtue ethics since Plato's *Republic*. As Gouwens puts it, "Throughout his authorship, [Kierkegaard's] ideal is one shared by the virtue tradition, the ideal of personal 'unity' . . . . Becoming ethical or religious is gaining a unified self."[18] The perfectly unified self is the self that "wills one thing": the self that is single-minded, devoid of inner conflict or duplicity.[19]

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transformation. . . . [I]n respect to virtue there is always particular emphasis on *the internal*, the inward, "the single individual."

Here I come again to my thesis—Christianity is not a doctrine but an existence communication [*Existents-Meddelelse*] (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:46 (#1060)).

[17]For a categorical listing of the chief virtue explored in each discourse, see 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), 186.

[18]Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 95.

[19]See especially Søren Kierkegaard, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948). This discourse also is found under the title, "An Occasional

The ideally unified self is the ideally virtuous self, the self that wills the good out of a pure character rather than out of a desire for reward, a fear of punishment, or even a desire for moral "victory" (self-righteous pride).[20]

One of Kierkegaard's most interesting and original contributions to the field of virtue ethics—and, specifically, to moral psychology as it bears on the task of acquiring the virtues—is found in his analysis of *repetition*. Two aspects of this difficult category are especially pertinent for the present discussion. First, there is the interesting feature of character development that similar behaviors—especially those of moral significance—performed by the same agent at different times often are construed differently by that agent (that is, either the behavior itself or its meaning and significance are construed differently), depending on the state of the agent's character at the time. In this vein, Randall G. Colton discusses repetition as "a narrative pattern of loss and recovery";[21] in the event of a repetition, an individual gains a new vision of the world, "seeing it anew in the light of a more adequate object of concern and finding a more reliable and appropriate sense of its significance."[22] The most dramatic example of this occurs when an individual successively occupies different existence spheres—a "moral" behavior often will be construed differently from the vantage point of the aesthetic sphere, the ethical sphere, and the religious sphere, respectively—but repetitions also occur for individuals

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Discourse" in Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 3-154. All references to this discourse in the present chapter will be to the Steere translation, unless otherwise specified.

[20]See sections 4, 5, and 6 of "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing" (respectively, "Barriers to Willing One Thing: The Reward Disease," "Barriers to Willing One Thing: Willing out of Fear of Punishment," and "Barriers to Willing One Thing: Egocentric Service of the Good").

[21]Randall G. Colton, "Perception, Emotion, and Development in Kierkegaard's Moral Pedagogy," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: "Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 221.

[22]Ibid., 218.

successively occupying different "levels" of one sphere: for example, by one undergoing the process of religious maturation.

Colton uses the example of giving to the poor to illustrate this point. Giving to the poor is at least potentially a meritorious behavior, but it is one that can be construed in many different ways, and these construals help determine its full meaning and significance—and thus its true moral worth. The way such a behavior is construed is shaped by one's character: one will view the behavior in different ways depending on the kind of person one is. Thus the category of repetition is of special significance for virtue ethics. Repetition highlights the fact that the same behavior-type (same in virtue of instantiating the same salient property, such as *giving to the poor*) performed over and over may not be the same, morally speaking, each time it is performed. One may give to the poor grudgingly at one time, condescendingly at another, altruistically at yet another, and so on. A repetition is not simply an event in which one comes to perceive correctly moral features of a situation, action, or institution that one previously overlooked. Rather, it marks a change in an individual's attitude toward or construal of some situation, behavior, etc. It is, in Christian rhetoric, the event in which "the old becomes new."[23] What the category of repetition demonstrates is that the exemplification of some behavior, by itself—and even the intention behind the behavior—is insufficient to capture its entire moral status and worth (or lack thereof).[24] This highlights the deficiency of many rival ethical theories, such as a strictly rule-based, Kantian ethic, which cannot adequately account for such features.

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[23]Colton, "Perception, Emotion, and Development in Kierkegaard's Moral Pedagogy," 221-3.

[24]Note that, in the example of giving to the poor, the intention in each case might be to help meet the needs of the poor.

A second "version" of repetition that is simpler, perhaps, but nevertheless crucial for virtue ethics is this: repetition is the process by which the virtues are acquired by an individual. As Aristotle puts it in *Nicomachaean Ethics*, "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."[25] It is neither by willing such acts on a single occasion nor by resolving to acquire such character traits that one comes to possess the virtues. Rather, virtuous character is acquired through a process of *repeatedly* performing actions of a certain kind.[26]

More generally, this version of repetition can be characterized as *the continual choosing of oneself as the self of one's choosing.* One makes, in a moment of decisive significance, a choice to be a certain kind of person;[27] the religious individual, for example, chooses herself as one whose life will express an absolute commitment to God. However, in order to make this choice actual, in order actually to define oneself as a religious self, one must express this commitment in each present moment by one's actions and choices. What is true of one's life as a whole also is true of the individual virtues. One cannot simply say, resolvedly, "Henceforth I will be an honest person," and thereby become an honest person. Regardless of how sincere this initial declaration might be, if the person soon after begins practicing deception, it is clear that she is not, in fact, an honest person. To *be* an honest person requires that one consistently practice

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[25]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103 b, in *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J. L. Ackrill (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 376.

[26]Some undoubtedly will object that this second interpretation of repetition is too literal and simple-minded. I think a good case can be made for it, however, by a close reading of Kierkegaard's analysis of the simultaneous *striving* and *suffering* involved in repetition. The paragraph that follows—which is adopted, with modifications, from my "Striving and Resting: Seven Aspects of Religious Suffering" (unpublished)—is an attempt to make this point in passing, given that a fuller exploration of the issue would be digressive in the present context.

[27]In Kierkegaardian terms, one chooses one's "ideal self." See, for example, Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 259.

honesty in one's day-to-day activities. In the same way, to choose oneself as a religious self—a self that exemplifies the Christian virtues—is to choose to express the absolute commitment to God day-by-day, moment-by-moment. As Evans notes, "Ethical and religious qualities must be constantly renewed in order to be preserved."[28] Of course, the difficulty is that it often is much more difficult to will the subsequent repetitions than it is to will the initial decision.[29] Becoming a self is a process rather than a singular event; thus, what Climacus claims about "dying to immediacy" in the *Postscript* applies equally to the acquisition of the virtues: "the individual must not imagine that it can be done all at once, because this is esthetics."[30]

The Case for a Virtue Reading of Kierkegaard, Part II: Essentialism and Teleology

In the next two sections, I will explore some further points of contact between Kierkegaardian ethics and virtue ethics. Two related, characteristically central themes of virtue ethics are (1) that human beings have a given nature (essentialism) and (2) that there is a given *telos*, determined by this nature, the fulfillment of which constitutes human flourishing (teleology).[31, 32] Because of his early appropriation by existentialists, Kierkegaard commonly has been regarded as a thinker who rejects completely the ideas

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[28]Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 67.

[29]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* 160-1; "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," 61-2.

[30]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 461.

[31]The word "given" in this sentence is meant to convey that, contra Sartre and other existentialists, this nature and *telos* are not up to the individual—or up to some culture, or the entire human species, for that matter—to determine.

[32]Listing "some of the features of mainline virtuism," Roberts writes, "Second, virtuists think of human beings as having a given human nature independently of our trait development, and of the traits as either satisfying or failing to satisfy or frustrating the developmental demands of that basic nature" ("The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*," 187).

of a human nature and *telos*. If we take Sartre as a proper representative of existentialism, then the foundational premise of the movement is that existence precedes essence: in other words, that there is no human nature with which we are born. On this view, we define what it is to be human by our attitudes, choices, and actions; human existence is infinitely malleable given the scope of freedom and the enormous range of options for living that it makes available to us. If Kierkegaard were indeed a proto-existentialist, as commonly assumed, one would expect him to endorse at least this minimal existentialist tenet. MacIntyre implies that Kierkegaard does so when, in *After Virtue*, he claims of Diderot, Smith and Kierkegaard,

> All reject any teleological view of human nature, any view of man as having an essence which defines his true end. But to understand this is to understand why their project of finding a basis for morality had to fail.[33]

The truth of the matter, however, is that there is both a strong version of teleology and a commitment to the reality of human nature that pervades the religious writings that represent Kierkegaard's own view. Peter J. Mehl[34] and Karen L. Carr take MacIntyre to task for the aforementioned claim, the latter noting that "[s]uch a reading of Kierkegaard is only possible by ignoring his many Christian writings"[35]—a point MacIntyre later concedes.[36] Other commentators have noted the themes of essentialism and teleology in

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[33]MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52.

[34]Peter J. Mehl, "Kierkegaard and the Relativist Challenge to Practical Philosophy," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, eds. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 5.

[35]Karen L. Carr, "After Paganism: Kierkegaard, Socrates, and the Christian Tradition," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, eds. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 190, footnote 20.

[36]In a reply to his critics, MacIntyre claims that Carr "justly chides me. . . for having denied that Kierkegaard has a teleological view of human nature, an error perpetrated in one of the clumsiest and most misleading sentences of *After Virtue*" ("Once More on Kierkegaard," 344).

Kierkegaard's writings, as well. Evans points out that ". . . Kierkegaard affirms a universal human nature that includes some qualities as essential,"[37] and on this point, Roberts concurs:

> In contradiction of Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum that, where human beings are concerned, "existence precedes essence," Kierkegaard's accounts of the properly formed human being start from a conception of a nonnegotiable given human nature which lays down the parameters of development, dictating that some formations are proper and healthy and others are not.[38]

And elsewhere, Roberts elaborates on this point:

> An Aristotelian assumption operates throughout Kierkegaard's authorship, to the effect that human nature has fixed parameters that can be developmentally violated, all right, but to do so means, to one degree or another, failure as a person, and more or less obvious dysfunction.[39]

We already have seen that there is something that Kierkegaard calls "the essentially human."[40] But what is it? What are the qualities that are essential to human flourishing? Certainly, they include qualities like rationality, freedom, and moral responsibility, but they go beyond these. More generally, they are the qualities of individual selfhood that develop initially through ethical commitment and reach full maturation in the condition Anti-Climacus describes as "resting transparently" in God.[41]

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[37]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 23.

[38]Roberts, "The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*," 190.

[39]Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 149.

[40]I am referring here to the aforementioned quote from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "The subjective thinker's task is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence the essentially human."

[41]In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus speaks of ". . . the universally human or that which every human being, unconditionally every human being, is capable of, that which is not linked to any condition save that which is in everyone's power, *the universally human, that is, the ethical*, that which every human being shall and therefore also presumably can do" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 242, emphasis added).

What are the "fixed parameters" that, if crossed, constitute personal dysfunction? They are the boundaries of human experience that circumscribe individual ethico-religious development. As Roberts notes, Kierkegaard certainly thinks these parameters can be violated: the case studies of "A" and of the Seducer in *Either/Or* provide two examples of the developmental dysfunction of becoming mired in the aesthetic sphere; the demoniac discussed in *The Sickness Unto Death* illustrates a very different kind of dysfunction. The fact that these parameters can be violated indicates that the kind of essentialism in question is not that typically discussed by contemporary analytic metaphysicians: it is not a discussion of the qualities possessed by an agent (or agents) in all possible worlds, properties whose loss by an agent would entail the agent's ceasing to exist. Rather, it is an essentialism tied much closer to teleology and human flourishing, similar (at least in this respect) to an Aristotelian essentialism.

For Kierkegaard, there is a divinely appointed end for human beings, an end that is "built in" to our nature by our Creator. There are not an infinite number of ends—or a multiplicity of existence-types—that will result in ideal human flourishing. There are many *paths* that lead to the end of human flourishing, but there is only one end. It is the end for which humans are created, and the degree to which individuals fail to achieve this end is the degree to which they fall short of living flourishing human lives. For Kierkegaard, we do not define human nature by our actions; we do not define the meaning of human existence by our choices; we do not define the flourishing life by our attitudes. This is about as strong a rejection of existentialism as one can make, and yet it

is, as Roberts notes, the assumption that operates throughout Kierkegaard's entire authorship.[42]

It is debatable the extent to which Kierkegaard's teleology is Aristotelian.[43] In some respects, it bears an important similarity: for example, in having its foundations in an underlying speculative metaphysic[44]—precisely the point on which many contemporary ethicists take Aristotle's ethic to task. Christine McKinnon's view that virtue ethics must be "naturalized" to be contemporarily relevant is representative of the intellectual climate of mainstream virtue ethics today.[45] Against such a view, Kierkegaard is in agreement with Aristotle: his teleology, based on Christian theological commitments, is also one that is "fraught with metaphysical assumptions,"[46] albeit not the Aristotelian ones. Because of this, the Kierkegaardian ethic is not one that will be considered a live option by those, like McKinnon, who seek a naturalist approach, or for those, more generally, who reject the possibility of a religious foundation for ethics. In other respects, however, Kierkegaard's teleology is decidedly un-Aristotelian. Not only

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[42]One place it emerges most clearly is in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The book opens by listing a number of purported essential qualities of the self—that it is a certain complex kind of synthesis, etc.—and then proceeds to explore the myriad ways that the attainment of complete selfhood can be thwarted. The fact that the self under discussion is a "task"—that is, a goal to be achieved—rather than a substance does not disqualify its essentialist features.

[43]See Mehl, "Kierkegaard and the Relativist Challenge to Practical Philosophy," 11-12.

[44]I am not using "speculative" here in the sense in which Climacus discusses speculative philosophies in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Rather, by "speculative metaphysic," I mean simply a metaphysic that posits, as real and irreducible features of the world, some properties that would be rejected by naturalists.

[45]McKinnon writes that "Aristotle is thought to have provided the classical teleological ethics. He supposed that there was a proper end for humans, and he argued that human virtues were those excellences, both moral and intellectual, the active exercise of which permitted persons to approximate this ideal." But she takes Aristotle's teleology to be untenable in that it is "fraught with metaphysical assumptions" (*Character, Virtue Theories, and the Vices*, 21).

[46]See above footnote.

does he reject those aspects of Aristotelian metaphysics inconsistent with Christian theism, he takes rational deliberation to play a more diminutive role in ethics.

We will return to the question of whether—and to what degree—Kierkegaard's ethic is Aristotelian. For now, the question that needs to be addressed is this: What is the human *telos*, for Kierkegaard? What is the end of human existence? Not surprisingly, scholars disagree on this point. Clearly, one's end is the ideal of human flourishing, the full actualization of one's self. But what is complete self-actualization? Davenport suggests that Kierkegaard advocates a "minimal teleology" of "authenticity" which "does not require moral goodness" and thus can be achieved—at least in part—outside of ethical existence, ordinarily understood: authenticity can be displayed even in the context of a life that includes deliberate and radical evil.[47] (We will return to Davenport's view shortly.) Mehl, in contrast, suggests that the human *telos* for Kierkegaard is the exercise of freedom specifically to actualize the ethical and thereby "confront the call to personhood, the *telos* of human existence."[48] He claims that for Kierkegaard,

> . . . human beings are essentially beings that have as their essential function the actualizing of what characterizes them *qua* humans. The individual's highest interest concerns the natural predisposition to personhood. The highest need of the human being is to become a person, and that means becoming a center of responsible freedom. When Kierkegaard says that the central task confronting the existing individual is to exist, he is referring to this need to move from ethical reality as a potential to it as an actuality. In this sense, there is an ethical *telos* at the center of what it means to be a human person.[49]

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[47]John J. Davenport, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, eds. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 265 and 296.

[48]Mehl, "Kierkegaard and the Relativist Challenge to Practical Philosophy," 30.

[49]Ibid., 17. At times, Mehl implies that the *telos* is essentially religious. He notes that, for Kierkegaard, full personhood is attained in "existence in faith," which is "most conducive to human flourishing" (29) and that "[i]n Christian existence this ideal of human flourishing, the *telos* of existence, is attained most fully" (27). As I understand him, Mehl thinks a kind of "minimal teleology" (to borrow

In contrast to both these views, I contend that the human *telos*—the end displayed in "the highest life"—is, for Kierkegaard, a specifically religious end: [50] it is "a life in communion [*Samfund*] with God."[51] Many scholars overlook the underlying theme of communion with God in Kierkegaard's thought, but it has been noted before. Louis Mackey writes,

> What Kierkegaard proclaimed in the nineteenth century, to the scandal of his Christian contemporaries, is at bottom the common medieval teaching that man's desire for self-fulfillment can be satisfied by nothing less than union with God.[52]

And Alastair Hannay writes,

> The philosophical concept of a highest good (*summum bonum*) stems from Aristotle: roughly it is the concept of the most complete form of humanly attainable satisfaction, and an 'intrinsic' good in the sense that it is good in and of itself, not for or by virtue of some other good. Aristotle himself thought this highest good to be intellectual contemplation, this being for him the most complete and therefore most satisfying fulfillment of the potentialities of human nature. But Climacus's conception of the good as that offered by Christianity comes closer, naturally enough, to the Aquinian adaptation of Aristotle's ideal: the ideal of a special kind of contentment bestowed by God, a happiness or heavenly bliss, in the form of a maximally satisfying human participation in the divine; indeed Climacus actually speaks of 'participation' in the blessedness promised by Christianity.[53]

While the idea that the human *telos* is communion with God hardly is unique to Kierkegaard—as Mackey points out, it is the common medieval teaching—his particular

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Davenport's term) can be achieved in the pre-religious ethical sphere. Thus, for Mehl's Kierkegaard, faith is "most conducive to"—rather than *constitutive of*—human flourishing.

[50]Thus Anti-Climacus identifies one's true self as "the theological self, the self directly before God." (Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 79).

[51]Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 6:7-8 (#6152). "*Samfund*" is translated by the Hongs as "fellowship." I have followed Anthony Dru in translating it as "communion" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 144).

[52]Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 121.

[53]Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London, Boston, et. al.: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 210. The passage to which Hannay refers is Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 15-16.

conception of this communion is distinctive. He thinks that, paradoxically, communion with God is a matter of resting transparently in His sustaining power and love,[54] a single-minded obedience to the divine will so complete that it constitutes a kind of "annihilation" of the self.[55] The one who achieves this *telos* "is completely and wholly transformed into simply being an active power in the hands of God."[56]

The theme of teleology plays heavily in Kierkegaard's ethic in *Works of Love*, even though it remains in the background rather than being discussed explicitly. He emphasizes that "*to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved*."[57] Since the end of human existence is a state of loving union with God, the purpose of the Love Commandment is to facilitate each person's achieving the human *telos*.[58] Achieving our end is thus a communal project, and each person's ethico-religious development is tied to the ethico-religious development of others. One's own development is furthered by loving others, and one loves others by helping them to love God. And in turn, one is shown love when others help one to love God more deeply—again, furthering one's own development as a self. Ideally, in loving God through radical trust and obedience to His will, one achieves one's

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[54]Kierkegaard claims that God's love is "the love that sustains all existence" (*Works of Love*, 301).

[55]This view provides a unique interpretation of the scriptural teaching that one must lose one's life in order to save it (Matt. 10:39).

[56]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 279.

[57]Ibid., 107, Kierkegaard's italics.

[58]In developing her own, secular account of virtue ethics, McKinnon discusses how virtuous agents aid others in their (others') individual quests to become selves (*Character, Virtue Theories, and the Vices*, 25). Kierkegaard anticipates this theme of contemporary virtue ethics and develops it in a theological direction.

own highest fulfillment; it is for this reason that "*to love God is to love oneself truly*."[59] These central themes of *Works of Love* make sense only in the context of a view in which the highest individual potential, the most meaningful existence, and the most complete personal fulfillment are achieved in a right relationship to God—in short, in the context of a classical Christian teleology.

The Case for a Virtue Reading of Kierkegaard, Part III: Moral Vision and Other Themes

Another point of contact with contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in Kierkegaard's writings is found in the theme of *developing moral vision*. The issue of moral vision looms large in virtue ethics, dating back at least to Plato, who held that virtue "is essentially knowledge or insight into what is truly good."[60] The (ideal) fully virtuous person would be one who possesses the ability to immediately (i.e., non-inferentially) perceive the good (what is of ultimate value) and the right (what is morally obligatory) in all circumstances. It is the person who, moral speaking, "sees" the world rightly.

Many contemporary virtue ethicists share Stanley Hauerwas's conviction that "[t]he moral life is thus as much a matter of vision as it is a matter of doing"[61] and that modern moral philosophy is lopsided in its single-minded preoccupation with volitional acts. Hauerwas elaborates elsewhere on this point:

> Modern moral philosophers have failed to understand that moral behavior is an affair not primarily of choice but of vision. . . . Our morality is more than

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[59]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 107.

[60]Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 467.

[61]Stanley Hauerwas, "Toward an Ethic of Character," in *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974), 66.

> adherence to universalizable rules; it also encompasses our experiences, fables, beliefs, images, concepts, and inner monologues. . . . The moral life, then, is more than thinking clearly and making rational choices. It is a way of seeing the world.[62]

It seems, then, that Kierkegaard's ethic fits well the version of morality Hauerwas describes, for, as Gouwens points out, "Kierkegaard's virtue ethic, with its stress on passion and interest, emphasizes vision and not simply the will."[63]

The topic of moral vision arises in different forms in Kierkegaard's writings. One major theme in his works is that individuals who reside in different existence spheres see the world differently. Stark depictions of this are found in the respective analyses of "A" and Judge William on the institution of marriage, and in the different perspectives of Job, his wife, and his friends on Job's condition—and on what his response to God should be—as depicted in Kierkegaard's discourse, "The Lord gave and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord."[64] As Roberts puts it, "The worldly person and the spiritual person differ in what they 'notice,' what they 'look at.' The spiritual person

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[62]Stanley Hauerwas, "The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic," in *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974), 34-6. Despite their significant overlap on this point, Kierkegaard likely would not follow Hauerwas in claiming that "The moral life is thus better understood in the analogy of the aesthetic mode of seeing and beholding than in terms of action and decision. For the right answer is mainly a matter of really *looking* while avoiding the constant temptation to return to the self with the deceitful consolation of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair" (ibid., 37). This claim apparently overlooks the fact that it is in large part through making repeated choices of a certain kind that one's character is shaped, and it is by one's character's being shaped virtuously that one comes to develop proper moral vision, a point that challenges Hauerwas's claim that the moral life is *better* understood in aesthetic terms than in volitional terms. Kierkegaard likely would resist conceptual prioritizing at this point, noting that moral vision guides moral choice, and moral choice in turn shapes moral vision. Volition and vision constitute two parts of the self that are in constant interaction with one another—Kierkegaard would identify this as a "dialectical relation"—which is just what one would expect of a self that is *in process*—i.e., a self that is undergoing ethical development, or, in Kierkegaard's words, "becoming itself."

[63]Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 97.

[64]"The Lord gave and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord," in Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 109-124. For a helpful analysis of this discourse, see Colton, "Perception, Emotion, and Development in Kierkegaard's Moral Pedagogy."

'looks' and 'sees' using religious thoughts . . . ."[65] Many of the religious categories that Kierkegaard explores are best understood in terms of moral vision. For instance, "Offense and faith are two ways (or families of ways) of perceiving, with the 'eyes of the heart' (Ephesians 1:18), certain crucial features of Christ's person and activity . . . ."[66] More generally, in ethical and spiritual matters, the way one perceives the world is largely a function of one's own character. Kierkegaard writes,

> It does not depend, then, merely upon what one sees, but what one sees depends upon how one sees; all observation is not just a receiving, a discovering, but also a bringing forth, and insofar as it is that, how the observer himself is constituted is indeed decisive.[67]

A characteristic feature of proper moral vision is the focusing of one's attention on ethical ideals. Kierkegaard surely would agree with Hauerwas in his claim that

> Man's capacity for self-determination is dependent on his ability to envision and fix his attention on certain descriptions and to form his actions (and thus his self) in accordance with them. A man's character is largely the result of such sustained attention.[68]

The religious individual focuses her attention on God, trying to discern His will and striving to uphold "the task of relating oneself absolutely to the absolute *telos*."[69] The

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[65]Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 196.

[66]Roberts, "Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith," 88.

[67]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 59. Kierkegaard continues: "When one person sees one thing and another sees something else in the same thing, then the one discovers what the other conceals. Insofar as the object viewed belongs to the external world, then how the observer is constituted is probably less important, or, more correctly, then what is necessary for the observation is something irrelevant to his deeper nature. But the more the object of observation belongs to the world of spirit, the more important is the way he himself is constituted in his innermost nature, because everything spiritual is appropriated only in freedom; but what is appropriated in freedom is also brought forth. The difference, then, is not in the external but in the internal, and everything that makes a person impure and his observation impure comes from within" (59-60).

[68]Hauerwas, "Toward an Ethics of Character," 58.

[69]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 402.

Christian individual, specifically, focuses her attention on Christ as the prototype to be imitated.[70] Only by sustaining such focus can those in the ethical and religious spheres maintain a straight trajectory on their path toward becoming the selves they have chosen.

Another important feature of moral vision for Kierkegaard lies in its ability to address the problem of how an individual's concern for her own eternal happiness, and the existential choices this concern motivates, is not simply a self-serving calculation inimical to ethico-religious existence. If one's choice to live by ethico-religious commitments is motivated by a calculation that doing so is the means by which to secure one's own eternal happiness, then, as Climacus puts it, one simply has engaged in a form of "trading"—"an intellectual transaction, a profitable stock-exchange speculation, instead of a daring venture"—which, he thinks, God by no means will respect.[71] And yet, Climacus clearly seems to take a concern for one's own eternal happiness as an ethically legitimate point of departure. Virtue ethics offers a way out of this dilemma. Evans and Gouwens both note that, for Kierkegaard, "happiness is the intrinsically satisfied state of the person who fulfills his moral duty."[72] I think this can be taken further: the "eternal happiness" [*evig Salighed*] of which Climacus speaks is the human *telos*, communion with God, which, in heaven, is perfect and everlasting. One achieves this *telos* through ethico-religious development, aimed ultimately at becoming the self that God intends.

But is this not a way of defining the problem away? Have we "solved" the problem by giving an artificial and *ad hoc* characterization of "eternal happiness"?

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[70]See especially Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, No. III.

[71]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 422-6.

[72]Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 147; see also Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 99.

Reading Kierkegaard as a virtue ethicist enables one to see that this is not the case. Becoming a self—specifically, becoming the self that God intends one to become—culminates in one's becoming a self who glories in God's fellowship. As one becomes "a new creature,"[73] one sees the world anew, and this includes a new vision of perfect happiness. In the process of religious character-formation (sanctification, in Christian theological terms), one's old, "worldly" desires begin to weaken and ultimately fade away, and new, godly desires are formed in their place. The blessed are those who *thirst* for righteousness, Scripture tells us.[74] The Kierkegaardian moral hero is not the conscientious misanthrope whose faithful willing of the good requires tremendous moral effort because it is contrary to her natural inclination (as many have understood Kant's ideal moral agent[75]). Rather, she is the one who, having fully achieved the human *telos*, finds her deepest heart's desire received in her communion with the divine.[76]

Finally, Roberts points out three further ways in which Kierkegaard's ethic resembles a virtue ethic. First, there is some evidence that Kierkegaard endorses the classical thesis of *the unity of the virtues*. An example is found in the discourse, "Patience in Expectancy":

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[73]2 Cor. 5:17 and Gal. 6:15. Climacus writes, "The point is this: the individual first becomes infinitized by the daring venture [of absolute obedience to God, i.e., "relating oneself absolutely to the absolute *telos*"]; it is not the same individual and the daring venture is not one among several undertakings, one more predicate about the one and the same individual—no, *through the daring venture he himself becomes someone else*" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 423, emphasis added).

[74]E.g., Matt. 5:6.

[75]Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Edition, trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 14. § 398 in the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences edition.

[76]For a similar—though more in-depth—treatment of this issue, see Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 141-7.

> [P]atience and expectancy correspond to each other, and not until these two have found each other, find and understand each other in a person, not until then is there like for like in the friendship that is to be continued; expectancy in patience is like a good word in the right place, like a golden apple in a silver bowl.[77]

Second, Kierkegaard's writings are deeply concerned not just with clarifying and explicating concepts and categories, but with the *moral and spiritual development and education* of the reader:

> . . . Kierkegaard calls the discourses we have been discussing “edifying” or “upbuilding.” It is clear that what he intends to build up in people is [*sic*] such personally essential attributes as gratitude, humility, patience, courage, and hope—that is, he intends the discourses to contribute, in some small way, to the building up of people as people.[78]

And finally, there is evidence of a recognition by Kierkegaard of *the relativity of the virtues* to different worldviews. Roberts puts it in Wittgensteinian terms: “Kierkegaard has a healthy understanding of the relativity of the virtues and their grammars to the life understandings and the ways of living in which they are at home.”[79] That is to say, different virtues characterize the different existence spheres. Many of the character traits considered excellences in the aesthetic sphere are considered vices from the perspective of one in the religious sphere, for instance—and vice-versa. Rather than trying to give objective arguments—arguments that transcend all particular, finite points of view—for the superiority of one sphere and of its characteristic virtues, Kierkegaard instead “writes as a practitioner of one of these ways of life,” writing about virtue concepts “in such a way as to encourage the *inculcation* of what is proposed, and not merely to convey it in

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[77]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 220; quoted in Roberts, “The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*,” 198.

[78]Roberts, “The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*,” 203.

[79]Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of ‘Virtue Ethics,’” 164.

an abstracted academic dialectic . . . ."[80] Kierkegaard strives to help his reader to *see for herself* the worth of the ethico-religious virtues, but he recognizes that this cannot be accomplished through standard, philosophical, deductive argumentation, for each sphere has its own internal consistency, which reinforces it against critiques aimed at showing the conceptual inferiority of its characteristic virtues.

It is important to note, however, that Kierkegaard's understanding of the relativity of the virtues is not a rejection of objective moral truth; he is sensitive to the *apparent* relativity of ethics without in fact advocating relativism. This is why his writings on this point do not conflict with his underlying commitment to human teleology and essentialism. To put it in terms of the theme of moral vision, Kierkegaard thinks that there are right and wrong ways of seeing, even though those residing in different existence spheres will disagree about which ways of seeing are right and which are wrong. For instance, in *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard writes that "it is merely *an error of vision* on the part of the sufferer" to "fix his gaze on" his oppressor's strength rather than on God's sustaining power.[81] He apparently agrees with Roberts that ". . . virtue consists in the disposition to *right* emotion and action."[82] But Kierkegaard does not try to establish which way of seeing is right by way of objective, disinterested argumentation and philosophical analysis. Karen Carr puts this point well when she writes,

> . . . Kierkegaard does reject the possibility of rational justification for ultimate beliefs (be they moral or religious), but his view clearly does presume that there is

[80]Ibid., 164-5.

[81]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), 131, emphasis added.

[82]Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue," 179.

> an absolute standard by which humans are judged: God's standard. This standard is inaccessible to the human mind save through revelation, in part because of the "infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity," in part because of the corrupting influence of sin. But the very use of the notion of sin implies a normative vision of what humans should be and are failing to live up to.[83]

Rival Versions of a Virtue Reading of Kierkegaard

Up to this point, I have made the general case for reading Kierkegaard within the neo-Aristotelian virtue tradition. Those who read Kierkegaard in this tradition are not a monolithic group, however. The fact that the virtues play a central role in Kierkegaard's writings does not determine *what kind* of virtue ethicist he is: for example, it is not enough, by itself, to qualify him as a virtue *theorist*. Nor does it determine the degree to which selfhood and *virtuous* character are coextensive: some argue that selfhood can be grounded in non-virtuous character traits, even vices, which is why Kierkegaard believes in the possibility of radical evil. In the upcoming sections, I will explore these issues by way of analyzing two markedly different interpretations of Kierkegaard's virtue ethics.

One of the lines along which dispute arises is the degree to which Kierkegaard proposes a theory of ethics or ethical concepts. In a series of articles,[84] Roberts argues that Kierkegaard is best read not as giving us a theory of the ethical, but rather as providing a model of how virtue ethics ought to be done. Roberts notes that "the work of the recent virtue ethicists has many, sometimes conflicting facets," but "at the very center of that family of inquiries known as virtue ethics" lies the project of "trac[ing] the

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[83]Carr, "After Paganism," 186.

[84]Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics'"; "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard"; and "Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory" (unpublished).

conceptual and psychological contours of particular virtues."[85] In other words, the project of conceptual analysis of individual virtues is central to contemporary virtue ethics. Since this is a project that Kierkegaard undertakes throughout his works, Roberts thinks "that Kierkegaard is pre-eminently a 'virtue ethicist,' and that in his grammatical analysis of various virtues we find a model for the central method of virtue ethics . . . ."[86] However, he also claims that this is "a method largely neglected by present-day practitioners of the discipline."[87] But if conceptual analysis of the virtues is a project central to the discipline of virtue ethics, why has this model been overlooked by most working in the area? And why have Kierkegaard's works, until recently, largely been excluded from the discussion?

The answer to the first question is found in the theoretical orientation of most contemporary ethics, including virtue ethics. For Roberts, Kierkegaard serves as a corrective to both the hubris and myopia of modern moral philosophy. Kierkegaard offers a way to do ethics without getting bogged down in the project of theorizing: that is, the project of trying to *order* moral concepts "in such a way that some of them are subordinated to or derived from other concepts or some single other concept so that some one or small number of moral concepts become the source, the ground, the foundation,

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[85]Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 143.

[86]Ibid., 148. Roberts argues that, besides the virtues, much of Kierkegaard's "grammatical" analysis focuses on the related concepts of existence, emotion, and character. Emotions, for instance, ". . . have a logic or 'dialectic' the knowledge of which is a kind of moral wisdom. Kierkegaard's writings consist, to a large degree, in explorations of this emotion-dialectic, a 'dialectic of existence' or dialectic of character. Since such exploration is a large and central task of 'virtue ethics,' Kierkegaard can and should count as an eminent virtue ethicist" (Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue," 184).

[87]"Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 143.

the base, of the others."[88] On Roberts's reading, Kierkegaard explores a wide array of moral concepts without imposing any such "hierarchical" ordering of them, which results in "a more 'natural' approach to the conceptual array, less likely than moral theory to distort the concepts."[89]

The answer to the question of why Kierkegaard's works traditionally have been considered peripheral to the discussion of virtue ethics is provided partly by the absence of ethical theorizing in his works, and partly by his religious orientation. Because of Kierkegaard's focus on specifically *Christian* concepts and virtues,

> "[m]odern" philosophers—partisans of the project of finding a morality to which all rational comers must subscribe—have tended to think Kierkegaard uninteresting insofar as he is spiritually parochial, committed as he is to the understanding and promotion of a Christian outlook.[90]

But, as Roberts points out,

> it is becoming increasingly clear that the idea of a single, rationally compelling rationality is either the idea of a rationality too thin to entail any moral outlook (perhaps formal logic is such a rationality), or it is a chimera. If so, then we have only particular and rival moralities, and their particular versions of courage, love, patience, truthfulness, generosity, etc., to look at as we develop philosophically a clarification of the ethical life.[91]

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[88]Roberts, "Studying Virtues," p. 2 in manuscript. In this paragraph, I have adopted some quotes from "Studying Virtues" and applied them to Roberts's reading of Kierkegaard. Roberts does not discuss Kierkegaard in "Studying Virtues," but, from what he says about Kierkegaard in other essays (specifically, the ones already cited), it seems clear that the general view he advocates in this chapter is one that he also attributes to Kierkegaard.

[89]Ibid., p. 18 in manuscript.

[90]Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 144.

[91]Ibid.

The approach to ethics that focuses on bringing insight into these key virtues is exemplary, Roberts thinks, because it has "the most potential to fulfill the conception of philosophy as wisdom."[92]

Roberts's reading of Kierkegaard thus stands on one end of the "theory" spectrum of virtue readings: he reads Kierkegaard as a kind of proto-anti-theorist. I already have voiced my primary reservations about reading Kierkegaard in this way in chapter one:[93] first, I see no compelling reason to think Kierkegaard is averse to the project of theorizing in general, and second, the distinction between conceptual analysis and theorizing seems quite thin, so long as the theorizing is not of a reductive sort. I will not rehearse the substance of these worries here. Rather, my concern about the anti-theory reading of Kierkegaard in the present context lies elsewhere. I will explain this worry later in the chapter; at this point, my intention is simply to paint the contemporary landscape of various virtue readings of Kierkegaard. We have seen that Roberts's view stands at one end of the spectrum; a second reading, defended by John J. Davenport, is situated further toward the "theory" end.

In "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre," Davenport argues that Kierkegaard is "a kind of virtue ethicist," but in a different sense than what Roberts advocates. Davenport argues that existentialism and virtue ethics come together in Kierkegaard's development of "existential dispositions," which are "volitional tendencies" characterized by the presence of earnestness.[94] He writes,

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[92]Ibid., 143.

[93]Section three, "Kierkegaard, Metaethics, and Anti-theory."

[94]Davenport, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," 282.

> Kierkegaard is important as a virtue ethicist in large part because he makes some unique contributions to the Anscombian project of clarifying the basic psychological concepts involved in notions of agency and character without which an ethics of virtue cannot be articulated.[95]

At first glance, this sounds very similar to Roberts's project. But according to Davenport, Kierkegaard's insight is that "all genuine virtues are existential dispositions"[96] or "dispositions of freedom"[97]—a claim that indicates Davenport takes a much less "classical" reading of Kierkegaard than Roberts.[98] He claims to find in Kierkegaard's writings an "existential virtue ethics," which differs significantly from other versions of virtue ethics "in seeing virtues as *volitional* states of resolve that involve the exercise of libertarian freedom."[99] For Davenport's Kierkegaard, the most important dispositions are "earnest states of will," which are dispositions of the "higher-order will" (in Frankfurt's sense) that constitute an agent's "inner volitional *character*."[100] "This is not a set of character-traits the self *has* as accidental properties," Davenport explains; "rather this character *is* the self."[101] He agrees with Roberts (and against MacIntyre) that Kierkegaard accepts a teleological view of human nature, but he thinks it is an "existential teleology" rather than an Aristotelian one: it is *authenticity / existential*

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[95]Ibid., 276.

[96]Ibid., 282.

[97]Ibid., 276.

[98]Roberts makes it clear that he reads Kierkegaard "more as a successor of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas than as a predecessor of Sartre and Foucault" ("Existence, Emotion, and Virtue," 177). His reading of Kierkegaard is, in this way, a "classical reading" (ibid., 179).

[99]Davenport, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," 277.

[100]Ibid., 278-9.

[101]Ibid.

meaningfulness, rather than eudaimonia, that functions as the human *telos*.[102] This existential teleology "grounds the existential proto-virtues," though not the whole of morality: Davenport claims that "the requirements ethics makes on our freedom are at least partially independent of the teleological requirements of becoming a self," which opens up the possibility of a person's freely choosing radical evil.[103]

Davenport's project overlaps with Roberts's in that both read Kierkegaard within the tradition of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. But Davenport is more interested in mining a theoretical account of the virtues in Kierkegaard's writings. However, his account faces difficulties. For one, as MacIntyre points out, it lacks sufficient textual support and seems to read the themes of twentieth century existentialism back into Kierkegaard's writings against Kierkegaard's own intentions:

> . . . [Davenport and Rudd] both ascribe to Kierkegaard a kind of teleological view that I cannot find in his writings: that it is a central goal of human existence to find meaning and coherence in our lives. Kierkegaard did of course recognize that human beings find a lack of coherence and meaning in their lives disquieting and Judge Wilhelm in some of his arguments relies on that fact. But it is not meaning *as such* nor coherence *as such* that we have to achieve, if we are to become what we are capable of becoming as ethical subjects, but that very specific type of meaning and coherence which belongs to the lives of those to whom it is given to stand before God and to acknowledge that they are in the wrong. And Davenport's account of Kierkegaard's concern for authenticity is in some danger of assimilating Kierkegaard's preoccupations to those of twentieth-century German and French existentialists.[104]

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[102]Davenport is not entirely clear whether authenticity is the same as existential meaningfulness, but a charitable reading would lead one to assume so, since he writes in some passages as if it is the former that is the human *telos*, and in other places as if it is the latter. For example, in the "Summary" (ibid., 265), Davenport writes, "In place of the classical notion of eudaimonia as the human *telos*, existential virtue ethics puts *authenticity*, understood as practical coherence among earnestly willed projects that can give narrative shape and enduring meaning to a human life" (see also 301-2). But elsewhere he claims that existential meaningfulness "is a more minimal *telos* than eudaimonia, since eudaimonia entails meaningfulness but not the reverse" (291).

[103]Ibid., 302.

[104]MacIntyre, "Once More on Kierkegaard," 344-5.

What Davenport's view obscures, I think, is that, for Kierkegaard, the human *telos* cannot be reached apart from God, because that *telos* is a state of communion with God—a state in which the highest forms of personal meaning and coherence are achieved. While it may be true that *some* form of meaning and coherence can be found in a life lived apart from God, it is not the kind of meaning and coherence that could constitute the end of human existence. Davenport seems to read Kierkegaard as thinking that the human *telos* is becoming a self, which one does simply by exercising one's freedom in a way that gives one's life "existential meaningfulness." Not all of the ways that one can do this are ethical ways; thus teleology (and metaphysics, more generally) does not ground ethics.

Davenport errs, I think, in understanding the Kierkegaardian human *telos* as thin enough to be compatible with (i.e., obtainable within) pre-religious existence spheres. Achieving a sense of personal meaning and coherence in one's life is not, by itself, the human *telos*, even in a deficient or inchoate form. The principal aesthete of *Either/Or*, "A," forges a kind of meaning and coherence in his life by seeking to maximize a completely unfettered volitional freedom and an ability to enjoy himself in every moment, even to the point that he learns to enjoy—and even celebrate—his own despair.[105] But this is not an individual whose life displays the human *telos*. Climacus claims that aesthetic existence is "perdition" and chides the reader who would need the aesthetic characters of *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way* to meet ruinous ends to see this:

> A reader who needs the trustworthiness of a severe lecture or an unfortunate outcome (for example, madness, suicide, poverty, etc.) in order to see that a

[105]See, for example, the "inspired address" entitled, "The Unhappiest One," in Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 217-30.

> standpoint is in error still sees nothing and is merely deluding himself, and to behave that way as an author is to write effeminately for childish readers. Take a character like Johannes the Seducer. The person who needs him to become insane or shoot himself in order to see that his standpoint is perdition does not actually see it but deludes himself into thinking that he does. In other words, the person who comprehends it comprehends it as soon as the Seducer opens his mouth; in every word he hears the ruination and the judgment upon him.[106]

Kierkegaard does not present all his characters and pseudonymous personae as depicting different but equally valid ways that human lives can be lived and the human *telos* achieved. They *are* depictions of some of the ways human lives can be lived, but some are presented as functional and flourishing lives, others as dysfunctional and self-deceived.

For Kierkegaard, the human *telos* is a state in which all despair is "rooted out." He indicates that such a state is achieved only by the unified self that wills one thing: "Is not despair simply double-mindedness? For what is despairing other than to have two wills?"[107] In light of the analysis of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*, this claim highlights the essential connection between having a unified self and having faith: Anti-Climacus finally identifies "the formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out" as "the definition of faith."[108] Thus, Kierkegaard's teleology is not a "minimal" one. It is the rich teleology of classical Christian orthodoxy, and it is fulfilled only in intimate communion with God—in a state Anti-Climacus describes as

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[106]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 296-7.

[107]Kierkegaard, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," 61.

[108]Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 14 and 131.

"resting transparently" in the power that "establishes" oneself. Those whose lives fall short of this ideal fail to achieve the human *telos*.[109]

Even if Davenport were right, however, his reading of Kierkegaard still lacks a clear account of the concept of moral obligation in Kierkegaard's writings. To my knowledge, there is no one who defends a virtue-theoretical account of moral obligation in Kierkegaard's writings: the "theory" end of the spectrum of virtue readers of Kierkegaard is largely unoccupied, and those few who do occupy it do not focus on this aspect of his thought. Later, I will argue that such an account of Kierkegaard's view of obligation, were it offered, would not be successful. I will use this in the context of a broader argument for why virtue readings (theoretical and anti-theoretical alike) of Kierkegaard ultimately are unsatisfactory. Before I turn to this, however, I will make a few brief remarks regarding some more general challenges that neo-Aristotelian virtue readings of Kierkegaard face.

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[109]It is not entirely clear to me whether my disagreement with Davenport is substantive or merely semantic. Perhaps Davenport would not deny that ideal human flourishing can be achieved only in perfect communion with God. Perhaps his "minimal teleology" is intended to denote *one aspect of* the human *telos* rather than the minimal conditions under which the human *telos* can be achieved. He seems to suggest the latter in his essay, "Kierkegaard, Anxiety, and the Will," where he implies that, given "our 'nature,'" there is only one "path along which we can fully realize our selfhood" (John J. Davenport, "Kierkegaard, Anxiety, and the Will," in *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 2001*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and Jon Stewart (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 173). What remains unclear to me, however, is whether the "existential coherence" that Davenport thinks (and thinks Kierkegaard thinks) "our nature requires" is the full communion of "resting transparently in God" or something less: a more "minimal" teleology (ibid., 173-4). In "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," Davenport further complicates the issue by claiming that ". . . for Kierkegaard, our *telos* has both a provisional abstract form and a final wholly concrete form" (274). He identifies the former as authenticity and the latter as salvation. He then suggests that one "can eventually discover that the kind of self-relation intended in the ideal of authenticity can only be attained through 'an absolute relation' to the Absolute as the personal God who saves from sin" (ibid.). But later, in a footnote, he states, ". . . I do not think Kierkegaard understands the infinite happiness that can be gained only through salvation as our *telos* in the way Aquinas did" (320). I do not understand how Davenport intends all these claims to cohere with one another, which leaves me worried that I do not adequately understand his view—in which case my critique could be (inadvertently) aimed at a straw man. I can only direct the reader to the relevant passages (especially pp. 273-5 and pp. 301-2 of "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics") to decide for herself. Fortunately, though, this issue need not be resolved for the purposes of the present inquiry, as the following paragraph in the main text—and the discussion in the final section ("The Problem of Moral Obligation for Virtue Readings of Kierkegaard")—should make clear.

Challenges to the Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Reading of Kierkegaard

The virtue reading of Kierkegaard, despite the general case for it that we have discussed, also faces certain challenges. The issues in this section are not meant to demonstrate that the categorization of Kierkegaard's ethic as "a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic" is misguided, but rather to clarify the extent to which this label must be qualified in order to fit. Some of the objections are aimed at the "neo-Aristotelian" label; others challenge the classification of "virtue ethics" altogether. So long as there is sufficient overlap between the respective ethics of Aristotle, classical and/or contemporary virtue thinkers, and Kierkegaard, the classification may well be legitimate. Nevertheless, the project of explicating Kierkegaard's ethic demands that these differences be emphasized adequately. Whether these considerations collectively make a compelling case against the aptness of such labels is a question I leave to the reader.

Some of the challenges to the virtue reading of Kierkegaard are merely apparent, despite the fact that they have persuaded many. I will address these pseudo-problems first, briefly, before moving on to more substantial challenges. The first such "problem" for the virtue reading of Kierkegaard is based on a passage in *The Sickness Unto Death* in which Anti-Climacus writes,

> Very often, however, it is overlooked that the opposite of sin is by no means virtue. In part, this is a pagan view, which is satisfied with a merely human criterion and simply does not know what sin is, that all sin is before God. No, *the opposite of sin is faith*. . . ."[110]

Some take this passage, and the following emphatic comment that "this is one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity—that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith," to indicate that Kierkegaard rejects any kind of virtue approach to ethics. But, as Roberts

[110]Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 82, Kierkegaard's emphasis.

points out, this is a mistaken reading of the text. What Kierkegaard has in mind by "virtue" here is

> a conception of virtue as unaided human accomplishment, perhaps something like Aristotle's picture of the magnanimous man who takes great pleasure in thinking himself glorious because of his courage, his generosity, his temperance, etc.[111]

This "pagan virtue," however, is not the only kind of virtue, and the passage should not lead us to believe that Kierkegaard rejects the view that faith is a virtue. Roberts explains:

> 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.[112]

Another merely apparent problem for the virtue reading of Kierkegaard concerns the emphasis on *the other*—as opposed to an emphasis on personal self-development and character formation—in *Works of Love*. Ferreira argues in *Love's Grateful Striving* that, in its strong emphasis on the priority of and responsibility to the other, Kierkegaard's ethic bears a remarkable resemblance to the ethics of Levinas. It might seem that this feature makes Kierkegaard's view unlikely to qualify as a virtue ethic. But again, the difficulty is at most apparent. It is resolved by pointing out that, in Kierkegaard's ethic, the acquisition of virtue is accomplished *by* focusing on one's responsibility to the other, *by* meeting the needs of the other, etc. Kierkegaard's emphasis on loving the neighbor is not at odds with his emphasis on becoming a self.

Other difficulties for the neo-Aristotelian virtue reading of Kierkegaard are not so easily dismissed, however. There are a number of crucial differences between

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[111]Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 151.

[112]Ibid.

Kierkegaard's ethic and ancient Greek ethics, which challenges the reading of Kierkegaard as falling within the Aristotelian tradition. One crucial difference lies in Kierkegaard's rejection of ethical rationalism, the view that the development and proper use of (unaided) human reason is sufficient to guide individual moral progress and develop proper moral vision and character. As Colton puts it, for Kierkegaard, "developing the virtues depends not on a self-sufficient unfolding of latent potential, but instead on the reception of a gift."[113] Kierkegaard's rejection of ethical rationalism constitutes the single biggest challenge to placing him within the Aristotelian virtue tradition.

Nevertheless, this is not a decisive objection against those who read Kierkegaard as advocating a broadly Aristotelian ethic, for a theistic neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic reasonably could differ from its secular counterpart on exactly this point: namely, in claiming that unaided reason is insufficient for the proper individual development of moral vision and character and that divine grace is required. This is, after all, one of Aquinas's modifications of Aristotle's ethic; Kierkegaard simply radicalizes the point and takes it to its more extreme, Lutheran end. The difference is not a small one, of course: the implications of this heightened emphasis on man's need for divine assistance leads Kierkegaard both to reject much of Aquinas's project—including virtually the whole of natural theology—and to argue that God must provide not only the grace necessary for sanctification (which includes ethical development), but also the very condition for accepting this grace—a central theme of *Philosophical Fragments*. We thus can expand

[113]Colton, "Perception, Emotion, and Development in Kierkegaard's Moral Pedagogy," 238.

Colton's point by saying that the acquisition of the Christian virtues depends on *two* divine gifts: the virtues themselves and the condition for accepting them as gifts.

Returning momentarily to the theme of moral vision, it is worth noting that, because it takes a distinctively theistic—and specifically Protestant—turn in Kierkegaard's writings, the topic of moral vision serves both as a point of contact and a point of difference between his own and ancient Greek ethics. In the tradition of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin (as well as many others), Kierkegaard places heavy emphasis on the noetic effects of sin: original sin has eroded our ability to perceive the good (what is of ultimate value) and the right (what is obligatory). This is part of the reason God not only must reveal the truth to us but also provide the condition for understanding the revelation. One's positive response to this revelation marks the beginning of one's spiritual formation, but through the process of sanctification, one's moral perception continually is made more acute.[114]

The second most important difference between Kierkegaard and the ancient rationalist tradition is the former's insistence on the possibility of radical and intentional evil.[115] The Socratic tradition does not allow for the possibility of deliberate and

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[114]Another helpful analysis of the similarities and differences between Kierkegaard's and Aristotle's perspectives on the issue is offered by Gouwens: "The metaphor of *vision*, of 'seeing the good and God,' enables Kierkegaard to steer between ethical and religious subjectivism and objectivism, for it is a metaphor with both subjective and objective dimensions. On the one hand, for Kierkegaard (as for Aristotle), willing the good (required in virtue) is *envisioning* and *desiring* the good as an object toward which one strives. This envisioning and desiring the good does not 'create values,' but is a *conforming* and *transforming* of the person who 'sees' a value or a good or God outside the self. Virtue is learning to see things and persons as they are, to give them attention. . . . Yet, on the other hand, Kierkegaard's focus on the subjective qualifications for knowing the good and God is a careful attempt to pry us from the idea that 'knowing' the good and God are like a neutral, uninvolved 'representing' of reality. He highlights the subjective capacities in ethics and religion in that he holds that seeing and doing the good require personal capacities, including 'purity of heart'" (*Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 106).

[115]For a recent treatment of Kierkegaard on radical evil, see Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

informed wrongdoing, much less of radical evil, because it holds that all wrongdoing results ultimately from ignorance. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, argues that individuals are capable of deliberately willing in defiance of God.[116] The two key differences between Kierkegaard and ancient Greek thought discussed so far—disputes over the adequacy of reason and the possibility of sin—are connected, for as Rudd and Davenport point out, "Sin has epistemological implications: because our reason is corrupted, revelation cannot simply be consistent with but beyond the deliverances of human reason; rather they will sometimes clash."[117] In other words, the noetic effects of sin insure that reason is not always a reliable guide to discerning moral truth; thus the need for grace.

A third point of difference between Aristotle and Kierkegaard that is crucial to the present discussion concerns their differing views on the nature of ethical freedom. This dispute underlies Kierkegaard's comments in the following journal entry from 1842-43:

> that he [Aristotle] does not believe virtue to be the postulated midpoint at all times can be seen in his distinction between virtue and voluntary acts. The voluntary is the discreet [*sic*]; virtue is the continuous. He therefore says most profoundly that free action lies totally in a man's power; virtue does not, except with respect to the beginning, because it is a competence (continuity).[118]

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[116]Of course, one might respond to this worry by claiming that it proves only that Kierkegaard's ethic is not in the Platonic tradition. It may still be in the Aristotelian tradition, for, as Jean Porter points out, "[Aristotle] also argued, contrary to Plato, that it is possible to know the good and yet to act contrary to it, thus initiating an extended discussion on the problem of weakness of the will" ("Virtue Ethics," 466). Nevertheless, weakness of will is crucially different from intentional and radical evil. Whether one can make a case for the latter within the Aristotelian tradition is an issue that must be saved for anther time. For now, it is enough to catalog the issue of radical evil among those (at least) possible areas of conflict between Aristotle's and Kierkegaard's respective ethics.

[117]Davenport and Rudd, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, xxv-xvi.

[118]Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:399 (#893), quoted in Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 101.

This passage offers a clue why Kierkegaard does not identify himself as a virtue ethicist.[119] As Gouwens argues, Kierkegaard associates the term "virtue" with Aristotle, whose concept of a virtue (Kierkegaard thought) was that of a *habit*:

> Indeed, Kierkegaard's suspicion of Aristotle's understanding of virtue is that "the so-called moral virtues" in Aristotle are simply matters of moderation dealing only with habit, not with free acts. . . . [A]gainst Aristotle, Kierkegaard locates virtue not in habit, but in active resolution.[120]

Kierkegaard reasons that, since habits are not voluntary and ethical dispositions are, the latter must not be virtues (in the Aristotelian sense).

It is not entirely clear that Kierkegaard understands Aristotle rightly on this point. Aristotle characterizes *arête* as "a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it."[121] But as Davenport notes,

> Virtues in this sense cannot be unthinking habits of action of the sort that could be produced by mindlessly drilling children in certain patters of behavior. To say they are concerned with "choice" (*prohairesis*) means they involve not a tendency to some noncognitive urge or brute impulse but rather a stable disposition to act in the relevant way when appropriate because one thinks and feels in the right way about the situation.[122]

However, regardless of whether Kierkegaard does, to some degree, mischaracterize the Aristotelian concept of a virtue, it does seem that his view of ethical freedom is importantly different from Aristotle's. This difference is tied to the other disputes between the two that we already have discussed; most importantly, it is tied to the dispute over whether unaided human faculties are sufficient to achieve the ethical ideal of

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[119]Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 101, footnote 31.

[120]Ibid., 101.

[121]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a, in *A New Aristotle Reader*, 383.

[122]Davenport, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," 276.

virtuous character. One view Kierkegaard's works suggest is that ethical freedom, in its most important sense, is being able to do what one resolves to do and to achieve the ethical ideal one sets for oneself—in short, to be able to become the self that one resolves to become. Kierkegaard realizes that there is a gap between the ethical ideals that we hold and our ability to realize those ideals in our lives, and we are unable to bridge this gap by our own efforts.[123] This is a crucial impediment to freedom, and it is one that only divine grace can allow one to overcome. Thus grace is essential to (the most important sense of) ethical freedom. Kierkegaard's virtue ethic does not simply recast the human *telos* in theistic terms; rather, it makes grace the crucial component that allows one who wills to achieve this *telos* actually to be able to achieve it.[124] Even when one reaches the level of ethico-religious maturity in which one resolves that one must "become oneself," one cannot, *of one's own power*, effectively do so (that is, effectively will to become the self that God wills one to become).[125]

The issues discussed in this section demonstrate the degree to which the term "neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic" must be stretched to apply to Kierkegaard's view, but, as I mentioned from the outset, they do not necessarily invalidate this classification of Kierkegaard. However, in the next section, I will argue that, on the particular issue of accounting for moral obligation in Kierkegaard's writings, the problems facing the virtue reading ultimately prove insurmountable.

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[123]See John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

[124]Davenport and Rudd, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, xxvi.

[125]For more on the issues discussed in this section, see Davenport, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," 285-6 and 302-4.

The Problem of Moral Obligation for Virtue Readings of Kierkegaard

In this final section, I will try to bring out why virtue readings of Kierkegaard ultimately are unsatisfactory in accounting for the issue of moral obligation in his works. I will try to show that the entire spectrum of virtue readings are inadequate—albeit in different ways.

To begin, let us define some terms (in a purely stipulatory manner) to facilitate discussion:

> *the weak virtue reading* = dn. The view that Kierkegaard's writings contain a non-reductive, theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic in which central themes of contemporary virtue ethics are explored and developed.

> *the strong virtue reading* = dn. The view that Kierkegaard's writings contain a reductive, theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic in which virtue concepts form the theoretical foundation from which all other moral concepts are derived.

Each of these readings comes in various, weaker and stronger forms. We will begin with those on the "weak" end of the spectrum. At the extreme end is

> *the weakest version of the weak virtue reading* – The view that Kierkegaard's writings contain rich conceptual analyses of the Christian virtues and that Kierkegaard explores and develops many themes central to the contemporary literature on virtue ethics, especially neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

This version of the virtue reading almost certainly is true. However, it also is not very controversial: even those who read Kierkegaard as a divine command theorist can—and sometimes do—explicitly endorse this version of the virtue reading.[126] It is also, for much the same reason, not very helpful for the issue at hand: it entails nothing about the topic of moral obligation in Kierkegaard's writings. Clearly, then, this version of the virtue reading is unsatisfactory for present purposes. It is compatible with far too many rival interpretations of Kierkegaard on the topic of moral obligation, and, for the same

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[126]E.g., Evans in *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*.

reason, it leaves it entirely up to another theory to make a substantive claim about that topic.

A more substantive and controversial view is the following:

> *a stronger version of the weak virtue reading* – The view that Kierkegaard's writings display the qualities described in the weak virtue reading but no theoretical content: i.e., that he deliberately avoids all theorizing, and his writings are inimical to the project of constructing an ethical theory of any kind—including a theory of moral obligation.

This is Roberts's view, as I understand it. He writes,

> I take it that Kierkegaard does not have a theory in the sense that ethics professors are supposed to, and that what he is doing in his writings is better thought of as a conceptual exploration, within a given moral tradition (Christianity), that expresses, seeks, and seeks to engender *wisdom*.[127]

Roberts compares the project of conceptual clarification, as Kierkegaard exemplifies it, to a diamond, in which all the different facets (ethical and religious concepts) are situated in a certain highly structured way to one another without any one's being *derived from* another. He writes, "Any concept is determined, in its character or shape or definition, by its situation with respect to other concepts internal to the system of concepts to which it belongs; so these placements are what I am likening to facets."[128] The concept of obligation, for instance, is situated with respect to concepts like God, freedom, striving, conscience, natural inclination, divine commands, the "inner glory" of the neighbor, and Christian love.[129] Roberts contrasts this treatment of ethical concepts with the foundationalist project of theory-building, characteristic of modern moral philosophy, in which all the various moral concepts are derived from some fundamental concept or set

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[127]Roberts, "Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory," p. 1 in manuscript.

[128]Ibid., p. 7 in manuscript.

[129]Ibid.

of concepts. (As opposed to a diamond, an upside-down pyramid would be an apt illustration of this project.) In Roberts's view, "pure" versions of both virtue theories and divine command theories have this characteristic, hierarchical, derivational structure. But in contrast,

> Neither the divine command nor the virtue that it enjoins has the kind of hierarchical privilege in Kierkegaard's thought (or in Christian ethics more generally) that it would need to have to function as the base of a moral theory. Instead, the picture of moral concepts suggested by Kierkegaard's writings—pseudonymous and signed—is that of an array that has a jewel-like hardness of mutually supporting complexity, inviting, as the only right philosophical response, a multi-directional, dialectical exploration.[130]

Clearly, Roberts rejects strong virtue readings of Kierkegaard. What is less clear is what, exactly, he wants to say about the topic of moral obligation in Kierkegaard's works. Obviously, he takes it that the concept of moral obligation is not derived from other concepts more fundamental to it, nor are other, less fundamental concepts derived from it. But what would Roberts say about the claim (1) that, for Kierkegaard, God's commanding an action is *sufficient* to make it obligatory? Or (2) that (for Kierkegaard) God's commanding an action is *necessary* to make it obligatory? Or (3) that God commands some actions *because* they are obligatory? Or (4) that all morally obligatory actions are obligatory *because* God commands them? Such questions pose a dilemma for Roberts, for the following reason: Either he would say that answers to these questions are given (or at least implied) in Kierkegaard's works, or he would say that Kierkegaard avoids these questions altogether, deliberately taking no stand on them. Claiming the former seems to be at odds with the "stronger version of the weak virtue reading" under discussion. But to claim the latter would be to overlook key passages in Kierkegaard's

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[130]Ibid., p. 25 in manuscript.

writings: not only can *Fear and Trembling* be read as an elaborate discussion of the view that God's commanding something is sufficient to make it morally obligatory—a straightforward answer to question (1)— but passages from the signed writings address these questions, as well.[131]

It seems, however, that Roberts prefers the first response: that answers to questions like those cited above are given (or implied) in Kierkegaard's works. He writes, "To someone who is looking for theories in the classical modern style, *the fact that there are indeed dependency relations among the concepts in an ethical outlook, and that Kierkegaard is tracing these*, can seem to encourage this interpretation."[132] But Roberts rejects the idea that this fact alone is enough to substantiate claims of an ethical "theory" in Kierkegaard's works. He seems to overlook the point that the above questions address "dependency relations" among ethical concepts, and yet, a certain set of answers to those questions *alone* would be sufficient to substantiate claims of a non-reductive ethical theory in Kierkegaard's writings. For example, if the answers to questions (1), (2), and (4) are "yes," then Kierkegaard commits himself—whether knowingly or not—to at least a minimal divine command theory, in which case Quinn's and Evans's claims are substantiated.

For these reasons, it seems that a weak version of the virtue reading of Kierkegaard is unsatisfactory. Either it is so weak that it entails nothing substantial about

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[131]For example, the theme of *unconditional obedience to God* in Kierkegaard's writings, explored at length in both the signed and pseudonymous works, provides textual evidence that Kierkegaard takes a stand on questions like those cited in the main text (see, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 24-35). These themes in Kierkegaard's writings—and how they bear on the questions cited—will be discussed at length in chapters three and four.

[132]Roberts, "Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory," p. 8 in manuscript, emphasis added.

moral obligation, or it makes the false claim that there are no passages in Kierkegaard's writings that could classify his view of obligation in terms of any theoretical framework, virtue ethic or otherwise.

What are the prospects for a stronger version of the virtue reading? Recall the way it was defined:

> *the strong virtue reading* = dn. The view that Kierkegaard's writings contain a reductive, theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic in which virtue concepts form the theoretical foundation from which all other moral concepts are derived.

Again, this view comes in stronger and weaker forms. At the far end of the spectrum is

> *the strongest version of the strong virtue reading* – The view that Kierkegaard intends the strong virtue reading and develops such a theory explicitly.

This view almost certainly is false, and, to my knowledge, no one in the contemporary literature defends it. Roberts presumably has such a view in mind when he writes,

> Virtue theories in ethics are even more implausible than their classical modern predecessors, and I shall not waste time showing that Kierkegaard is not a virtue ethicist in this sense.[133]

Let us consider, then, the following:

> *a weaker version of the strong virtue reading* – The view that Kierkegaard commits himself to a minimal strong virtue theory by various comments he makes directed toward other points (that is, in comments intended to do something other than articulate or defend a strong virtue theory).

Is this version of the strong virtue reading plausible? In order to answer this question, the issue must be addressed of what, exactly, a reductive, theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic *is*. The "theistic" aspect is obvious enough, and the features that would make an ethic "neo-Aristotelian" already have been discussed. The "reductive" qualification means that it is a view in which virtue concepts are taken as the basic and/or foundational

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[133]Roberts, "Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory," p. 7 in manuscript.

concepts from which all other moral concepts are derived. The question of whether a reductive ethic is found in Kierkegaard's writings is the question of whether those works contain a virtue "theory," in Roberts's sense. As Roberts puts it, ". . . if [Kierkegaard] had a virtue theory, he would try to ground all the other concepts in the concept of a virtue (or perhaps in the concept of some particular virtue, such as love)."[134]

Once again, there is no one, to my knowledge, who defends explicitly the strong virtue reading. Some, such as Davenport, argue for various other virtue-related theories in Kierkegaard's writings (e.g., theories of what a virtue is), but none defends a reductive virtue theory of moral obligation.[135] This likely is not a coincidence. Were someone to endorse the strong virtue reading, she would face the problem of claiming for Kierkegaard views that, *prima facie* at least, he does not hold. Such a reading would, therefore, be forced to try to explain away many key passages.

This becomes apparent when we consider the textual evidence cited by those who read Kierkegaard as a divine command theorist. First, there is the problem (for the strong virtue reading) of the essentiality of God as the "middle term" in *Works of Love*: "Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person—God—a person, that is, that God is the middle term [*Mellem-Bestemmelsen*]."[136] This is taken by some as the basis for a divine command reading of Kierkegaard in the following way: the basis for neighbor love is a command, and God always remains in this love as the middle term,

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[134]Ibid., p. 8 in manuscript.

[135]Davenport writes, "If one *must* demote the concept of obligation or moral necessity to the status of a completely derivative concept to count as a virtue ethicist, then Kierkegaard would probably have to be excluded, since he constantly emphasizes the absoluteness of ethical requirements and ideals" ("Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," 272).

[136]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 107.

because our obligation to the neighbor is entirely derivative from our obligation to obey God. Even if this reading is mistaken, however, it seems clear that God is, for Kierkegaard, an essential part of the relationship that generates the obligation to love one's neighbor. How could this be compatible with the claim that all moral properties—including the property of *having a duty to love the neighbor*—are (entirely) derivable from virtue concepts? How could it be both that God is a necessary part of the "derivation" and that the duty is entirely derivable from concepts that essentially make reference only to the character, motivation, actions, etc. of the virtuous agent (but not to God)? More generally, the emphasis on the commandedness of neighbor love in Kierkegaard's writings is problematic for the strong virtue reading.[137] If right action (moral obligation) is derivable from virtue concepts (for example, if right actions are those that proceed from a virtuous character, or those that a virtuous agent would perform), then it is difficult to account for those passages in Kierkegaard's writings that seem to claim that the basis of our obligation to love the neighbor is God's command to do so. Basing Christian ethics in a command is a move away from the teleological foundation of ethics to which a virtue theory is most akin.[138]

Perhaps most difficult of all for the strong virtue reading of Kierkegaard, however, is its apparent inability to account for the place of personal conviction in Christian ethics. A major theme of *Fear and Trembling* is that God can impose unique

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[137]It is primarily this emphasis that led Quinn to argue first for a divine command ethic in Kierkegaard's writings. See Philip L. Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

[138]In the next chapter, we will explore in greater detail how commentators such as Quinn and Evans employ these considerations to argue for a full-fledged divine command theory in Kierkegaard's writings.

obligations on particular individuals—even to the point of commanding them to act in ways that seem to violate general principles or laws of ethics. Evans is right that *Fear and Trembling* is not the text that supports a divine command reading of Kierkegaard;[139] nevertheless, the text *is* primarily about God's ability to call out individuals to act in ways that are not universalizable (i.e., are not required of—and perhaps are not even permissible for—every person) and thus are not communicable (i.e., cannot be defended objectively or made intelligible to an outside party). The source of Abraham's angst, on Johannes de Silentio's reading, is his inability to communicate to anyone what God has required of him. But if God's commands to everyone are the same, this situation does not arise. Divorced from the view that God can impose unique obligations on particular individuals, *Fear and Trembling* loses most of its force.

No version of the strong virtue reading can accommodate the view that being commanded by God to do something is sufficient for being obligated to do it. (Let us call this view "the sufficiency thesis."[140]) A reductive virtue theory—according to which, for example, *a* is a morally right action to perform in circumstance C if and only if *a* is the sort of action a virtuous agent would perform in C—is incompatible with the view that God's commands are sufficient for obligation, on the grounds that God might command an agent to behave in ways opposed to what such a theory would dictate is obligatory—for example, God might command the agent not to perform *a* in C. This proves problematic for the strong virtue reading of Kierkegaard, because the sufficiency thesis is required to justify the legitimacy of personal conviction as a source of obligation—

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[139] Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, Ch. 3.

[140] This term will be defined more precisely in the following chapter. I introduce it at this point simply to avoid repetition of the phrase, "the view that being commanded by God to do something is sufficient for being obligated to do it."

something Kierkegaard clearly wants to advocate, as demonstrated by his treatment of the Abraham and Isaac story. In short, Kierkegaard appears to endorse the sufficiency thesis, and a reductive virtue theory is incompatible with it.

To get around this problem, it is not enough to claim that obedience to God is a Christian virtue. Certainly a Christian virtue theory can accommodate the view that it is virtuous and even obligatory to obey God's general commands to all people ("Do not murder; Do not steal; etc."), but precisely what is raised by the story of Abraham—as well as the stories of the other so-called "immoralities of the patriarchs"—is whether it is right to obey God in *all* circumstances, regardless of what He commands. How could a strong virtue theory accommodate the possibility of one's being justified in obeying a divine command that results in one's violating a general ethical principle (such as "Never intentionally take the life of one's innocent child") that, when followed, tends to actualize the potential good present in the natural order, or that generally contributes to the formation of virtue in oneself and others, or that promotes human flourishing, or that—however one wishes to formulate it—is, to all appearances, at odds with the *aretaic* qualities central to virtue ethics?[141]

A possibility worth considering is this: one could construct a non-standard virtue ethic in which *absolute obedience to God* is included among the virtues. In reasoning about a moral situation, the agent possessing this trait regards God's commands as "trump cards" that overrule all other, competing considerations. Including this trait

[141]Less troubling, but equally problematic, is whether strong virtue theories can account for less "extreme" personal convictions: God's calling one to become a missionary in Kabul, Afghanistan, for instance. Obviously, not everyone has such an obligation, and becoming a missionary in Afghanistan is not a practice that must generally be followed in order to develop personal virtue, and yet, arguably at least, the idea that God could call out a particular individual—and thereby obligate her—to do something like this is an idea that is central to orthodox Christian theology and ethics.

among the virtues apparently allows for the possibility of an action such as sacrificing one's innocent child to be obligatory—in extreme cases like Abraham's—even though it is an action of which the virtuous agent can see no redeeming ethical value other than the fact that it is commanded by God. Interestingly, on a modified virtue theory of this type, the sufficiency thesis, as we have defined it, turns out to be compatible with a central claim of strong virtue theories: namely, that *a*'s being the sort of action a virtuous agent would perform in some circumstance C is *necessary* for *a*'s being morally right to perform in C. The reason these claims are compatible, *given the virtue of absolute obedience to God*, is that (1) God's commanding *a* in C *entails* (2) *a*'s being the sort of action a perfectly virtuous agent would perform in C.[142] Given that (1) entails (2), if the combination of (1) and (2) is sufficient for *a*'s being morally obligatory in C, then (1) is sufficient for *a*'s being morally obligatory in C—even if (2) is *necessary* for *a*'s being morally obligatory in C.[143] Thus, including absolute obedience to God among the virtues apparently allows a virtue theorist to preserve the sufficiency thesis, even while insisting that the actions of the virtuous agent play a necessary role.

The problem, however, is that, by including absolute obedience to God among the virtues, a theory ceases to be a strong virtue theory. This is the case for several reasons. First, on a strong virtue theory, all moral properties are *defined in terms of* the virtues, which implies that the virtues are *explanatorily prior* to all other moral concepts. But on an ethic in which absolute obedience to God is included among the virtues, neither the

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[142]I intend the phrase, "God's commanding *a* in C," to imply that God's commanding *a* is itself one of the features of C.

[143]The principle can be summarized as follows: if P entails Q, then P's being sufficient for R is consistent with (though it does not entail) Q's being necessary for R. I am indebted to John Hare for bringing this to my attention.

actions nor the character traits of the virtuous agent are explanatorily basic to the moral status of an action—at least, not in the difficult cases under discussion, such as the story of Abraham. In such cases, the *explanatory* basis for why *a* is morally obligatory in C is that it is commanded by God: it is not fundamentally explained by the fact that the virtuous agent would perform it, because the explanation for why the virtuous agent would perform it is that it is commanded by God.

Second, including absolute obedience to God among the virtues leads to another commitment a strong virtue theorist would reject. In cases like the ones under consideration, in which an otherwise prohibited or morally neutral action becomes obligatory by God's issuing a command, the virtues are not *ontologically* fundamental to the moral status of the action; rather, they are derivative. An (ideal) agent is perfectly virtuous in part because she obeys God perfectly, which results in her performing *a* in C, but what initiates the change in the moral status of *a* is God's commanding it, not the virtuous agent's performing (or being ready to perform) it. This implies that God's commands are ontologically more basic to the moral status of *a* than the virtuous agent's traits or actions. In contrast, strong virtue theorists typically insist that, in grounding moral obligations, virtues and/or virtuous agents are ontologically fundamental. Thus, by including absolute obedience to God among the virtues, a theory can account for individual obligation and vocation—the theoretical upshots of the sufficiency thesis—but, for multiple reasons, it ceases to be a strong virtue theory.

These considerations highlight an additional point: What is important to many theistic ethics, including the Kierkegaardian ethic, is not just that God's commands are logically sufficient for moral obligation—a criterion that is met merely by God's

commanding only what is morally obligatory in all possible worlds—but also that morally obligatory actions are obligatory *because* God commands them.[144] Consider, for example, the following claim, which seems to express well the basic commitment of a strong virtue theory:

> A right (permissible) act is defined in terms of what a virtuous person *might* do in like circumstances. A moral duty is defined in terms of what a virtuous person *would* do in like circumstances. A wrong act is defined in terms of what a virtuous person *would not* do in like circumstances.[145]

The problem with such views, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, is that the moral properties *right*, *wrong*, and *permissible* are defined in terms of the activity of virtuous human agents rather than in terms of the activity of God. In this way, reductive virtue theories locate the ground of obligation in the wrong place to be compatible with

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[144]To account for this intuition, one must include in one's ethic some kind of asymmetrical dependency relation thesis: i.e., some version of the thesis that the moral status of various actions is not merely *logically correlated with* but also *metaphysically dependent upon* the kinds of commands that God issues. Metaethical divine command theories include just such a thesis—a point that will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

[145]Linda Zagzebski, "Perfect Goodness and Divine Motivation Theory," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume XXI: Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 308. It is worth noting that Zagzebski herself is a proponent of divine motivation theory rather than a standard virtue theory—a point this quote does not make clear. She writes, "Divine Motivation theory is the same as motivation-based virtue theory, but with the additional claim that, ultimately, the goodness of all motives is grounded in the motives of a single being—a perfectly good God" ("Perfect Goodness and Divine Motivation Theory," 308.). This suggests that Zagzebski's view is a combination of a virtue deontology (a reduction of deontological properties to virtue properties) and a religious axiology that identifies the perfect good with God's motives and creaturely goodness with similarity to God's motives. If so, this certainly makes God more central in Zagzebski's ethics than in most other virtue theories. Nevertheless, the view still is one in which *moral obligation* is defined essentially in terms of virtuous agents and only derivatively in terms of God. On the other hand, Zagzebski sometimes writes as if she takes God's motives to provide the ontological foundations of both the good *and* the right. She claims, "The theory I am proposing is structurally like [divine command theory], but instead of claiming that what is morally right (or good) is made to be morally right (or good) by God's will, what I propose is that what is right (or good) is made to be right (or good) by God's motives" (ibid., 304). It is not clear how Zagzebski intends these various claims (the two cited in this footnote, along with the passage quoted in the main text) to cohere with one another. Regardless, even if it is taken out of context, the quote in the main text exemplifies well *the kind of claim* that strong virtue theorists characteristically make, which suffices for present purposes.

Christianity—at least as Kierkegaard understands Christianity.[146] For Kierkegaard, the ontological and explanatory basis of moral obligation must lie, ultimately, in God. This is a point that militates in favor of divine command readings of Kierkegaard. Since God is the *source* of moral obligation, it is not enough to formulate some version of virtue theory on which everything that God commands is obligatory; rather, to be Kierkegaardian, an ethic must be one on which everything that God commands[147] is obligatory *because of* some activity of God (for example, because He commands it).

Note, finally, that the proponent of the virtue reading might claim that "strong" and "weak" versions present a false dichotomy and that there is a moderate version that structurally resembles contemporary divine command theories in restricting itself to an account of moral obligation, rather than claiming that *all* other moral concepts are derivable from virtue concepts:

> *the moderate virtue reading* = dn. The view that Kierkegaard's writings contain a theistic, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic in which *the concept of moral obligation* is derived from virtue concepts (which are theoretically more basic).

But, of course, such a view will not circumvent the problem at hand. In addition to being highly idiosyncratic among virtue theories (contemporary virtue theorists tend to be

[146] In "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," Quinn voices a similar worry. He identifies "a virtue theory of Aristotelian provenance" as "the rival contender [to theological voluntarism] that currently enjoys the greatest popularity among Christian philosophers," but worries that adopting such a theory undermines something essential to Christian ethics. He writes, "Of course it would be silly to maintain that there is no place in Christian ethics for virtues, but I shall argue that they should not have pride of place in Christian moral philosophy. They should instead be confined to a subordinate role. Making human virtue primary in ethics is an inversion of the Christian order in which God's will is primary and the human response to it is secondary. Seen from within a Christian perspective, virtue looks very different from what it appears to be when observed from the point of view of pagan Aristotelianism. So incorporating parts of Aristotle's ethical legacy into Christian moral philosophy will inevitably involve radical transformation in order to enforce the required theoretical subordination" (Philip Quinn, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher, and Mark Nelson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 262).

[147] With a qualification that I will discuss in chapter four.

either anti-theorists or "pure" theorists in Roberts's sense[148]), the main critique applying to the strong virtue reading also will apply to the moderate reading: namely, the view is inconsistent with claims that Kierkegaard makes. The very problem I have discussed for the strong version centers on its claim that moral obligation is reducible to virtue concepts. Obviously, then, the moderate virtue reading will not avoid the problem, since this is the very feature it shares with stronger readings.

Conclusion

It seems clear that if Kierkegaard endorses the sufficiency thesis, as I have claimed, then he is not a reductive virtue theorist and his views are incompatible with all reductive virtue theories, including theistic versions. Of course, the significance of this conditional claim is dependent on the truth of its antecedent; in the next chapter, I will argue further for the claim that Kierkegaard endorses the sufficiency thesis.

The above considerations do not undercut the reading of Kierkegaard as a non-reductive virtue ethicist. As I mentioned, the weakest version of the weak virtue reading seems certainly true. Thus Kierkegaard still can be described legitimately as a "virtue ethicist," given the focus he sustains in his writings on the virtues and the significance of their acquisition, and on the careful, conceptual analysis he provides of many key Christian virtues. Many predominant themes of virtue ethics, broadly construed, certainly are central to the Kierkegaardian corpus. But if virtue concepts are not taken to

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[148]Michael Slote writes, ". . . I shall assume . . . that a view counts as a form of virtue ethics if and only if it treats arêtaic terms as *fundamental* (and deontic notions as *either derivative or dispensable*) and it focuses mainly on inner character and/or motive rather than on rules for or consequences of actions. This characterization is fairly rough, but it has the virtue of being broad enough to help us understand the sheer variety of the possible forms virtue ethics may take. It also allows us to rule out certain sorts of views that someone might initially mistake for forms of virtue ethics" ("Virtue Ethics," in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000), 325, emphasis added).

be the central moral categories in terms of which others are defined or explicated—which they are not, for Kierkegaard—the term "virtue *theorist*" hardly seems apt to describe one's position. Thus, I agree with Roberts that there is no basis for describing Kierkegaard as a "virtue theorist."

The term "virtue ethicist" leaves something to be desired, however, because as most Kierkegaard commentators use it, it is at best vague and at worst misleading or ill-applied. This is especially palpable when evaluating Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation. I have tried to demonstrate that virtue readings of all forms are inadequate to account for the issue of moral obligation in his writings. If one retains the label of "virtue ethicist" for Kierkegaard, one should, I think, make this explicit and indicate that by the use of the term one means only to endorse a view on the farthest "weak" end of the spectrum of virtue readings.

In the next chapter, I will turn to the second major camp of interpretation regarding Kierkegaard's ethic: the group of commentators who argue that a divine command theory is to be found in his most important, signed work on ethics.

CHAPTER THREE

Kierkegaard and Divine Command Theory

Introduction

One of the most important developments in the contemporary discussion of Kierkegaard's ethics is an interpretation of *Works of Love* defended, in different forms, by Philip Quinn[1] and C. Stephen Evans.[2] Both argue that a divine command theory of moral obligation is to be found in this key Kierkegaardian text. In this chapter, I will examine the case that each makes for this reading of *Works of Love*. I will argue, in response, that neither makes a compelling case for the divine command interpretation and that, while there are significant points of contact between the view of moral obligation found in Kierkegaard's writings and a minimal divine command theory, there are even more significant differences. In the end, these differences make it doubtful that Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation is best characterized as a divine command theory. However, the significant overlaps between Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation and divine command theory, to which Quinn and Evans rightly bring our attention, are

[1]Philip L Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*" (op. cit.); "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 349-375; "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics" (op. cit.); "Divine Command Theory," in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 53-73; "God and Morality," in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Australia, Canada, Mexico, et. al.: Wadsworth Group, 2002), 664-79.

[2]C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (op. cit.). See also "Authority and Transcendence in *Works of Love*" (op. cit.) and "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), 63-76.

features that must be accounted for in any adequate interpretation of Kierkegaard's ethic. In closing, I will discuss these features and their significance.

Quinn on Kierkegaard and Divine Command Ethics

It is hardly controversial that Jesus's summary of the Moral Law in the Gospels as a two-part command to love is central to Christian ethics.[3] It is no small detail of this teaching that love for God and neighbor is the object of a command. Kierkegaard certainly recognizes the importance of the commanded nature of Christian love, as his chapter entitled "You *Shall* Love" from *Works of Love*[4] demonstrates. What is unclear is what conclusions should be drawn from these observations. The first two observations have led some to conclude that Christian ethics must take the form of a divine command theory (henceforth: "DCT"), but this clearly is mistaken. As Quinn points out, "By itself, the fact that a Christian ethics of love can be put in terms of commands does not imply that it must be formulated or is best articulated in such terms."[5] Nevertheless, the fact that the New Testament claims that "all the law and prophets" "depend" on two commands—to love God and to love one's neighbor—gives many Christians a *prima facie* reason to take DCT seriously. The commandedness of Christian love is, according

[3]In response to the Pharisee lawyer's question of which commandment in the Law is the greatest, Jesus replies, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets'" (Matt. 22:37-40, RSV). This summary of the Christian moral law is repeated throughout Scriptures: e.g., Matt. 19:19, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Rom. 13:9, Gal. 5:14.

[4]First Series, II, A.

[5]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 29-30.

to Quinn, both "foundational for Christian morality and is what sets it apart from secular rivals."[6]

But what conclusions should we draw from Kierkegaard's discussion of the commanded nature of love in *Works of Love*? Quinn and Evans both argue that we can find in this discussion evidence that Kierkegaard himself endorses a divine command ethic of some sort. In order to assess their arguments, we first need to be clear about what a divine command theory is.

Both Quinn and Evans agree that a divine command theory of moral obligation must hold, minimally, (1) that divine commands and moral requirements are coextensive and (2) that there is a metaphysically asymmetrical relationship between the two, so that divine commands are in some sense prior to moral requirements and moral requirements in some way depend on divine commands.[7] Evans formulates these two conditions as follows:

> A divine command theory of moral obligation, as I shall understand the term, is therefore committed to the following two propositions: (1) Any action God (understood as a perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing Creator) commands his human creatures to do is morally obligatory for them. (2) Any action that is morally obligatory for humans has the status of moral obligation because God commands it.[8]

Though Evans is right that a divine command theorist is *committed to* these propositions, a minimal DCT must assert something stronger: it must hold that, *necessarily*, any action that God commands is morally obligatory and, *necessarily*, any action that is morally

[6]Quinn, "God and Morality," 668. See also Quinn, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," 279.

[7]The sense in which divine commands are prior and the way in which moral obligations depend on divine commands varies among different versions of DCT. See Quinn, "Divine Command Theory," 53-5.

[8]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 120-1.

obligatory has this status because God commands it. Otherwise, the view will not entail counterfactual propositions of the form, *if God (counterfactually) had commanded p, then p would be obligatory*—a set of claims the divine command theorist surely wants to endorse. The relation clause also needs to be strengthened as follows: *necessarily*, there is a metaphysically asymmetrical relationship between divine commands and moral obligations such that the latter depend on the former. This ensures *both* that the relation between divine commands and moral requirements is one of dependency of the latter on the former *and* that it could not be otherwise. Let us, then, strengthen the minimal version of DCT under discussion in these ways.

Thus modified, the coextensiveness thesis expresses a necessary biconditional—a material equivalence between divine commands and moral obligations that holds in all possible worlds: necessarily, for all *p*, *p* is morally obligatory if and only if God commands that *p*.[9] It will be helpful for our purposes to separate the biconditional into its constituent parts and to name each part for ease of reference. Let "the necessity clause" refer to the proposition that, necessarily, *p* is morally obligatory only if God commands that *p*.[10] The necessity clause expresses that, necessarily, only those things God commands are morally required. This entails that nothing is morally required except what God commands, i.e., that any action that lacks the property of being divinely commanded also lacks the property of being morally obligatory. Thus, divine commands

[9]The scope of this proposition may be of some controversy: *p* may be argued to range over act tokens, act types, or states of affairs. For present purposes, we need not settle this issue.

[10]The word "necessary" in the name of the clause refers to the direction of the material implication tying God's commands to moral obligations (God's commands are *necessary* for moral obligations) and not to the modal necessity of the proposition. Note that the sufficiency clause, discussed next, also expresses a (modally) necessary proposition.

constitute the only ground of moral obligation that is possibly sufficient.[11] Let "the sufficiency clause" refer to the proposition that, necessarily, *p* is morally obligatory if God commands that *p*. The sufficiency clause expresses that, necessarily, everything God commands is morally obligatory (in the world in which He commands it); nothing else is required in addition to God's commanding *p* to make *p* obligatory. The difference between the two clauses is important because, I will argue, Kierkegaard's writings provide support only for one of them.

Quinn's argument focuses on the fact that, for Kierkegaard, Christian love for the neighbor—agape love—is commanded by God, and its being commanded by God suffices to make it obligatory:

> In the religious tradition of Jesus and his hearers, it is taken for granted that divine commands give rise to obligations, and so an obligatory love would in that tradition naturally be represented as commanded by a divine lawgiver. It is, then, no accident that the love of neighbor the Gospels propose to us is, as Soren [*sic*] Kierkegaard says, a "*commanded* love."[12]

Quinn identifies three primary reasons why, according to Kierkegaard, love of neighbor must be commanded and thus made obligatory. First, "only love which is obligatory can be extensive enough in scope to embrace absolutely anyone without distinction."[13] In the absence of the command, love is based on preference and thus extends only to those for whom we feel some affection or those to whom we have some special tie. Second, "only

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[11]It does not follow from the necessity clause that God's commands are a sufficient ground of moral obligation, but it does follow from it that nothing else (logically distinct from divine commands) is a sufficient ground of obligation. Thus, it follows from the necessity clause that divine commands are the only ground of moral obligation that is *possibly* sufficient—i.e., that *if* there is any ground of obligation that is solely sufficient, it is divine commands.

[12]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 30.

[13]Quinn, "God and Morality," 668.

a love which is obligatory can be invulnerable to changes in its object."[14] Loves based on preference are always subject to change: they can begin to wane or be extinguished completely if some change occurs in one (or both) of the lovers that makes him or her seem no longer lovely to the other. And finally, it is necessary for neighbor love to be commanded by God in order to provide us with "backup motivation"[15]—a constant and reliable source of motivation to love the neighbor when there is insufficient or no natural inclination to do so:

> For most of us most of the time, love of neighbor is not an attractive goal, and, if it were optional or supererogatory, we simply would not pursue it. To get us to have such love, it must be presented to us as an obligatory love with the feel of something that represents a curb or check on our natural desires, inclinations, and predilections.[16]

In each of his articles on this topic, Quinn expresses his view that "no Christian thinker has seen with greater clarity than [Kierkegaard] just how radical the demands of love of neighbor really are,"[17] and, after making observations such as the ones above, he proceeds to unpack what the concept of neighbor love entails for Kierkegaard. His exposition of Kierkegaard's concept of neighbor love seems to me successful for the most part. The problem, however, is that it is never clear why Quinn thinks that Kierkegaard's claims about neighbor love add up to a divine command ethic. The textual evidence Quinn cites supports only the sufficiency clause, not DCT as a whole. Quinn repeats his basic argument about Kierkegaard's unique understanding of the radical demands of

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Quinn, "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics," 368, and "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 44.

[16]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 30-1.

[17]Ibid., 30.

neighbor love in at least five articles, and in each of these, the context implies that Quinn takes these arguments to be evidence of Kierkegaard's divine command ethic.[18] But if this is Quinn's intention, then he is moving from some piece (or set) of textual evidence in Kierkegaard's writings that at most supports the sufficiency clause to the conclusion that Kierkegaard advocates DCT—a fallacious inference.

In fact, Quinn gives this type of argument not only to support the conclusion that Kierkegaard endorses a version of DCT, but also to support the conclusion that Christians ought to endorse DCT:

> Loving everyone as we love ourselves is, I want to insist, obligatory in Christian ethics, and it has this status, as the Gospels show us, because God has commanded this all-inclusive love. So I find in what is most distinctive about the Christian ethics of the Gospels another reason for Christians to favor a divine command conception of moral obligation. It seems to me that Christians who take the Gospels seriously would be in no position to deny that they teach us that we have been commanded by God to love the neighbor and are so obliged to do our best to fulfill the command perfectly.[19]

Of course, many Christians would agree that we are obliged to love the neighbor and yet deny that the *reason* we are so obliged is that God has commanded us to do so. But even if we accept Quinn's implied claim that it is God's command that makes neighbor love obligatory, this at most supports the sufficiency clause. It gives us no reason to think that

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[18]Strangely, Quinn never (to my knowledge) explicitly asserts that Kierkegaard endorses a divine command ethic. He repeatedly implies this, but he seems oddly cagey about stating it outright. He writes an essay about Kierkegaard's understanding of neighbor love, and he titles the essay, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*"—even though the phrase "divine command ethics" never appears in the body of the essay. He reiterates his claims about Kierkegaard in a number of essays devoted to discussions of divine command theory, inviting the reader to infer that these considerations should count as evidence for DCT—and thus as evidence that Kierkegaard endorses DCT—while never explicitly asserting this. It is difficult to discern whether this failure to assert plainly that Kierkegaard endorses DCT in *Works of Love* is deliberate or just a strange oversight. Obviously, for the purposes of the present discussion, I have taken it to be the latter and have proceeded under the assumption that it is indeed Quinn's view that a divine command ethic is both found in *Works of Love* and advocated by Kierkegaard himself.

[19]Quinn, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," 279.

all our obligations have their origin in divine commands and that no obligations possibly can arise from a different source.[20]

In the end, Quinn's exposition of Kierkegaard's view of neighbor love, even if entirely correct, only suffices to demonstrate that Kierkegaard endorses some view of moral obligation compatible with the claim that God's commands are sufficient to impose moral obligations. Since there are a number of theistic ethical theories that are compatible with the sufficiency clause, this gives us no reason to think Kierkegaard favors DCT, in particular. In order to support the DCT reading of *Works of Love*, Quinn would need to provide some textual evidence that Kierkegaard endorses the necessity clause, as well. He offers no evidence of this—and, *a fortiori*, no evidence that even a minimal version of DCT is advocated in *Works of Love*.

This is, as far as I can tell, the most serious difficulty for Quinn's reading of Kierkegaard. But there are other difficulties, as well. In much of his discussion of Kierkegaard, Quinn seems to confuse DCT with a theory of moral motivation. Quinn repeatedly emphasizes the need for neighbor love to be commanded in order to motivate

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[20]Of course, one might take the phrase "another reason" in the above quotation from Quinn ("I find in what is most distinctive about the Christian ethics of the Gospels *another reason* for Christians to favor a divine command conception of moral obligation. . .") to indicate that these considerations are only intended to support part of DCT (the sufficiency clause) and that there are other considerations that support the rest of the theory. But two things should be noted in response to this. First, in a parallel passage in "God in Morality" (a later essay), Quinn does not use the phrase, "another reason." Instead, he writes, "But it seems to me that Christians who take the Gospels seriously are in no position to deny that they teach us that God has commanded us to love the neighbor or that this command places us under an obligation to do so. Hence I see in what is most distinctive of the Christian morality of love, the fact that it is commanded, a reason for Christians to favor a divine command theory of moral obligation" (669). This passage suggests even more strongly the inference from the sufficiency clause to DCT. Second, it is doubtful that Quinn establishes the necessity clause elsewhere. In his "cumulative case argument" for DCT (given in a number of essays), none of the "legs" of his argument clearly suffices to establish this clause, though the "argument from divine sovereignty" comes closest to addressing the issue (see, for example, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," 263-8). Regardless, in his discussions of Kierkegaard's ethic, no such considerations are ever presented, so even if Quinn can establish the plausibility of the necessity clause through the argument from divine sovereignty, this still fails to establish that *Kierkegaard* endorses the necessity clause.

the Christian to love the neighbor even when the neighbor is perceived to be unlovely. The command is a source of motivation that gives one a reason to love even when one's natural inclinations are to hate, ignore, or simply fail to love the neighbor as one ought. But even if it is true that we need the command for this purpose, taking this fact to support a divine command reading of Kierkegaard conflates a thesis about moral motivation with a thesis about the ontological basis of moral obligation. It is one thing to claim that divine commands are needed to motivate us to fulfill our moral obligations; it is another to claim that the metaphysical basis of moral obligation is tied essentially to divine commands. The two claims are logically distinct, and neither obviously entails the other.

I see two reasonable ways of interpreting Quinn on this point, though on either reading, Quinn's view is problematic. On the one hand, Quinn might be claiming that, for any action *p*, a duty to *p* binds an agent A only if A feels some inclination not to *p.* On this view, duties exist only insofar as there is some conflict between what God wants us to do and what we naturally are inclined to do. Thus God issues commands—and thereby brings it about that we are morally obligated—whenever He wants to give us an overriding reason to act in some way that we otherwise would not. This is one way of understanding the following passage:

> But the image of God, who is perfectly good, is presumably a mark that renders all who bear it lovable. If one can discern it in another, one can give the other loving care in virtue of and on account of the other's possession of it. . . . [I]f Kierkegaard is right about there being an inner glory in each of us, loving care can be given to anyone, absolutely anyone, out of affection for it if one can but see it. . . . It must be emphasized, however, that even if Kierkegaard is right about there being an inner glory in each of us, many will still be thrust back by the command to love the neighbor. Some will think it foolish to look for the image of God in all those they encounter; others are unlikely to see it no matter how hard they

> look . . . . Moreover, the image of God is often too faintly perceived to be motivationally sufficient for those works of love that demand great sacrifice. So ordinary Christians need to be able to trust to [*sic*] the "Thou *shall*" of the command for backup motivation. They will have to appeal to the motive of duty on many occasions as a substitute for or a supplement to the motives provided by perceived inner glory.[21]

What Quinn seems to be saying in these passages is that once we come to see the image of God in the neighbor, we can come to love the neighbor ("give the other loving care") on the basis of finding the neighbor lovely—in the deepest sense rather than a superficial sense—rather than having to rely on the "backup motivation" of the command to love.

It might not be immediately obvious why this view is problematic. To make the difficulty clear, consider the following question: Would we have a duty to love the neighbor if our natural inclination (at all times) were to love the neighbor? In the passage above, Quinn claims that if we could see the image of God in the neighbor at all times—which presumably we always could do if not for the blinding effects of sin and our fallen nature—then there would be no *need*, motivationally speaking, to make loving the neighbor a duty, and thus no need for God to issue a command to love the neighbor.[22] In such a case, God would not issue the command, so there would be no duty to love the neighbor. But this seems mistaken. There is a difference between (1) not needing *p* to be a duty in order to be motivated to *p* and (2) *p*'s not being a duty. While it is plausible that

[21]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 40-4.

[22]Actually, things are not quite this simple. There are circumstances in which God would need to command A to *p* even if it were A's natural inclination to *p*. Suppose A falsely believes that *q*, and *q* implies that *p* is wrong. In this case, if A wanted to uphold (what she believed to be) her duty, she would not perform *p*, even though performing *p* is (*ex hypothesi*) in accordance with her natural inclination. This gives us reason to doubt both the proposition that an agent has a duty to do some action only if she has some natural inclination not to do that action and the proposition that God would command an agent to do some action only if that agent's natural inclination were not to do the action.

(1) could, in some circumstances, apply to loving the neighbor, it is not plausible, I think, that (2) could.[23]

The argument for why loving the neighbor could not fail to be a duty is this: If, as Quinn's own claims about the neighbor's essential nature suggest, agape love is the only proper response to the neighbor as a fellow creature of God who bears His image, then it seems we have another source of duty to love the neighbor in addition to the divine command to do so.[24] We have an obligation to love the neighbor because of *the kind of being the neighbor is*. We would have this duty even if, due to our moral and religious perception's being so acute and our character's being so virtuous that we always saw the neighbor as lovely and thus loved the neighbor without special moral effort, God had not issued a command to love the neighbor. Thus (1) and (2) are not equivalent. It may be that, in the actual world, because of our sinful natures, it is necessary for God to issue a divine command to love the neighbor in order for us to know that this is our duty, and it may be that divine commands are necessary to motivate us to uphold this duty, but the duty to love the neighbor exists prior to the command, in virtue of the fact that the neighbor is both a creation of God and a being who bears the *imago Dei*.[25]

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[23]I think Evans conflates (1) and (2)—that is, conflates the motivational aspect of the command to love with the metaphysical aspect—when he claims that "[*Works of Love*] concludes by arguing that the satisfying character of love is such that we *ought* not to require a command at all. Love must be a duty only because of our own fallenness" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 141). It is hard to know what to make of the phrase "must be" in the second sentence, but if the implication is that love *is* a duty only because of our own fallenness, then the metaphysical basis of the duty to love is being confused with the motivational role that the command to love plays in the lives of sinful creatures like ourselves.

[24]Quinn writes, "It is this glory [the image of God] that makes each person lovable quite apart from any distinguishing excellences; this is the mark of neighbor that renders everyone worthy of loving care no matter what their other qualities may be" ("The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 41).

[25]Nor is it plausible, I think, that moral duties are something that can be "outgrown" by the perfecting of one's character. The (ideal) perfectly virtuous person is not outside the scope of moral obligation; rather, she simply is free of the internal tension the unvirtuous person experiences between

In fact, on this first interpretation, the various claims Quinn makes about the relation between duty and motivation, when combined, lead to paradox. As previously discussed, what characterizes the first interpretation of Quinn is his endorsement of

(1) for any action *p*, an agent A has a duty to *p* only if A has some inclination not to *p*.

But elsewhere Quinn endorses (what he takes to be) Kierkegaard's view that

(2) we are divinely commanded—and thus have a duty—to love "affectionately."[26]

(Here "affection" is being used in the sense of "tender concern," "attentive regard," "affectionate sensitivity to the individual character of the recipient."[27]) And yet, Quinn also claims that

(3) we are commanded to love the neighbor because loving the neighbor is an act that "does not spontaneously engage [our] affections"[28]

and that

(4) a love that is motivated by duty is not "a matter of feelings" and can "exist and persist independent of feelings, though it need not do so."[29]

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willing in accordance with her inclination (the inclination determined by her character) and willing what is right. If in heaven, our characters are so perfected that we no longer feel any inclination not to love the neighbor, this does not entail that we no longer have a duty to love the neighbor. It entails only that we have attained a state that ensures we will uphold our duty, because we lack any motivation not to uphold it. This is clear from the fact that *if* one suddenly ceased to love the neighbor in heaven, one thereby would act wrongly. The fact that behaving in this way might be psychologically impossible in heaven due to our natures' having been perfected does not change the truth value of this conditional. But if the conditional is true, then we still have a duty in heaven to love the neighbor. The idea that we might eventually outgrow our duties is suggested by Evans in the following passage: "Perhaps in eternity, my desires will be transformed entirely. Duty will cease to exist as duty and I will love my neighbour and at the same time thereby [fulfill] my own deepest desires. Those desires will perfectly correspond with what is now experienced as duty" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 146).

[26]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 37.

[27]Ibid., 36.

[28]Quinn, "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics," 353.

[29]Ibid., 355.

There are a number of ways in which these claims come into conflict with one another. First, (4) is in tension with (2), because a love that is not a matter of feelings and can exist and persist independently of feelings is not an affectionate love in the sense in question. Second, the combination of (1) and (2) apparently leads to the following paradoxical conclusion: we have a duty that, if perfectly upheld, renders the duty no longer a duty. (2) claims that we have a duty to love the neighbor affectionately, and (3) implies that the reason this is a duty is that we are not naturally inclined to do it. But it is plausible that one could uphold this duty perfectly—that one could perfectly love the neighbor affectionately in the sense of loving her with tender concern, attentive regard, and sensitivity to the individual character of the neighbor—only if one loved the neighbor out of a pure character. Presumably, an individual's character would be pure (perfectly virtuous) only if she loved the other affectionately without inner conflict—that is, only if her natural inclinations were to love the neighbor. But if this is right, then if one perfectly upheld the duty cited in (2), it would cease to be a duty, because, according to (1), one cannot have a duty to do what one has no inclination not to do. This implies that one cannot fulfill one's duty by perfectly loving the neighbor—a view that, while perhaps not logically contradictory, certainly is paradoxical. Ordinarily, moral requirements are not thought to be the sorts of things that cease to be requirements if they are fulfilled perfectly.[30]

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[30]An exception to this is a requirement of the form, "A is obligated to become/acquire *p*," where *p* denotes some type or trait (a character trait, for instance). If A becomes/acquires *p*, then A obviously no longer has an obligation to *become* or to *acquire p* (though A may, of course, have an obligation to *continue to be p* or to *sustain p*). The duty to love the neighbor is not (solely) a duty of this type, so it remains paradoxical that on Quinn's view it is a moral requirement that would cease to be a requirement if perfectly fulfilled.

These problems suggest that we should look for another interpretation of Quinn on the issue of the relation between duty and moral motivation. A second reasonable interpretation is that Quinn thinks the duty to love the neighbor remains for an agent even when (ideally) that agent's character has been perfected. On this reading, Quinn is claiming that in this perfected state, the agent no longer relies on the motivation of the duty to love the neighbor; instead, she loves the neighbor because she sees the "inner glory"—the *imago Dei*—in the neighbor and thus recognizes that the neighbor is intrinsically worthy of being loved. The duty to love the neighbor remains even though it is motivationally superfluous. The following passage provides textual support for this interpretation:

> Saintly exemplars such as Mother Teresa . . . show us that we might, if we would but try, find something glorious in anyone and as a result might come to perform works of love *not merely* out of obedience to the divine command *but also* in affectionate response to the glory perceived in the one for whom the works are performed. This, I take it, would be the perfection of Christian love for the neighbor.[31]

This is, I think, a more reasonable view, and it avoids many of the problems just discussed. But on this reading, what is important for the issue of moral motivation is that neighbor love is obligatory, not that it is commanded. What is important is that we have a backup motivation to love the neighbor when we lack any natural inclination to do so. But if neighbor love is obligatory, and if we know it to be such, then we have this backup motivation; it does not matter *why* it is obligatory. Thus, the motivational importance of the duty to love provides no support whatsoever to DCT over other ethical theories on which neighbor love is obligatory. To claim otherwise is to beg the question in favor of DCT: it is to assume that, since neighbor love must be obligatory to provide us with

[31]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 43, emphasis added.

sufficient motivation to practice it, it must be divinely commanded. This is simply to assume that the only source of duty is divine commands. Certainly, the proponent of DCT is committed to this view (the necessity clause), but simply to assume its truth is not to provide *evidence* for DCT. So once again, even if Quinn is right in thinking that Kierkegaard sees that it is a practical necessity for fallen creatures that love of neighbor be a duty, this provides no evidence for thinking that Kierkegaard endorses DCT.

A final problem with Quinn's reading of Kierkegaard is that it seems at times to conflate DCT with what is sometimes called "the weak dependency thesis": the thesis that "human beings, because of their flaws, can neither attain moral knowledge nor behave in moral ways unless assisted by God."[32] The weak dependency thesis resembles DCT in giving divine commands a central role; the crucial difference, however, is that the role is epistemological and/or motivational rather than ontological. Quinn writes,

> Christians are, I take it, expected to be confident that there is something loveable about each human person, even if they do not see what it is, because God loves all his human creatures. But perhaps only those who are well advanced in the practice of works of love should hope to be blessed with a growth in the brightness of eternity's light that will enable them to see steadily what makes some of their neighbors worthy of love.[33]

Coming back to a point discussed earlier, if it is the image of God in the other that makes the other "worthy of love," then this suggests that we have a duty to love the other in virtue of this feature of the other's essential nature, independent of any divine command to do so. Nevertheless, it may be necessary for God to command us to love the neighbor

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[32]Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman, "Divine Command Morality and Jewish Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23 (1995): 41, quoted by John J. Davenport in "Quinn's Kierkegaard: Some Questions About Neighbor-Love and Divine Commands" (paper presented to the Kierkegaard Society at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Atlanta, GA, December 2001). I am indebted to Davenport's presentation for this section of my discussion.

[33]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 42.

in order for us to recognize this duty—whether because of our fallen nature, the noetic effects of sin, our own personal moral immaturity, or whatever. Divine commands are, on this model, an essential component of human moral development; without them, we would be blind to our obligations, or, at the very least, confused about the extent of our duties and about what it is that we are obliged to do in some cases. None of this, however, implies the stronger dependency thesis according to which all moral obligations owe their ontological status to God's activity of issuing commands. In fact, if the neighbor's essential nature as bearer of the *imago Dei* itself imposes the duty to love, then this stronger dependency thesis is false: at least some duties owe their status as duties to certain features of creation rather than to their being commanded by God.

There is some textual support for the view that even the command to love serves primarily a revelatory and/or motivational function in Kierkegaard's ethic, rather than serving as the ultimate basis of the obligation to love.[34] In the conclusion to *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard discusses the Apostle John's admonition, "Beloved, let us love one another." He imagines the apostle saying,

> "The commandment is that you *shall* love, but ah, if you will understand yourself and 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."[35]

Regarding this passage, Davenport writes,

> This clearly suggests that agape is the fulfillment of our existential *telos*, even if for most or all of us this attitude will be volitionally impossible, and so we must start with only the stringency of the command. Saying that neighbor-love is

[34] I say "even," because it is possible that, endorsing the sufficiency clause, Kierkegaard thinks the particular obligation to love the neighbor is grounded in a divine command, even though, rejecting the necessity clause, he thinks some other obligations have a different ground.

[35] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 375.

> commanded, then, does not by itself automatically imply any metaphysical theory reducing rightness to being freely selected as a law by the divine will.[36]

However, Davenport is skeptical even about the legitimacy of DCT as a motivational theory:

> If we decide to love the other just because we are commanded to, it seems to me that we only really love the one who commands. Instead, we are commanded to see what is worthy of our absolute response, our unconditional love, *in the human person* we are to care about.[37]

I think Davenport's worries are legitimate on both counts, though the first concerns a worry about interpreting Kierkegaard as a divine command theorist and the second concerns a worry about DCT itself.[38]

Evans on Kierkegaard and DCT, Part I: The Social Theory of Obligation

A more developed account of Kierkegaard's connection with divine command theory is given by Evans, who attempts to synthesize the motivational and metaphysical aspects of DCT by developing "a divine command theory of ethics that can incorporate some of the insights of a human nature theory of moral obligation."[39] By a "human nature theory," Evans means a theory that accounts for the grounds of moral obligation in terms of a teleology of the natural order—one that focuses especially on the conditions for human flourishing. The ethic Evans finds in Kierkegaard's writings synthesizes DCT

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[36]Davenport, "Quinn's Kierkegaard: Some Questions about Neighbor Love and Divine Commands."

[37]Ibid., Davenport's emphasis.

[38] The latter worry is tied to "Objection Four," discussed in chapter one, concerning whether, on Kierkegaard's ethic, one loves the neighbor merely as a means to the end of loving God and thus *truly* loves only God—a worry that was raised in response to Kierkegaard's insistence that God is the "middle term" in any relationship based on genuine (agape) love.

[39]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love,* 19. John Hare has argued for a similar version of DCT in the works of Scotus. See *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

and certain aspects of a human nature theory by holding that moral obligations are grounded in divine commands, but God, being essentially loving, issues these commands not arbitrarily, but rather with the intent of promoting our own individual and/or collective flourishing.

The idea that our relation to God is a crucial part of human flourishing has a long history. Evans notes that within the Christian tradition,

> it has generally been taught that such a relation is the highest good that is possible for a human person. It follows very plausibly from this that a need for such a relationship is a constituent of human nature.[40]

As our just and loving Creator, God is owed our love, respect, gratitude, and obedience. But there is an important difference between the ethic Evans defends and a full-fledged human nature theory, such as that often found in ethical theories inspired by Thomism:

> God's commands can be understood as fitting our human nature and as being directed to our happiness. This divine command theory, however, differs from a human nature theory in claiming that moral obligations do not follow directly from human nature alone. On such a view morality fits our human nature, but one cannot deduce our moral duties simply from a knowledge of human nature.[41]

For Evans's Kierkegaard, God's plan for each person is unique, and each individual's highest flourishing is attained by becoming the particular self that God intends that person to be. An individual becomes the self God intends through a process of character formation guided by obedience to the commands God issues to that person. What God commands of each of us, perhaps most fundamentally, is that we become more loving. By truly loving God and our neighbor, we become more like God, whose very nature is

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[40]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 13. It seems there is a missing premise here, something to the effect that the highest possible good for a thing is a constituent of that thing's nature. I will pass over the question of whether such a premise is plausible.

[41]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 9.

love.[42] This fundamental command is one that is issued to—and thus binding upon—all persons.

However, God also may impose *individual obligations* by issuing certain commands to an individual that He issues to no one else. He may, for example, command me and only me to take some course of action; in this way, an action that might be morally neutral for anyone else becomes obligatory for me. This opens up the possibility that God has for each of us a particular *vocation* or *calling*.[43] Kierkegaard writes,

> But this I do believe (and I will gladly listen to any objection, although I will not believe it) that at each man's birth there comes into being an eternal vocation [*evig Bestemmelse*] for him, expressly for him. To be true to himself in relation to this eternal vocation is the highest thing a man can practice. . . .[44]

The concept of personal vocation is most at home in an ethic in which divine commands play a central role. God can, for example, give one certain abilities or talents and command one to develop these and use them in specific ways. He can command one to become one type of person (say, a teacher) rather than another (say, a missionary). In these and many other ways, God can issue commands that guide one toward an individual

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[42]"God's own nature is essentially love, and God's demand that his human creatures relate to him in faith is one that has as an aim that those creatures better image God by becoming more like him in loving. . . . The self we must become has as its primary characteristic love. . . . We have, then, a divine command ethic [in *Works of Love*] in which the fundamental command is that a person become what God intends. What God intends for each of us is that we become like him in loving" (Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 29).

[43]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 24-8.

[44]Kierkegaard, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," 140. The Hongs render "Bestemmelse" as "purpose" in this passage. In the Danish, the passage reads, "*men dette troer jeg (og jeg vil villig høre enhver Indvending, men jeg* vil *ikke troe den), at der med ethvert Menneskes Fødsel bliver en evig Bestemmelse til for ham, for ham særligen. Troskab mod sig selv er i Forhold til denne det Høieste et Menneske kan øve. . . .*"

calling, ultimately aimed at the end of becoming the person God intends one to become.[45] By obeying God's commands—both universal and individual—one achieves the human *telos* and, as both Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard himself put it, "becomes oneself."[46]

Evans considers the ethic he finds in Kierkegaard to be "a full-fledged divine command theory" in which "*all* truly moral obligations owe their status as moral duties to the fact that God commands them."[47] He is much more explicit than Quinn in describing how he thinks divine commands give rise to moral obligations. Following Robert M. Adams, Evans endorses a social theory of the nature of obligation.[48] According to this theory, social relations "carry with them obligations" and "are in fact partly constituted by systems of obligation, even though these obligations may be 'pre-moral' in character."[49] Both Adams and Evans argue that our relation to God is properly described as a social relation that carries with it specific obligations; Evans claims further that it is an indispensable constituent of human flourishing.[50] However, a subset of the obligations

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[45]At this point, I will not discuss the issue of how God might issue these commands, though I will return to the issue in chapter four. For Evans's view on this, see *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 156-79.

[46]For this reason, Evans identifies Kierkegaard's ethic as a kind of "self-actualization" ethic. The term can be misleading, however. For Kierkegaard, it is not that one actualizes one's self by one's decisions and unaided power of will. God's grace and sustaining power are required throughout one's ethical development (i.e., throughout the process of one's "becoming a self"). It is a self-actualization ethic in the sense that it places the task of becoming oneself—understood as actualizing the potential self that God intends one to become—as the central ethical task. Evans discusses the way that this aspect of Kierkegaard's ethic is developed in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing" in *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 85-111.

[47]Ibid., 15.

[48]Robert M. Adams, "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher, and Mark Nelson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 47-62, and *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 231-76.

[49]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 13.

[50]Ibid., 13.

generated by our relation to God are different from other socially-generated obligations in that they have the right characteristics to qualify them as *moral* obligations. Evans sums up his view as follows:

> On this view we are creatures made by God for fellowship with God, and our deepest happiness depends on such a relation, one that requires love and gratitude to God on our part. The relation with God, like other social relations, generates obligations. In this case the obligations to obey God's commands are of a character to merit the description 'moral.' I believe that this is the right perspective from which to view Kierkegaard's ethics.[51]

Evans cites three qualities that characterize moral obligations and distinguish them from other types of obligations.[52] First, they are *objective*: their binding power does not depend merely on the beliefs, practices, or customs of individuals, cultural groups, or societies. Second, they are *ultimate*: they give reasons for action that are overriding in relation to other, conflicting reasons, including those provided by other kinds of obligations. Finally, they are, in some cases at least, *universal*. Many divine commands are issued to all persons and thus impose moral obligations on everyone without exception. We can add to this that moral obligations are universal in another sense, as well: in any case in which one is obligated, anyone in relevantly similar circumstances would be similarly obligated. On a divine command theory such as Evans's, however, this does not imply that moral properties must supervene on natural properties, where "natural properties" are taken to refer (roughly) to those properties a naturalist metaphysic would allow. God can issue two individuals in similar "natural"

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[51]Ibid., 19.

[52]Ibid., 15-16 and 119.

circumstances contrary commands, in which case they would be differently obligated.[53] However, this is not to deny that moral obligations are universal, because being commanded by God is, for the divine command theorist, a morally salient feature of any circumstance. Anyone similarly commanded by God will be similarly obligated.[54] Thus, the divine command theorist still can allow that everyone who is *in all relevant ways* similarly circumstanced will have the same obligations.[55]

This social theory of the nature of obligation is helpful in clarifying how a divine command theory of *moral* obligation can fit into a broader theory of obligation. But combining DCT with a social theory of obligation results in a view that faces the following difficulty: it is forced to classify as "non-moral" or "pre-moral" some obligations that seem to be paradigmatically moral. Consider, for example, a parent's obligation to love and care for her child. This seems like a quintessential moral obligation that is binding on the parent simply in virtue of the kind of social relation the

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[53]Evans does point out, however, that "if we include in 'the same circumstances' having the same history and individual calling, then it is probably incoherent to imagine two individuals who could have opposite duties. However, perhaps in such a case we would not really have two individuals at all" (ibid., 174).

[54]Adams argues that employing the concept of vocation allows that ". . . strongly individual obligations can be reconciled with the universalizability principle, or at least with a restricted form of it. For the obligations of a person who has received a vocation from God will be the same as the obligations of any other persons whose situation is sufficiently similar. Of course, only those who have received the same vocation from God will be in a sufficiently similar situation. Similarity (even exact similarity) of *mundane* situation will not be sufficient. With respect to mundane situations (which do not include God's commands), moral facts may not be universalizable" (*Finite and Infinite Goods*, 295).

[55]There is, however, a problem here for the proponent of a reductive DCT, on which divine commands are metaphysically identical to moral obligations. Following an argument by Mark Murphy, we can see that the following problem emerges: it is difficult for the proponent of a reductive DCT to give any meaningful sense to the claim that everyone who is in all relevant ways similarly circumstanced will have the same obligations. It is not true that everyone in *non-morally* similar circumstances will have the same obligations, because a divine command *is* a moral obligation, and thus being divinely commanded is a paradigm moral property. But it is trivially true that everyone in *morally* similar circumstances has the same obligations, because to have a moral obligation is to have a moral property. See Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 82-92. I will put this objection aside for the purposes of the present discussion, though see also footnote 21 of chapter four.

parent has with the child—that is, in virtue of the fact that she is the child's parent combined with the kind of relationship the parent-child relationship is. One who endorses a social theory of the nature of obligation will admit that the nature of this relationship generates obligations, such as the obligation on the parent to love and care for the child. But the divine command theorist must claim that this obligation is a *moral* obligation only if God commands it—and, further, that it is a moral obligation *because* God commands it. This implies, first, that if God had not commanded parents to love and care for their children, then—even if everything else about the world were the same—it would not be morally obligatory for them to do so. It would be at most a good thing for them to do so and obligatory in some pre-moral sense. But this seems clearly implausible. Further, it seems doubtful that the *only* sufficient reason that parents have a moral obligation to love and care for their children is that God commands it. One would think that other facts about the parent-child relation—for example, the fact that children depend completely (at least at first) on the love and care of their parents both for their basic survival and for their emotional, physical, and psychological development—also provide sufficient reasons for parents' being morally obligated to love and care for their children. Yet the divine command theorist must deny this. She must claim that such reasons are at most reasons why it is good and obligatory in some pre-moral sense for parents to love and care for their children. She can, of course, claim that such facts constitute (at least some of) God's reasons for commanding the action. But she must insist that it is solely God's commanding the action that suffices to make it morally obligatory, which is enough to give the view an air of implausibility.

Another problem for the DCT version of the social theory of obligation is that the two parts of the theory seem to be in tension with one another at a crucial point. Adams's social theory of obligation holds that certain social relations—such as the parent-child relation—generate obligations, and he emphasizes that the Creator-creature relation is a social relation that generates obligations, as well. However, as a divine command theorist, he holds that only divine *commands* generate *moral* obligations. But this raises the question: "If relations between persons can generate obligations independent of any action of commanding, then why cannot our relation to God generate moral obligations independent of any action of commanding?" For instance, it is ridiculous to think that parents are obligated to love and care for their children only if their children command them to do so. The proponent of the social theory of obligation grants that the parent-child relation itself generates this obligation;[56] no action of commanding need be involved. Why, then, should the proponent of the social theory of obligation deny that the Creator-creature relation itself generates moral obligations, sometimes without any action of commanding involved?

The best response available to the divine command theorist is to claim that the Creator-creature relation generates obligations, in much the same way the parent-child relation does, but that these obligations are not moral obligations. The proponent of DCT may call these "religious obligations," for example, reserving the title "moral obligations" for those obligations generated by divine commands. But to prevent DCT

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[56]I am not claiming, of course, that Adams and Evans would grant that the parent-child relation itself generates the *moral* obligation to love and care for their children. Divine command theorists who endorse the social theory of obligation are willing to grant only the claim that the parent-child relation is sufficient to generate the non-moral (or 'pre-moral') obligation on the parents to love and care for their children.

from being reduced to a purely stipulatory view, the proponent who gives this answer must be able to argue that religious obligations are not moral obligations.

The prospects for such an argument, however, do not look promising. The main obstacle to establishing such a distinction is this: the criteria for distinguishing non-moral obligations from moral obligations all could apply to obligations generated by the Creator-creature relation.[57] As previously discussed, the main characteristics for moral obligations are the following: they are objective, ultimate, and universal. It is hard to see why these characteristics would not apply to many (perhaps most or even all) of the obligations generated by the Creator-creature relation.

Take, for instance, our obligation to obey God's commands. There can be little reason for the theistic proponent of the social theory of obligation—such as Adams and Evans—to doubt that our relation to God, as our omniscient, omni-benevolent, and loving creator, generates the obligation on us to obey Him. This obligation is objective: it holds regardless of anyone's or any group's beliefs, practices, or customs. Even if some one (or group) does not believe that God exists, the obligation to obey God still is binding on that person (or group) if God in fact exists. Further, the obligation is ultimate. If one has an obligation (e.g., to another person or to one's society or ruler) to do something that constitutes disobedience to God, one's obligation to obey God overrides this obligation. The obligation to obey God cannot legitimately be trumped by other, conflicting reasons or obligations. Finally, the obligation is universal: it is binding on all persons, and each

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[57]That is, all criteria that are not simply question-begging in favor of the proponent of DCT. Obviously, it will not do for the divine command theorist to point out that obligations generated by the Creator-creature relation are not moral obligations because, unlike moral obligations, they are not brought about by a divine command.

person has the obligation in virtue of the same features of his or her relationship to God (e.g., in virtue of having been created and loved by God).

On what basis, then, can the proponent of the social theory of obligation argue that the obligation to obey God is merely a religious obligation and not a moral obligation? There are many ways that "religious obligation" could be used meaningfully, but it seems likely they all involve using it either (1) as a term referring to our obligations to someone (or some group) other than God,[58] or (2) as a term referring to a subset of our moral obligations—namely, to those moral obligations that are owed to God or that otherwise involve God directly and essentially. It is difficult to see how any obligation owed to God could fail to be a moral obligation. But we need not defend this strong claim to oppose the Adams-Evans view. It is enough to defend the weaker claim that at least some obligations generated by the Creator-creature relation that involve no action of commanding are moral obligations. The obligation on us to obey God clearly seems to be an obligation of this type.

In fact, accounting for the obligation to obey God, in particular, proves to be one of the most difficult for the divine command theorist.[59] The proponent of DCT faces three options: (1) she can argue that this obligation is not a moral obligation; (2) she can argue that it is a moral obligation whose ground is the same as other moral obligations; (3) she can argue that it is a moral obligation whose ground is different from other moral

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[58]For instance, the term might be used to refer to those obligations one has to certain religious authorities.

[59]William J. Wainwright discusses this issue in *Religion and Morality* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2005), 82 ff. However, as this book was published at roughly the same time that I was drafting the present chapter, I discovered it too late for it to have influenced my ideas here. The book did influence my thinking about some of the issues discussed in chapter four, however, which was written much later.

obligations. We have just seen why (1) is problematic. Some who endorse this solution, such as Evans, focus on the question, "Why should God be obeyed?"[60] Evans argues that the question is ambiguous between "What motive do I have to obey God?" and "Why is it a good thing for me to obey God?" Evans may be right that the question is ambiguous and that there are good, albeit different, answers to each of the questions that might be intended by it. But focusing entirely on this question fails to address the set of questions most difficult for the divine command theorist: namely, "Do we have a moral obligation to obey God? And if so, what grounds it?" In numerous passages, Evans speaks of our obligation to obey God, and he claims that this obligation is grounded in the nature of God's relation to us:

> I should obey God because I should love God and be grateful to him for the good he has manifested to me in creating me and sustaining me. . . . The immediate ground of the obligation to obey God for us humans is not that we thereby seek to secure our own happiness. . . . Kierkegaard argues that our obligation to obey God is grounded in the specific relationship we have with God. . . . [O]ur duties to God are rooted in our history with God, a history that precedes any obligations created by human actions. . . . My obligations to God are rooted in the fact that the God who created me loves me and wants only my good. . . . It is the fact that God is love and that love is ultimately the foundation of all that is really valuable in human existence that makes God's commands such that they should be obeyed.[61]

Evans is careful never to speak of our *moral* obligation to obey God, because his position, like Adams's, entails that obedience to God is not *morally* obligatory—or, at least, it would not be morally obligatory if God had not commanded it. But if we reject this claim, as I have argued we should, then option (1) is unsatisfactory, regardless of

[60]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 135-9.

[61]Ibid.

whether it is consistent with satisfactory answers to such *related* questions as "What motive do I have to obey God?" and "Why is it a good thing for me to obey God?"[62]

Option (2)—the option of claiming that our obligation to obey God is a moral obligation whose ground is the same as other moral obligations—is, however, more implausible than option (1) for the proponent of DCT. The divine command theorist holds, of course, that the ground of all (other) moral obligations is a divine command. But this clearly will not work for the obligation to obey God. Although it is interesting that there are many scriptural passages (particularly in the Old Testament) in which God is recorded as commanding people to obey His commands (i.e., to "uphold His decrees" and "keep His commandments"), the divine command theorist cannot resolve the issue at hand simply by appealing to these passages. If the divine command theorist were to claim that our obligation to obey God derives entirely from His command to us to do so, she would face the following question: "Why are we obligated to obey God's command to obey His commands?" At this point, either she will give an answer in terms of yet another divine command (God commands us to obey His command to obey His commands) or she will appeal to some other, non-divine-command-based ground for this obligation. If she gives the former, she is on her way toward an infinite regress. If, on the other hand, she gives an account of our obligation to obey God's command to obey His commands that does not appeal to yet another divine command, then this account will apply equally well to the obligation to obey God's commands, in which case appealing to a divine command to ground our obligation to obey God is otiose.

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[62]Another question for which a proponent of the reductive version of DCT seems to have no satisfactory answer is this: "What is it to be morally obligated to God? That is, metaphysically speaking, *what is* a moral obligation to God?" Trying to answer this question satisfactorily will be a central aim of chapter four.

Alternatively, the problem could be put as follows. Appealing to a divine command to ground our moral obligation to obey God raises this question: "Would we be obligated to obey the commands God issues if He did not also command us to obey them?" The proponent of DCT surely wants to hold that we would. But this can be maintained only if there is some other ground for this obligation in these counterfactual worlds besides a divine command. And, presumably, whatever grounds this obligation in all the counterfactual worlds will ground it in the actual world, as well. Either way, then, appealing to a divine command to ground our moral obligation to obey God seems at best pointless and at worst fallacious.

Presumably for this reason, there are (to my knowledge) no proponents of DCT who defend the view that we have a moral obligation to obey God that derives from His commanding us to do so. This leaves the divine command theorist with option (3): arguing that we have a moral obligation to obey God whose ground is different from other moral obligations. The problem with this option, however, is that it is hard to see how the divine command theorist can hold it without abandoning divine command theory. Since a metaethical version of DCT is, at minimum, a theory that accounts for the grounds of all moral obligations, it is at best *ad hoc* and at worst an abandonment of the theory to claim that we have one moral obligation that is grounded in something other than a divine command.

As far as I can see, proponents of a metaethical version of DCT have no options other than these three. One response to this difficulty is to restrict the scope of one's divine command theory so that it becomes a normative, rather than a metaethical, theory. This may be the rationale behind Edward Wierenga's version of DCT, which Mark

Murphy correctly identifies as a normative theory.[63] I will not stop to address the normative version of DCT here. The criticisms that I will later aim at the necessity clause of DCT will apply, I think, to the normative version of DCT with only minor modifications.[64] For now, my focus is the metaethical version of DCT that Evans endorses and that he argues is to be found in Kierkegaard's writings.[65] In chapter four, I will argue for an alternative metaethical view that I think Kierkegaard's writings suggest,

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[63]Edward R. Wierenga, "A Defensible Divine Command Theory," *Nous* 17 (September, 1983): 387-407, and chapter eight of *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989). In the earlier piece, Wierenga states explicitly, "According to the theory which I am presenting, what God determines is not that the divine command theory is true, but rather what our particular obligations are. . . . [T]he general obligation to do what God commands is not, according to our theory, imposed by God" ("A Defensible Divine Command Theory," 392). This makes it clear that his version of DCT is normative rather than metaethical. Wierenga seems more hesitant to admit this openly in *The Nature of God*, but he hints at it by saying, "The fundamental task for a theory of normative ethics is to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an action's possessing these moral properties [namely, the properties *being obligatory*, *being permissible*, and *being wrong*]" (*The Nature of God*, 216)—a comment which he follows by presenting his own version of DCT. For Murphy's critique of the normative version of DCT, see his "Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 3-27.

[64]Murphy offers an interesting critique of normative DCT that I think is important and should be considered, although I do not, in the end, find it compelling. Murphy argues that the positive arguments that support a version of DCT like Wierenga's and Quinn's (that is, a version of DCT in which it is held that "the state of affairs of S's being morally obligated to Φ depends on the state of affairs of God's willing that S be morally obligated to Φ") support only a metaethical, and not a normative, divine command theory ("Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation," 10-13). I think Murphy may be right that the positive reasons used to support this kind of DCT—which Murphy calls "DCT2"—militate in favor of the metaethical version, but I am not convinced that it is unreasonable to endorse a normative version of DCT2 and reject a metaethical version because of negative reasons—i.e., because of considerations that count against a metaethical version of DCT2 but not a normative version. In other words, I think it is reasonable for theists to be led to DCT2 out of considerations of the divine attributes—especially sovereignty, freedom, and impeccability—and then to be led to retreat from a metaethical version of DCT2 and towards a normative version out of worries about how to ground the moral obligation to obey God. Nevertheless, I do think that normative versions of divine command theory are much less satisfying in that they leave unanswered one of the most difficult and important questions for a theistic ethic that supports the sufficiency clause: namely, the question of why we are obligated to obey God.

[65]It is worth noting, however, that Evans at times seems torn about whether DCT is best articulated as a normative or a metaethical theory. He writes, "One of the best treatments of divine command theories can be found in Edward Wierenga, 'A Defensible Divine Command Theory,'" and he notes also Wierenga's treatment of DCT in *The Nature of God* (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 120, footnote 6.). But, as already mentioned, Wierenga's version of DCT is a normative theory. Throughout *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, Evans characterizes DCT as a metaethical theory, and he indicates at various points that he favors Adams's reductive version of DCT (note, for example, the language and analogies used on pp. 123, 140, and 321, which Adams employs in defense of his DCT). It is thus hard to know what to make of Evans's endorsement of Wierenga's version of DCT.

and I will argue further that this view actually accords better with Adams's social theory of obligation than does Adams's own version of DCT.

Evans on Kierkegaard and DCT, Part II: The Necessity Clause

The objections discussed in the previous section are objections that apply to any view in which a metaethical version of DCT is combined with a social theory of obligation—a view endorsed, most prominently, by both Adams and Evans in the contemporary literature. This critique was formulated without any mention of Kierkegaard's ethic, in particular. In this section, I will return to the issue of whether a divine command ethic is to be found in Kierkegaard's writings. I will argue that, like Quinn, the textual evidence to which Evans appeals supports only the sufficiency clause, and not DCT as a whole. However, Evans's more thorough defense of the view offers us the opportunity to explore the issue in much more detail.

Several passages of *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* suggest that Evans believes it is obvious and even incontrovertible that Kierkegaard holds a version of DCT. He seems dismayed that Ferreira "actually goes so far as to deny that [*Works of Love*] contains a divine command account of moral obligation at all,"[66] and he later states explicitly, "When measured by my test, it seems *undeniable* to me that Kierkegaard does hold a divine command theory of obligation."[67] The "test" to which Evans refers here is simply the minimal version of DCT discussed in the first section of this chapter: namely, that divine commands are both necessary and sufficient for moral obligations and that moral obligations depend on divine commands (and not vice-versa).

[66]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 118.

[67]Ibid., 122, emphasis added.

What is the support for the claim that Kierkegaard undeniably holds such a view? Evans is more deliberate than Quinn in arguing that Kierkegaard endorses both the sufficiency clause and the necessity clause, so his answer comes in two parts. The first part of his answer, in which he argues that Kierkegaard endorses the sufficiency clause, sounds much like Quinn:

> For Kierkegaard, love for the neighbor is *commanded*, and its status as a serious moral duty depends on its being commanded. Furthermore, Kierkegaard believes that the concept of a command logically presupposes a commander with the authority to issue the command. God is the one who has this authority, and Kierkegaard does not flinch from the consequence of a divine command account of moral obligation that many people consider most offensive, which is that it implies that whatever God commands is obligatory.[68]

Immediately following this, Evans quotes the following passage from *Works of Love* to support this claim:

> But you shall love God in unconditional obedience, even if what he requires of you might seem to you to be your own harm, indeed, harmful to his cause; for God's wisdom is beyond all comparison with yours, and God's governance has no obligation of responsibility in relation to your sagacity. All you have to do is obey in love.[69]

The first part of Evans's argument, then, is that Kierkegaard endorses the sufficiency clause.[70] Although I think that additional textual evidence from Kierkegaard's writings is needed to establish this conclusion,[71] I believe—for reasons I will discuss at greater

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[68]Ibid., 123.

[69]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 20.

[70]Evans also indicates, in the aforementioned passage, that he thinks Kierkegaard endorses the asymmetrical dependency relation clause, at least in the case of our obligation to love the neighbor. This is the significance of the claim that, for Kierkegaard, neighbor love's "status as a serious moral duty *depends on* its being commanded."

[71]The view expressed in the quoted passage from *Works of Love*, by itself, does not entail a commitment to the sufficiency clause, because it is consistent with Kierkegaard's claim here that God simply reveals by His commands what is antecedently morally obligatory for us. One can read the passage as claiming that God must reveal (at least some of) our obligations to us in this way because we are unable

length later in the chapter—that Evans is right about Kierkegaard on this point. At any rate, I will not challenge further this part of his view.

Serious problems arise, however, with Evans's argument that Kierkegaard endorses the necessity clause—an argument that, as far as I can tell, is contained entirely in the following passage:

> It is not hard, I think, to show that Kierkegaard also accepts the claim that all our moral obligations are divine commands as well, and that there are no other adequate grounds for moral obligation. Kierkegaard holds that our moral duties to our fellow humans are both grounded in the command God gives us to love our neighbours as ourselves and are fulfilled by obeying this command. All our moral duties are therefore commanded by God or derived from such a command.[72]

The argument appears to be composed of a single (albeit multi-part) premise, given in the second sentence, and a conclusion, stated in the third sentence.[73] The premise claims that (all) our duties to the neighbor are grounded in the command to love the neighbor, so that, by loving the neighbor, we fulfill our (entire) obligation to the neighbor. If one obeys this divine command, then one loves the neighbor as oneself, and if one loves the neighbor as oneself, then one fulfills one's obligation to the neighbor. Evans's argument, then, put a bit more formally, seems to be the following:

(1) Kierkegaard holds that God commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves.
(2) Kierkegaard holds that if we obey God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves, we thereby will fulfill our entire obligation to our neighbors.

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to discern these obligations ourselves and that, in some cases at least, the obligations God reveals by His commands even will seem offensive to us.

[72]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 123.

[73]The first sentence of the passage is confusing, because it appears to conflict with another passage of *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*. Here Evans claims it is easy to show that, for Kierkegaard, all our moral obligations *are* divine commands. If true, this would suggest that Kierkegaard accepts a reductive/constitutive version of DCT. However, Evans claims elsewhere that Kierkegaard does not commit himself to any particular version of DCT. It seems, then, that what Evans means in this passage is that, for Kierkegaard, all our moral obligations are *grounded in* divine commands. At any rate, this sentence is not meant to express a premise, so we can safely ignore it—and any infelicities it might contain—in analyzing the argument in question.

(3) Kierkegaard holds that the entirety of our obligation to our neighbors is grounded in the command to love our neighbors as ourselves.
(4) Therefore, Kierkegaard endorses the necessity clause.

Premise (1) states an uncontroversial fact about *Works of Love*. Premise (2) says that, for Kierkegaard, obeying God's command to love the neighbor is sufficient for fulfilling our obligation to the neighbor. The implication is that the command to love the neighbor entails all the moral obligations one has to the neighbor. Premise (3) claims that Kierkegaard endorses the asymmetrical dependency relation between the divine command to love the neighbor and the moral obligation(s) that this command brings about. In other words, our obligation(s) to the neighbor depend(s) on the divine command to love the neighbor.

If I am right about this interpretation, then the argument can be restated more clearly and precisely as follows, where *p* is to be read as "God commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves":

(1) Kierkegaard holds that *p*.
(2') Kierkegaard holds that, for all *q*, if *q* expresses a moral obligation that one has to the neighbor, then *p* entails that *q*.[74]
(3') Kierkegaard holds that, for all *q*, if *q* expresses a moral obligation that one has to the neighbor, then *q because p*.
(4) Therefore, Kierkegaard endorses the necessity clause.

Again, roughly, (1) expresses a straightforward truth about *Works of Love*; (2') claims that all of one's obligations to the neighbor are entailed by the so-called royal law,[75] and (3') establishes the asymmetrical dependency relation between the royal law and the moral requirements in question.

[74]I take it that this proposition captures the feature of Evans's claim (that by obeying the command to love the neighbor we fulfill our obligation to the neighbor) that is relevant to the argument at hand.

[75]The term comes from the apostle James, who calls the command to love one's neighbor as oneself "the royal law found in Scripture" (James 2:8). I employ the term simply for the sake of brevity without implying any particular interpretation of the scriptural passage from which it is taken.

The problem with this argument, however, is that it is invalid: (4) does not follow from (1), (2'), and (3'). There are at least two distinct reasons why this is the case. First, no combination of these premises is sufficient to establish the claim that no moral obligation to the neighbor could arise in any way other than God's commanding us—a crucial aspect of the necessity clause. As discussed in section one ("Quinn on Kierkegaard and Divine Command Ethics), in order to make even a minimal version of DCT plausible, it must be strengthened to cover counterfactual claims about what we would be obligated to do in other possible worlds—for example, in worlds where God issues different commands. Each of the three parts of the minimal divine command theory (the necessity clause, the sufficiency clause, and the asymmetrical relation clause) must be modified to account for this. Even if it is true that in the actual world, all one's obligations to the neighbor are fulfilled by one's obeying God's command to love the neighbor as oneself, this is not enough to establish the claim that in every possible world, obeying God's commands is sufficient for upholding one's entire duty to the neighbor. If there is some world in which obeying God's commands is insufficient for upholding one's entire duty to the neighbor, then, in this world, there is some binding moral obligation that is not grounded in a divine command. This entails that divine commands are not logically necessary for moral obligations in this possible world, which entails that the necessity clause is false in this possible world. This, in turn, entails that the necessity clause is false in *every* world (since the necessity clause claims to express a necessary truth), which entails that DCT is false in every world, including the actual world.

In fact, however, the argument is invalid even if it were plausible to strengthen its second and third premises as follows:

(1) Kierkegaard holds that *p*.
(2'') Kierkegaard holds that, *necessarily*, for all *q*, if *q* expresses a moral obligation that one has to the neighbor, then *p* entails that *q*.
(3'') Kierkegaard holds that, *necessarily*, for all *q*, if *q* expresses a moral obligation that one has to the neighbor, then *q because p*.
(4) Therefore, Kierkegaard endorses the necessity clause.

This argument avoids the first difficulty: it implies that no obligation to the neighbor is sufficiently grounded in a source other than a divine command in any possible world. But it faces additional problems. It would be much more difficult, of course, to provide textual evidence that establishes (2'') and (3'') than it would be to provide textual evidence for (2') and (3'). But this is not the issue on which I will focus, because even if one could establish this, the argument still is invalid. The problem is that, according to (4), Kierkegaard endorses the claim that, necessarily, for all *q*, *q* expresses a moral obligation that one has (i.e., that is binding on one) only if God commands that *q* (or issues a command that entails that *q*). But what follows from (1), (2''), and (3'') is

(4') Kierkegaard holds that, necessarily, for all *q*, *q* expresses a moral obligation that one has *to the neighbor* only if God issues a command that entails that *q*.

The problem is that (4') does not entail the necessity clause, because we have, *prima facie* at least, more moral obligations than we have just to our neighbors. Since there is nothing in (1), (2'') or (3'') that addresses these obligations, (4) does not follow from these premises.

Evans claims in the aforementioned passage that it follows from the fact that God has commanded us to love the neighbor that "*all our moral duties* are therefore either commanded by God or derived from such a command."[76] In context, the command to which Evans refers here is the royal law; thus, the claim seems to be that all our moral

[76]Emphasis added. Evans also seems to use "God's command to love the neighbor" and "the moral law" interchangeably on pp. 159 and 163-4.

duties are entailed by the royal law. If this were true, it would solve the problem by collapsing the distinction between (4) and (4'). But the claim seems implausible, given that we also have at least (1) some moral obligations to God, and very likely also (2) some moral obligations to nonhuman animals, (3) some moral obligations to creation (e.g., to the environment), and (4) some moral obligations to ourselves.[77] It is hard to see how these obligations are entailed by the command to love the neighbor. At the very least, an argument is needed to establish this, and Evans offers no such argument.

In fact, if it were true that all of our moral duties followed from the duty to love the neighbor, this would be problematic for Evans, because he defends the notions of individual obligation and individual calling (*vocation*). As previously discussed, Evans claims that God issues (or at least could issue) some commands to particular individuals in order to bind them in some way that He does not bind others. However, he also claims that the duty to love the neighbor is promulgated via *general revelation* as well as special revelation, so it is binding on all persons.[78] But if the obligation to love the neighbor applies to all persons, and every moral obligation is entailed by the obligation to love the neighbor, then there are no moral obligations unique to particular individuals, and thus no

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[77]Some may argue that there is scriptural support for the claim that the command to love the neighbor entails the whole of the moral law. In Romans 13:9, Paul claims, "The commandments, 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (NIV), and in Galatians 5:14, he claims, even more explicitly, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (NIV). Further, James 2:8 identifies 'the royal law found in Scripture' as the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (NIV). However, it is crucial that Jesus does not say that the whole law depends merely on the command to love the neighbor; rather, he claims the whole law depends on the combination of this command *and* the command to love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind. Whether and how Jesus's teaching can be reconciled with the claims made by Paul and James is not an issue I will take up here. I will note only that, in order to reconcile these passages, it seems that either one must take Paul's and James's claims to be about a subsection of the moral law (i.e., the part that addresses one's obligations to the neighbor) or one must take the command to love the neighbor to entail the command to love God.

[78]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 156-79. More will be said about the notion of general revelation in the next section.

actual examples of an individual calling. This reveals a dilemma for Evans: either the command to love the neighbor entails all our moral duties or it does not. If it does, then the possibility of an individual calling is precluded. If it does not, then (4') does not entail that Kierkegaard endorses the necessity clause, in which case the divine command reading of Kierkegaard fails.

Furthermore, regardless of how the conclusion might be modified, another problem with this version of Evans's argument is that it follows from (1), (2''), and (3'') that Kierkegaard commits himself to the position that we have no moral obligations to the neighbor in any world in which God does not issue the royal law. Since (1) is only a claim about the actual world, it is consistent with the premises of the argument that there are such worlds. (And in fact, it would be bizarre to deny this, for doing so would amount to claiming that God issues the royal law necessarily—which implies that He does not issue it freely.) (3'') implies that moral obligations to the neighbor only arise in worlds in which it is true that God issues the royal law (". . . *q* [is true] *because p* [is true]"). This is implausible enough by itself, but it raises the following additional difficulty for the divine command theorist: in some of the worlds in which God does not issue the royal law, He issues other commands (such as "Do not steal from your neighbor"), and yet, such commands do not impose moral obligations in these worlds because, according to (3''), the royal law provides the grounds for all the moral obligations to the neighbor that hold in a world. If the royal law is not issued in a world, then there is no grounding available for any moral obligations to the neighbor in that world; *a fortiori*, there are no binding moral obligations to the neighbor that are grounded

in other divine commands. Obviously, this consequence is unacceptable for a divine command theorist.

In short, trying to deduce DCT from the command to love the neighbor is dubious at best. Even if one plausibly can deduce the sufficiency clause from it,[79] one can deduce the necessity clause from the command to love the neighbor only by first establishing *both* that, necessarily, the command to love the neighbor is necessary for the obligation to love the neighbor *and* that, necessarily, the obligation to love the neighbor entails the whole of the moral law. Both of these claims are contentious: it remains an open question whether the obligation to love the neighbor *must* arise from a divine command, and it seems clear that the obligation to love the neighbor does *not* entail the whole of the moral law. In addition, in order to construct such an argument, one would need to add some premise that ensures that moral obligations to the neighbor can exist in worlds in which God does not issue the royal law; but it is hard to see what plausible premise(s) could be added that would accomplish this.

As far as I can tell, then, the only way to construct valid arguments that begin with claims for which there is strong textual evidence (e.g., that Kierkegaard thinks love for the neighbor is morally obligatory because it is commanded by God) and that end with the thesis Quinn and Evans defend (that Kierkegaard endorses a minimal divine command theory) is by adding further, highly contentious premises.[80] The burden of

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[79]And, as mentioned in section one ("Quinn on Kierkegaard and Divine Command Ethics"), there is reason to doubt even this.

[80]The closest argument in the vicinity that I can see that would validly establish that Kierkegaard endorses a version of DCT is the following (footnote continues on next page):

(5) Kierkegaard holds that, necessarily, love for the neighbor is morally obligatory because it is commanded by God.

(6) Kierkegaard holds that, necessarily, we are morally obligated to love the neighbor if God commands it.

proof is on Quinn and Evans either to provide arguments for these premises or to construct alternative arguments for their reading of Kierkegaard that do not employ such premises. In the absence of such arguments, I see no reason to accept the claim that Kierkegaard either endorses or even commits himself to a minimal divine command theory of moral obligation.

A final point is worth noting. Despite the passage discussed earlier, Evans indicates at one point in the conclusion of *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* that he thinks the command to love the neighbor extends only to interpersonal moral obligations, but that Kierkegaard's argument can be expanded to account for our other moral obligations. He claims that "it would be relatively easy to develop [Kierkegaard's] account of moral obligations towards humans into a broader account that recognizes moral obligations to other animals and to the natural world generally."[81] This view seems much more plausible than the view (which seems to be expressed earlier in the book) that all our moral obligations can be derived from the royal law. Nevertheless, adopting this view would not resolve the problems for the divine command reading of Kierkegaard. First, even if we accept that our obligation to the neighbor is grounded in a divine command, there is no reason to assume that these other moral obligations likewise are grounded in

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(7) Kierkegaard holds that, necessarily, we are morally obligated to love the neighbor only if God commands it.
(8) Kierkegaard holds that, necessarily, the command to love the neighbor entails all the moral obligations we have.
(9) Therefore, Kierkegaard endorses a version of DCT.

Unfortunately, every one of the premises that drives this argument is highly contentious. And several of the premises, if they *were* true, would imply that Kierkegaard endorses a view that is quite implausible. The premises that *are* plausible—namely, (10) Kierkegaard holds that love for the neighbor is both morally obligatory and commanded by God and (11) Kierkegaard holds that love for the neighbor is morally obligatory because it is commanded by God—are both entailed by the premises of the above argument, but they cannot be substituted into the argument for any of its other premises without undermining the argument's validity.

[81]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 300-1.

divine commands. The two issues are at least logically independent, and if our moral obligations to the rest of creation are grounded in something other than divine commands, then the necessity clause is not met, and DCT is false. Second, the fact that Kierkegaard's account of moral obligation can be *expanded into* a divine command theory does not provide evidence that Kierkegaard endorses a divine command theory. In fact, it suggests the opposite: if a view has to be expanded in order to be made into a divine command theory, then presumably it is not a divine command theory prior to such modification. And finally, even if we can manage to account for our moral obligations to the rest of creation—including animals, the environment, and even ourselves (assuming we have such obligations)—this still does not account for our obligations to God. As we already have discussed, at least some of our moral obligations to God are such that grounding them in divine commands fails, so even if the "expansion" strategy works for the rest of our moral obligations, it will not work for these.

Positive Evidence Against the Divine Command Reading of Kierkegaard

So far, the evidence against the divine command reading of Kierkegaard has been "negative" evidence: the emphasis has been on the lack of textual evidence in Kierkegaard's writings sufficient to establish that he endorses the necessity clause. In this section, I will look at some positive evidence: that is, textual evidence that Kierkegaard rejects the necessity clause. Any such evidence will count, of course, as evidence against the divine command reading of Kierkegaard.

What would count as positive evidence that Kierkegaard rejects the necessity clause? If the necessity clause is true, then there are no grounds that are possibly sufficient for moral obligations other than divine commands. Thus, any passage in

Kierkegaard's signed writings that indicates we have an obligation that is sufficiently grounded in something other than a divine command will count as evidence that he thinks the necessity clause is false. In this section, I will argue that a difficulty for the divine command interpretation of Kierkegaard is posed by those passages in his writings that suggest the ultimate basis of moral obligation lies not in God's commands, but rather in the nature of creation—or "the structure of the created world," as Ferreira puts it[82]—and in God's relationship to it.

If some moral obligations are sufficiently grounded in features of creation, one could have an obligation to *p* prior to, or in the absence of, God's issuing a command to *p*—a view that clearly is incompatible with DCT. More precisely, if some moral obligations are sufficiently grounded in features of creation, one could have an obligation to do or will *p* (or to refrain from doing or willing *p*) prior to, or in the absence of, God's issuing a command that *entails* doing or willing *p* (or that entails refraining from doing or willing *p*). What we need to decide, then, is whether there are any passages in Kierkegaard's signed writings that suggest such a view.

I think there are at least two themes developed in *Works of Love* that suggest that at least some of our moral obligations—and perhaps *all* of our moral obligations—are sufficiently grounded in features of creation. More specifically, these passages suggest that some (or all) moral obligations are grounded in (1) our being created from nothing by God, and in (2) the neighbor's being a fellow—and equal—creation of God who bears His image. Kierkegaard suggests that (1) provides the grounds for our moral obligations

[82]Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 41.

to God and that (2) provides the grounds for (at least many of) our moral obligations to the neighbor. I will address each of these in turn.

In the discourse, "Love Is the Fulfilling of the Law," Kierkegaard writes that

> . . . every human being, not by birth but by creation from nothing, belongs as a bond servant [to God]. . . . [H]e belongs to God in every thought, the most hidden; in every feeling, the most secret; in every movement, the most inward.[83]

This passage supports (1), the claim that our moral obligations to God depend ultimately on the fact that we belong to God as His creations. The theme of "creation from nothing" (*Skabelsen af Intet*) is a recurring one in Kierkegaard's writings and plays an important role in his thought.[84] The idea in this passage is that we owe our very existence—both the origin of our existence and our continued existence through time—to God's creative work, and because of this fact, we owe everything to Him; each one of us is God's "bond servant" [*Livegen*].[85]

I will save discussion of the implications of this idea for the next chapter. For now, I simply will note in passing that the idea that our moral obligations to God most fundamentally are grounded in the nature of our relationship to Him, rather than in divine commands, suggests promising answers to at least one set of questions on which DCT

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[83]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 115.

[84]According to John W. Elrod, "Niels Thulstrup has remarked that the doctrine of creation is the central motif in all Kierkegaard's works. According to Thulstrup, the Kierkegaardian version of the doctrine includes both the concepts of divine omnipotence and human freedom and a stress upon the moral nature of human life" ("Human Subjectivity and Divine Creativity in Kierkegaard's Thought," 47). Unfortunately, Elrod does not provide references to support this claim.

[85]The term also can be translated "serf." Kierkegaard's point in the passage from which the above quotation is taken is that, while the abominable practice of human serfdom has been abolished—thankfully—the present age wishes also to abolish each person's "bondservice in relation to God" [*Livegenskab i Forhold til Gud*], which is thoroughly wrongheaded. No person properly belongs to another person, but each of us *does* belong quite properly to God. It is important, however, that the metaphor used here is serfdom [*Livengenskabet*] and not slavery [*Slaveri*]. The former—in theory if not in practice—connotes a system in which the indebted ones are recognized as retaining intrinsic worth as persons.

seems bound to stumble: namely, those questions surrounding the issue of our moral obligation to obey God. If the Creator-creature relationship itself gives rise to moral obligations, then the obligation on the creature to obey her Creator may well be one such moral obligation—in which case, obedience to God can be grounded as a moral obligation without infinite regress. Again, this claim is only meant to be suggestive at this point; a fuller treatment of the issue will be saved for chapter four. For now, I will focus more on the second piece of positive evidence against the divine command reading of Kierkegaard.

Support for (2), the claim that our moral obligation to the neighbor derives from the neighbor's being a fellow and equal creation of God, is found in passages such as the following:

> The neighbor is one who is equal. . . . [W]ith your neighbor you have the equality of a human being before God. . . . The neighbor is every person, since on the basis of dissimilarity he is not your neighbor nor on the basis of similarity to you in your dissimilarity from other people. He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, but unconditionally every person has this equality and has it unconditionally.[86]

This passage suggests that one's obligation to love the neighbor is grounded in the neighbor's equality with oneself before God. It is this status of equality before God that makes the other one's neighbor, and it is in virtue of being one's neighbor that the other is owed one's love. The neighbor is *the kind of being* to whom one's love is owed.

The neighbor's equality before God is based, in large part, on the essential characteristics possessed by all persons. This is a theme to which our discussion in this chapter already has alluded. Both Quinn and Evans stress the importance of the fact that the neighbor is one who bears the image of God. There is good reason to think that, for

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[86]Ibid., 60.

Kierkegaard, this is what makes human persons worthy of love beyond the general feature that all are God's creations. He claims that ". . . in each individual there continually glimmers that essential other, which is common to all, *the eternal resemblance, the likeness*" [*det evigt Lignende, Ligningen*].[87] He speaks of the neighbor as "the common watermark" [*det fælles Mærke*] and as "eternity's mark—on every human being."[88] The image of God is the "inner glory" that each person possesses.[89] Further, Kierkegaard speaks at several points of the love that is present "in the ground" [*i Grunden*] of the neighbor.[90] This love is an essential feature of persons, present in the foundation of human nature, even though, for many, it is manifested at most dimly due to human sinfulness. Each of these expressions—the eternal likeness, the common watermark, the inner glory, the love that is present in the ground of the neighbor—reasonably can be taken as references to the image of God in each person.

This suggests that, for Kierkegaard, human persons are owed love by their neighbors in virtue of their being essential bearers of the *imago Dei*. That is, each of us has a moral obligation to show love towards one another because, if for no other reason, each person possesses intrinsic worth as a bearer of the divine image; each person's essential nature is such that to behave unlovingingly toward such a being is to incur moral guilt. The very nature of persons demands that they be treated with respect and agape love. Thus, the obligation to love the neighbor is present prior to, and in the absence of, a divine command to do so. But this fact—if it indeed is a fact—directly

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[87]Ibid., 88, emphasis added.

[88]Ibid., 89.

[89]See Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 88-9, for his use of this term.

[90] Ibid., 216 ff.

undermines the necessity clause. A divine command to love the neighbor may well be needed for some purpose (e.g., to help fallen creatures know that they have this obligation), but it is not needed to make neighbor love morally obligatory.

There seem to be hints of this in both Quinn's and Evans's writings, and in each case, an internal tension arises in their respective positions. Quinn emphasizes the need for a divine command to give us back-up motivation to love the neighbor when doing so runs counter to our natural inclinations, but he claims that "the image of God, who is perfectly good, is presumably a mark that renders all who bear it lovable."[91] He goes on to discuss the image of God as that which makes the neighbor "worthy of love."[92] But to be worthy of love is to be owed love, and for one to be owed love is, in this context, for it to be morally obligatory for others to love one. This suggests that the divine command to love the neighbor serves a *merely* motivational and/or epistemic role—it gives us a motivating reason to love the neighbor when we otherwise are unwilling/unable to see in the neighbor that which actually grounds the obligation to love her: namely, the image of God that she bears.[93]

Evans also emphasizes the importance of the neighbor's bearing the image of God and the relevance it has to the issue of our duty to love the neighbor. He claims, "To love the neighbor is to love him or her *because* he or she is created by God in God's own

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[91]Quinn, "The Divine Command Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," 40.

[92]Ibid. A parallel discussion is found in Quinn, "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics," 364-8.

[93]Alternatively, one might hold that, with God's issuing of the moral law, there are two logically independent and individually sufficient sources of the moral obligation to love the neighbor. Whether such overdetermination would be problematic is not an issue I will address here. For now, it is enough to note that if this view is right, then DCT is false.

image."[94] Like Quinn, Evans focuses on the motivational aspect: when we discern the image of God in the other, we are motivated to love the neighbor as we ought. But, again like Quinn, he does not seem to recognize the potential tension that an emphasis on the image of God in the neighbor places on DCT. Loving the neighbor because she bears the image of God may be compatible with loving the neighbor because God commands one to do so, if the "because" is understood in a motivational sense.[95] But it is not obviously consistent to claim that the *source* of the obligation to love the neighbor is *both* God's command to love the neighbor *and* the neighbor's nature as bearer of the *imago Dei*. The latter grounds our moral obligation in features of the divine creation, the former in divine imperatives. Of course, it might be that God commands us to love the neighbor *because* the neighbor bears His image. But even if this is true, it remains an open question whether God commands us to love the neighbor because it is obligatory or whether it is obligatory because God commands it—and emphasizing the intrinsic worth the neighbor possesses in virtue of bearing the divine image tends to suggest the former.

The pressure that the theme of the *imago Dei* places on DCT pushes Evans, in the end, to add a modification to his view that strains its ability to bear the label of a divine command theory. Evans sides with the tradition that identifies God's commands, as opposed to God's will, as the ground of all moral obligations.[96] His primary reason for

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[94]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 145, emphasis added.

[95]See Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 144-6 on this issue.

[96]On this debate, see Adams, "Divine Command Ethics Modified Again," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 128-43, "The Concept of a Divine Command," in *Morality and Divine Commands*, ed. Paul Helm (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 59-80, "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," and *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 258-70; Murphy, "Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation"; and Quinn, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," and "Divine Command Theory."

this seems to be his belief that "For a law to be valid, it must not only stem from the relevant authority, but must publicly be made known by that authority."[97] This leads him to raise a critique of Kierkegaard's view and to suggest a modification of it. Kierkegaard claims that the royal law was unknown in paganism, thereby implying that the command to love the neighbor first was issued by a special revelation to those within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Evans, arguing that this claim is both historically dubious and philosophically problematic, attempts to mitigate Kierkegaard's position.

> In the end, I do not think the uniqueness claim, at least in its stronger forms, is important for Kierkegaard. . . . In fact, if Kierkegaard did wish to maintain that the moral law could be known only through a special historical revelation, this would create grave problems for him, and it is hard to see how such a view could be reconciled with his claim that God has placed love 'within the ground' of every human person.[98]

Thus, Evans attempts to modify Kierkegaard's position to make it more consistent with Kierkegaard's own implicit references to the image of God in the neighbor. He thinks that Kierkegaard himself indicates that knowledge of the royal law must be universal:

> . . . The knowledge of the love that God commands us to have is, says Kierkegaard, a knowledge that everyone can have and should have . . . . This is a knowledge that is rooted, not in special revelation, but in creation, for Kierkegaard affirms that within every human being God has placed love 'in the ground' of the self.[99]

But what kind of moral knowledge is rooted in creation, available for all persons to discern? Evans's answer is that it is knowledge of a divine command that God promulgates through *general revelation*. He distinguishes special and general revelation as follows:

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[97]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 156. This view echoes Adams's response to Murphy in *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 261-2.

[98]Ibid., 159-60.

[99]Ibid., 161.

> Very roughly, general revelation is the knowledge of God that God makes possible though observation of the natural world or through reflection on human experiences that are universal or commonly accessible. Special revelation is knowledge of God made possible by specific communications from God or specific historical events.[100]

In the passages that follow, it becomes clear that when Evans speaks of special and general revelation's making "knowledge of God" possible, he does not mean simply knowledge of God's existence (knowledge *that* God is) and nature (knowledge *of who* God is), but rather (or perhaps also) knowledge of God's commands. Evans uses this distinction between special and general revelation to argue that "[t]here is no principled reason why Kierkegaard should not admit that God's command to love the neighbour is promulgated through general revelation"[101] and that, in fact, Kierkegaard needs to do so in order to make his view consistent. Thus amended, Evans's modified Kierkegaardian version of DCT implies that all persons are subject to the moral requirement to love the neighbor, regardless of whether they have knowledge of the teachings of Scripture.

It seems to me a move in the right direction to claim that we can know some of our obligations "though observation of the natural world or through reflection on human experiences that are universal or commonly accessible," and that the obligation to love the neighbor is one such obligation. Allowing such moral knowledge makes it easy to account for moral requirements that are universal, in the sense of binding on all human persons. But two questions need to be raised at this point: First, is it necessary to modify Kierkegaard's position to account for this? And second, is Evans's suggested modification successful? I will address these questions in order.

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[100]Ibid., 156.

[101]Ibid., 159.

It is hard to believe that Kierkegaard simply overlooked the problem that Evans discusses. Surely Kierkegaard perceived the tension between (1) claiming that every person, as a bearer of the divine image, is a being to whom love is owed and (2) claiming that the obligation to love the neighbor goes into effect only after the royal law is revealed by special revelation and that it is binding only to those who hear the revelation. Evans typically is a very sympathetic reader of Kierkegaard, but in this case, I think the most charitable reading of Kierkegaard counts against the divine command interpretation. There is no need to claim that Kierkegaard contradicts himself so long as the divine command to love the neighbor is not held to be the only sufficient ground of the moral obligation to love the neighbor. If it is ultimately the neighbor's essential qualities that ground the moral obligation to love the neighbor (especially the quality of bearing the divine image, or—what seems to amount to the same thing—having the eternal, or love, as one's ground), then it is consistent to claim both that there is a universal obligation to love the neighbor and that this obligation was unknown in paganism. For Kierkegaard, human moral knowledge has been greatly impaired and moral motivation greatly corrupted by original sin, and thus divine revelations often are necessary to make known to us our obligations and to motivate us to uphold them. This is sufficient to account for Kierkegaard's claim that the royal law was unknown in paganism, and it is at least *prima facie* a plausible view (given broadly orthodox Christian theological assumptions). Thus, if we reject the divine command reading of Kierkegaard, we are not forced to "correct" his position. On the plausible assumptions that, first, the best reading of Kierkegaard is the most charitable one, and, second, the most charitable reading is the one on which the greatest proportion of his claims are plausible or defensible, this consideration gives us

another reason to reject the divine command reading of Kierkegaard in favor of some other interpretation.

But even if Evans is right that Kierkegaard needs correcting on this point, we should ask whether Evans's proposed modification is successful within the constraints of his broader project of defending a version of DCT. The question it raises is this: Why think that moral knowledge acquired through observation of the natural world or reflection on universal human experience is knowledge of divine *commands*? The inclusion of general revelation of the form Evans describes is a move toward natural law theory, a view not typically thought to be compatible with DCT. Of course, one reasonably could challenge the assumption that DCT and natural law theory are incompatible. But in the absence of an *argument* to this effect, the adoption of general revelation of the kind Evans describes stretches the notion of a command to the point that it leads one to wonder how appropriate the label of "divine command theory" really is for Evans's view.[102]

Furthermore, this modification raises a host of questions about Evans's position that he does not address in the book, such as the following: How do we discern divine commands that are manifested in the natural world? Has God equipped us with a faculty by which we discern them? Is the faculty reason, or something else? (If it is reason, we again are moving closer to natural law theory.) Evans indicates at one point that such

[102]Evans's version of general revelation may well be compatible with a divine command theory *of a specific kind*: for example, Adams's reductive version. Evans could argue that his DCT is a theory about what a moral obligation *is*. This might help to open up avenues for defense of the claim that moral knowledge acquired through observation of creation, etc., simply *is* knowledge of divine commands. However, if this is the case, Evans needs to make this explicit. He claims that the divine command ethic found in Kierkegaard's writings is neutral between the reductive, causal, and supervenience versions discussed in the contemporary literature on DCT, which, given the overall project of the book, leads the reader to assume that the version of DCT Evans himself intends to defend is neutral in the same way.

knowledge is acquired through conscience: "Every human being can come to know God, and every human being can come to know the obligation to love, because every human being has a conscience."[103] But what is conscience? Is it a faculty? And if so, is it the same faculty by which we discern personal convictions (commands issued only to oneself by God) and an individual calling? Would this not collapse any essential distinction between special and general revelation, making the difference between the two a quantitative one (a matter of *to how many* the command is issued) rather than a qualitative one? In the end, Evans's inclusion of the concept of general revelation raises more questions than it answers.[104]

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[103]Ibid., 162.

[104]It threatens to create other problems for his view, as well. Towards the end of the book, Evans appeals to the notion of general revelation again in his discussion of Abraham and Isaac. He claims that since "Abraham [was] not in the same epistemic situation as contemporary Christians and Jews," and given the cultural milieu in which Abraham lived—a culture in which child sacrifice commonly was practiced and the Mosaic Law forbidding it was not yet in existence—it is, Evans thinks, "not obvious at all that Abraham could have known through general revelation that child sacrifice was wrong. So far as we can tell Abraham would have had no good reason to think that God would not ask him to perform such an act" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 311). Evans here takes a view that is at least potentially problematic for his own position in two different ways. First, in claiming that Abraham could not be expected to know the prohibition on child sacrifice given his cultural milieu, Evans seems to align too closely the concepts of *general revelation* and *social norms*: he suggests that it is largely through a knowledge of the latter that one comes to know the former. This is why, given Abraham's cultural milieu, he could not be expected to discern a general revelation prohibiting child sacrifice. But it seems that aligning general revelation with social norms in this way is exactly what a divine command theorist should *not* do, as it undermines one of the most important advantages of DCT. Evans himself states explicitly that the possibility that divine commands might conflict with conventional morality must be preserved (314). Yet, if divine commands can be promulgated through general revelation, then the proponent of *Sittlichkeit* always can claim that the prevailing social norms are divine commands, promulgated via general revelation and discerned through reason (or some other natural faculty). This fact highlights the difficulty for one who wishes to insist both (1) that divine commands can be promulgated through general revelation and (2) that divine commands can conflict with social norms. On the other hand, given that Evans points out earlier in the book that Abraham's highest *social* obligation is to his family—that is, to protect Isaac—one wonders why Abraham could not be expected to discern the general revelation against sacrificing the innocent—especially child sacrifice. Is this not a paradigm case of a command that ought to be discernable from the nature of creation: that the parent should protect and not intentionally harm the child? If any moral requirement is available through a knowledge of general revelation, surely the prohibition on child sacrifice is. It seems, then, that Evans's inclusion of general revelation into his divine command theory tends to pull him in opposite directions and raise a host of questions for his broader project. In the final part of chapter four, I will return to Evans's treatment of Abraham in order to discuss at greater length a related set of problems that it raises.

The comments in this section primarily are meant to be suggestive. In the next chapter, I will argue at length for a fuller interpretation of the aforementioned passages in *Works of Love* and attempt to develop the promising account of moral obligation that I think they suggest. For now, I wish only to highlight these passages as possible, positive textual evidence that Kierkegaard rejects the necessity clause and thus neither endorses nor commits himself to a minimal divine command theory. At the very least, the theme of the *imago Dei* in Kierkegaard's ethic is one that creates trouble for those who endorse the divine command reading, as it suggests that the basis of our moral obligation to the neighbor lies deeper than the divine command. It is present "in the ground" of the neighbor, in the essential features of the neighbor as God has created her. Some degree of moral obligation to one bearing the image of God is present *prior to* God's issuing the command, even though, in our fallen state, we often have failed to recognize this. The ones with whom we stand equally "before God," the ones who possess love in the ground of their being, the ones who bear the very image of God—to all such beings love is owed; to all such beings expressions of agape love are morally obligatory.

Genuine Affinities between the Kierkegaardian Ethic and DCT

Thus far in this chapter, I have offered a sustained critique of the divine command reading of Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation. In this section, I wish to review what the divine command reading of Kierkegaard gets right. There is substantial overlap between Kierkegaard's ethic and DCT, and it is this overlap, I believe, that leads Quinn and Evans to argue that some version of divine command theory is found in *Works of Love*. Though I have argued that, in the end, the Kierkegaardian view falls short of even a minimal, metaethical divine command theory, Quinn and Evans rightly identify several

characteristics that it has in common with DCT.[105] By emphasizing what the divine command reading of Kierkegaard gets right, I wish to make it clear what *minimal* characteristics any plausible interpretation of Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation must include. Each of these features of Kierkegaard's view has been mentioned in the discussion up to this point. In this section, I wish to assemble them together, to explore each in more detail, and to highlight their interconnections.

The Sufficiency Clause

The feature of Kierkegaard's ethic to which much of Quinn's and Evans's discussions lend support is this: that it endorses the sufficiency clause. This is no minor feature of Kierkegaard's view, and its endorsement by Kierkegaard accounts for the temptation many readers feel to ascribe to him a divine command theory of moral obligation. The sufficiency clause is the feature of DCT that has attracted the most attention by its critics. It is the feature that gives rise to such worrisome questions as, "If God commanded us to practice torturing children for fun, would it be obligatory for us to do so?" A substantial portion of the defense of DCT in the contemporary literature is comprised of attempts to address such worries. If one is able to answer these objections successfully, one thereby takes a big step towards reinstating DCT as a viable metaethical

[105]In my opinion, Quinn and Evans are, in general, very reliable guides to understanding the *content* of Kierkegaard's ethic. Evans, in particular, offers in *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* a rigorous, nuanced, and, by my lights, almost entirely accurate account of the inner workings and details of Kierkegaard's mature ethical view. This gives rise to the ironic situation that I find myself agreeing with most all of the book, but disagreeing with one of its main theses: that a divine command ethic is advocated in *Works of Love.* My critique, then, is directed not at the exposition that these commentators offer of the content of the ethic found in Kierkegaard's writings, but rather at their assessment of what this ethic adds up to.

alternative.[106] It typically is taken to be an advantage of rival theistic views (such as theistic versions of Kantianism) that they are able to avoid such objections altogether. DCT is arguably the only major, theistic, metaethical alternative that openly embraces the sufficiency clause (even though, as we will see, other, incompatible theistic views that include it are possible). This is the reason, I think, that some readers of *Works of Love*, upon identifying an endorsement of the sufficiency clause in it, conclude that Kierkegaard must advocate some version of DCT.

Evidence that Kierkegaard endorses the sufficiency clause is present as early as *Fear and Trembling*. Although this text, as we discussed in chapter one, is not the place to look for Kierkegaard's own view of moral obligation, it does suggest some strong reasons why theists—especially those within the Judeo-Christian tradition—should endorse the sufficiency clause. A major theme of *Fear and Trembling* is that God can impose unique obligations on particular individuals—even to the point of commanding them to act in ways that run counter to deeply ingrained social norms. *Fear and Trembling* can be read as a sustained argument for why one who accepts Abraham as the "father of faith" has a *prima facie* reason to think that God can call out individuals to act in ways that are not universalizable (i.e., are not required of everyone) and thus are not communicable (i.e., cannot be defended objectively or made intelligible to an outside party). The text poses a challenge to those who would try to derive religion (one's relation to God) from ethics (one's relation to society), suggesting instead that—for Christians, at least—ethics must be derived from religion. A crucial feature of an ethic

[106]For this reason, much of the early work on DCT in the seventies and eighties focused on defending the view against objections. Quinn's *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) is perhaps the most notable example.

based on an "absolute commitment to the absolute"—that is, an absolute commitment to God—is that it takes divine imperatives to be adequate to provide an overriding reason to perform some action. In other words, it takes divine commands to be sufficient to impose moral obligations.

We already have examined textual evidence from *Works of Love* that supports the claim that Kierkegaard himself endorses the sufficiency clause. I will not review these passages, except to note that the theme of "unconditional obedience" that appears in them is one that we find repeated elsewhere in Kierkegaard's signed writings—a point that will prove to be of some significance in our discussion in chapter four. The language of unconditional obedience to God strongly suggests Kierkegaard's commitment to the sufficiency clause—and thus to an important *part* of DCT—and any plausible interpretation of Kierkegaard's view must account for this commitment.

The Possibility of Individual Obligation and Individual Calling (Vocation)

By endorsing the sufficiency clause, Kierkegaard opens up the possibility of both personal conviction—an obligation that God imposes only on some individual or group that is not binding on others—and a personal calling, or vocation. His treatment of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* clearly suggests that he believes in the former, and Evans argues convincingly that Kierkegaard endorses the latter, as well, in *Works of Love*.[107] Personal conviction and vocation are two of the most important "benefits" of a divine command theory, and the fact that Kierkegaard helps himself to them provides further evidence of the strong affinity between his ethic and DCT.

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[107]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 170-9.

On Evans's reading, the notion of an individual calling is at the very center of Kierkegaard's ethic. What we are commanded to do, most fundamentally, is to love, and it is by loving that we become what God intends us to be—i.e., that we actualize our full potential, that we "become ourselves." We are commanded to love both God and the neighbor, but in the end, these are inextricably intertwined in Kierkegaard's middle-term thesis. Loving the neighbor turns out to be identical to helping the neighbor love God. Thus, the task God has laid upon each of us is to become ourselves, by loving God and our neighbors, and to help our neighbors become themselves, by helping them to love God, which, in turn, requires them to love *their* neighbors.[108] But, while the task of loving God and the neighbor is universal, the content of this task is highly specific—determined, in large part, by each person's individual calling. I must become the person God intends *me* to be, but my duty to my neighbor is to help her become the person God intends *her* to be. As Evans puts it,

> In one sense the command is the same for everyone: to love the neighbour as oneself. . . . However, the particular character of the self each of us is commanded to become individualizes the command. This gives rise to the 'individual call' of the person, which is part of the 'universally human' in the sense that every person has such a call but [*sic*] cannot be captured in its material content by universal rules.[109]

[108]This discussion suggests both a difficulty for Evans's view and a possible response that he could give to an objection I raised in section three ("Evans on Kierkegaard and DCT, Part I: The Social Theory of Obligation"). First, it highlights the difficulty, for Evans in particular, of making an essential distinction between moral and religious obligations. On Evans's view, we are commanded—and thus morally obligated—to become ourselves. But Kierkegaard's middle-term thesis implies that becoming oneself amounts, in the end, to loving God. Thus, we are morally obligated to love God. But it is plausible (and arguably a biblical principle) that obeying God is a necessary condition for loving God. Given the standard deontic theorem that *if p is obligatory and p only if q, then q is obligatory*, it follows that we are morally obligated to obey God. In short, given Kierkegaard's middle-term thesis, obedience to God cannot be merely a religious obligation. On the other hand, Evans might be able to use this same implication of the middle-term thesis—namely, the interconnection of the obligation to love the neighbor and the obligation to love God—as the basis of a response to my objection in section three that the whole of the moral law cannot be derived from the command to love the neighbor.

[109]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 172.

Since each of my neighbors' abilities, circumstances, personality traits, gifts, etc. are likely different from my own, and different from each other's, my task to help a neighbor in concrete ways to become herself will, in each case, be different. Thus Evans concludes,

> It is not only our own distinctiveness that shapes our duties. Our duty to love others must express itself in helping them to become themselves. We must therefore pay close attention to the distinctiveness of each individual and try to block our natural human tendency to want others to be like ourselves.[110]

A personal vocation has the added benefit of making an otherwise overwhelmingly abstract and general obligation to will the good into a task that is manageable for finite, limited creatures. Adams recognizes this theme in Kierkegaard's writings—specifically, in the discussion of possibility and actuality in *The Sickness Unto Death*—and he concurs:

> In real ethical reflection and choice about one's life, one can hardly escape taking *actuality* as a guide to some extent. Possibility, even the possibility of good, is so vast and illimitable that we will be hopelessly adrift if we do not in some way accept actuality as defining in part who we are to be and what we are to do; we may hope we can accept it gratefully. The concept of vocation is strongly connected with actuality. As an offer or assignment of a role that is specially one's own, vocation is a call to be, among other things, oneself, and therefore to value something that is actual in oneself as object of the divine love.[111]

Adams agrees with Evans that the Kierkegaardian theme of becoming oneself is tied essentially to the concept of vocation: "Kierkegaard sees the vocation first and foremost as a vocation to be a certain kind of person—and, in the closest connection with that, to pursue certain projects which, in his view, are partially constitutive of

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[110]Ibid., 178.

[111]Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 305.

selfhood."[112] This insight highlights a shortcoming of the virtue reading of Kierkegaard according to which becoming oneself is *simply* a matter of acquiring virtuous character. There is a difference between becoming *a* self and becoming *oneself*. Ethical existence of the kind demonstrated by Judge William is one path by which one might try to become a self, but, for Kierkegaard, one only becomes oneself—the particular, unique self that God intends one to be—by "receiving oneself" from God through a continual repetition of one's "absolute commitment to the absolute," manifested concretely by one's unconditional obedience to God's will. Since God's will for each of us is, in part, highly particularized, the task of becoming oneself is highly particularized, as well—a point that is obscured by the virtue reading of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's divine command interpreters have tended to perceive this crucial aspect of his ethic most clearly.

The Weak Dependency Thesis

The weak dependency thesis, as mentioned earlier, is the thesis that divine assistance—including divine commands and grace—are necessary for us, in many if not all cases, to come to know our moral obligations and to uphold them. I have argued that Quinn, at times, seems to conflate this thesis with DCT. But for the present discussion, what is important to note is that Kierkegaard's endorsement of the weak dependency thesis marks a substantial overlap with DCT, even though it does not entail it. Although it is consistent with the weak dependency thesis that divine commands are metaphysically independent from moral obligations, it nevertheless assigns divine commands central epistemic and/or motivational roles.

[112]Ibid., 311.

There are several reasons why, in many cases, divine commands may be required for us to be able to know our antecedently-existing moral obligations. One pertains to moral development: it is plausible that some kind of moral instruction, upbringing, and personal moral development is required for one to acquire the ability to perceive the duties that are binding on oneself. In order to achieve a state in which one can recognize fine-grained or particularized obligations, it may be necessary that one first is taught, by divine commands, more general moral maxims. The same may hold true of societies as a whole: it might be that social norms initially must be shaped by divinely-revealed moral truths before highly sophisticated and nuanced moral practices and institutions can take root. Another reason divine commands may be required for us to come to know our moral obligations—a reason sometimes emphasized by those in the Reformed tradition—is that humans are fallen, and in our fallen state, we have lost our initial (pre-fallen) ability to discern basic moral truths for ourselves.[113]

A number of passages in Kierkegaard's writings suggest the weak dependency thesis in this form. First, Kierkegaard thinks it is possible that what is in fact our moral obligation sometimes will surprise, shock, or even offend us. As we already have seen, he writes in *Works of Love*,

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[113]This is a controversial view, however, even among orthodox Christians. On one reading of the Genesis account of the Fall, Adam and Eve first acquired the ability to discern good and evil when they disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. Thus, moral knowledge is one *consequence* of the Fall, rather than something corrupted by it. (On this reading, the serpent does not lie when it tells Eve, "'. . . God knows that when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen. 3:5, NIV), for when Adam and Eve eat the fruit, it is said that "Then the eyes of both of them were opened. . ." (Gen. 3:7, NIV). And later, God seems to confirm this: "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil'" (Gen. 3:22, NIV). Those who endorse this reading will point out that the knowledge Adam and Eve gained by eating the fruit cannot be simply the *experiential* knowledge of evil (knowing *what it is like* to sin), because God declares that they have "become *like one of us*, knowing good and evil," and God's knowledge of evil is not experiential knowledge.

> But you shall love God in unconditional obedience, even if what he requires of you might seem to you to be your own harm, indeed, harmful to his cause; for God's wisdom is beyond all comparison with yours, and God's governance has no obligation of responsibility in relation to your sagacity.[114]

The theme that God's ways and understanding are higher than man's is something of a leitmotif in Kierkegaard's writings, and he clearly thinks the principle applies to the moral realm. Part of the chasm between God's understanding and our own is accounted for by divine transcendence and human limitation. But Kierkegaard suggests that much of it derives from original sin, as well. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus explores the possibility that humankind is in a state in which, because of the noetic effects of sin, we are unable even to comprehend the revelation that the god brings; the god must provide both the revelation and the condition for understanding it.

Related to this is the issue of developing proper moral vision—the ability to perceive the intrinsic goodness, value, and worth of various aspects of creation and to discern one's moral obligations without calculation: an issue that we discussed at some length in chapter two. Taking into account the weak dependency thesis, Kierkegaard's view implies that divine commands are required for the process of developing moral vision, much like parental instruction—which often includes the issuing of commands—is required to help children to acquire and develop appropriate moral sensibilities. Moral development is, in large part, a process of acquiring the ability to *see for oneself* what is right or wrong. A moral obligation that is universally binding—such as the obligation to love the neighbor—may seem unreasonable or even offensive to one who lacks proper moral vision, whereas one who is more ethically developed can see for herself that the property of moral obligatoriness attaches to such a practice.

[114]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 20.

Divine commands can play a key motivational role in our moral lives, as well. This idea —perhaps more than any other—is one that Quinn develops in his discussions of Kierkegaard's ethic. We often must "fall back" on the command to love the neighbor, for instance, because we lack the natural inclination to do so. In those times when we simply cannot perceive anything lovely in the neighbor, the divine command that we *shall* love the neighbor provides us another source of motivation to love the neighbor anyway. The necessity of such motivation is especially present for those whose moral characters are still in an inchoate form—those for whom doing what is right characteristically requires deliberate, sustained, and significant moral effort.

The weak dependency thesis also can be expanded to include a (more-or-less extensive) volitional aspect. It may be that additional divine assistance, beyond the issuing of commands, is necessary for our moral conduct and development. One common way this is parsed out is in terms of the need for grace. A recurrent theme in both Kierkegaard's signed and pseudonymous writings is that we are capable of *absolutely nothing* without God. Climacus claims that the religious task is "to comprehend that a person is nothing at all before God," and, even more, that it is "existentially expressing that the individual is capable of doing nothing himself . . . ."[115] Scripture teaches that it is in God that we live and move and have our being, and Kierkegaard develops this to its logical conclusion: our dependence on God is absolute and unconditional. We are indebted to God not merely for our initial creation, but for our continued endurance at each moment, as well—for every power we possess to do anything, including the very power to will. What is striking is that Kierkegaard identifies

[115]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 461.

this as a human being's perfection. One of his most important early discourses is entitled, "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection," and one of its central theses is that the highest achievement for a human person "is this: that a person is fully convinced that he himself is capable of nothing, nothing at all."[116] The application of this idea to the moral realm is obvious and straightforward. We are unable to uphold even the least of our moral obligations without grace; we are utterly dependent upon God both for our overall moral development and for the power to will what is right at each moment.

The Centrality of the Divine

The theme of man's utter dependence on God highlights an overlap between Kierkegaard's view and DCT that, although it might seem too obvious to point out, is crucial, nonetheless: in both, God occupies an absolutely central place. That is to say, according to both views, it is not merely that ethics is *compatible* with theism; rather, God's role is *essential*.[117] I will argue in the next chapter, however, that the overlap goes beyond the weak dependency thesis: it is not only that divine activity is necessary for coming to know our obligations and for having the power to uphold them; it also is necessary for the grounding of morality. God's role is metaphysically central: His activity is largely responsible for the moral properties that various actions, institutions, etc. possess.

If this is right, then the overlap between Kierkegaard's ethic and DCT is both obvious and deep. What might not be clear is how God could occupy a place within

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[116]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 307.

[117]This is not to imply that God's role is inessential in all other theistic ethical views. I am simply highlighting an important overlap between the Kierkegaardian ethic and DCT.

ethics this central without DCT's being true. In the next chapter, I hope to demonstrate both that such an ethic is possible and that Kierkegaard's writings suggest such an ethic. It is an ethic that preserves the sufficiency clause, the weak dependency thesis, and the commitment to individual obligation and vocation. Nevertheless, it breaks from DCT in rejecting the necessity of divine commands for moral obligation. This crucial divergence from DCT opens up promising avenues for answering difficult questions—questions on which DCT tends to stumble. How this Kierkegaardian ethic can accomplish this, while still retaining the absolute centrality of God within the moral realm, is the topic to which I will now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR

Towards a Kierkegaardian Ethic: Creation, Love, and the Infinite Debt to God

Introduction

In chapter one, I identified the goals of the present project as being twofold: (1) to understand Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation, and (2) to defend this view as being both contemporarily relevant and—with some modification and further development—as providing those within the Judeo-Christian tradition an account that is more satisfying than its most prominent rivals. I hope the reader will judge that some progress towards this goal already has been achieved. In chapter one, I defended Kierkegaard's ethic against its most influential and often rehearsed objections in an attempt to make some preliminary progress toward the second goal. In chapters two and three, I situated Kierkegaard's ethic in relation to virtue ethics and divine command theory—trying to make clear both the points of contact and the points of contention between Kierkegaard's ethic, on the one hand, and these two approaches to ethics, on the other—which, I trust, has helped to make substantial progress toward the first goal.

In the present chapter, I will explicate and defend the account of moral obligation that seems to me most to warrant the label, "Kierkegaardian." I will then expand this view, taking the Kierkegaardian ethic as a foundation upon which to build an account of moral obligation, both as it pertains to normative ethics and metaethics. Subsequently, I will try to make clear the advantages this view has over its most prominent theistic rivals—in particular, how it captures the best of both virtue ethics and DCT while

avoiding the most serious problems of each. In closing, I will respond to what I anticipate to be the chief objections to this view.

Foundations for a Kierkegaardian View of the Right

Since I have discussed at some length in previous chapters many of the features of Kierkegaard's ethic, in general, and his view of moral obligation, in particular, I will, at this point, simply list the conclusions that have been reached concerning what commitments this ethic includes and what claims it rejects. First, a Kierkegaardian ethic includes, most significantly, a commitment to at least the following:

1) God's existence, nature, and activity is both *central* and *essential* to ethics, generally, and to grounding moral obligation, in particular.

2) The primary focus of ethical striving is on *becoming oneself*—that is, becoming the person God intends one to become by (1) developing the Christian virtues and (2) realizing one's individual, divine calling. The task of becoming oneself culminates in one's achieving the human *telos*: communion with God.

3) A significant part of attaining virtuous character is one's developing proper moral vision: the ability to immediately (i.e., non-inferentially) perceive the good (what is of ultimate value) and the right (what is morally obligatory).

4) Sin distorts one's moral perception and impairs one's ability to perceive one's obligations rightly; consequently, in many cases—and especially in the early stages of ethical and religious development—divine commands are necessary in order for fallen creatures to know (at least many of) their moral obligations. Divine assistance, in the form of grace, also is necessary to uphold one's moral obligations.

5) The command to love the neighbor often serves the purpose of moral motivation: specifically, the command to love often is necessary to provide "backup motivation" when one lacks a natural inclination to love the neighbor.

6) Being commanded by God is sufficient for being morally obligated. God's freedom to determine to whom His commands are issued makes it possible that some individuals and/or groups are morally obligated in certain ways that others are not.

7) It is not the case that being commanded by God is necessary for being morally obligated: it is at least possible that some obligations hold prior to, or in the absence of, God's issuing any command.

I also suggested, in chapter three, that Kierkegaard endorses the following, additional claim:

8) Moral obligation ultimately is grounded in divine creation. The obligation to love the neighbor, in particular, is closely tied to human nature—and especially to the fact that persons are imagers of God—and to the human *telos* of communion with God.

In order to see why it is plausible that Kierkegaard endorses (8), we need to return to the discussion of those passages in *Works of Love* that address the relationship between obligation and creation. As noted in chapter three, Kierkegaard thinks that we have the status of "bond servants" to God in virtue of His having created us from nothing.[1] This theme is not unique to *Works of Love*: he writes in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* that ". . . every human being is in debt to [God], and eternally in debt," and in *Christian Discourses*: "The life [*Liv*] of every human being is God's possession; the human being is his bond servant [*Livegne*]."[2] But in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard makes the connection to moral obligation most explicit in speaking of "God's outstanding claim" on us in relation to the fact that "God, after all, is the bond servant's master and owner."[3] He claims that "*in relation to God, every person begins with an infinite debt*, even if we

[1]". . . [E]very human being, not by birth but by creation from nothing, belongs as a bond servant [to God]" (Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 115).

[2]Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 66.

[3]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 108.

forget what the debt amounts to daily after the beginning."[4] In short, Kierkegaard's view is that it is God to whom one "infinitely and unconditionally owes everything."[5]

These passages provide some of the best clues for understanding the Kierkegaardian ethic as it pertains to moral obligation. What they suggest, I think, is that *Kierkegaard conceives of moral obligations as debts to God*. What I will try to demonstrate, in this chapter, is that this reading of Kierkegaard provides not only a metaethical foundation for a unified account of his ethical writings in the signed works, but also an explanation for why he is neither a virtue ethicist nor a divine command theorist about moral obligation. My first task, then, will be to explain how, why, and to what extent we are indebted to God on Kierkegaard's view; my second task will be to explain why our moral obligations should be identified with these debts; and my third task will be to explain how this account of moral obligation provides the foundation for a unified Kierkegaardian ethic.

The first part of the explanation of why we are indebted to God already has been mentioned: it is found in the recurrent theme of divine "creation from nothing"

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[4]Ibid., 102, emphasis added. Merold Westphal notes the connection between creation and obligation in Kierkegaard's thought at this point. He writes, "Not only does the command [to love the neighbor] come from outside me; it is there prior to any act on my part. In relation to God I begin with an infinite debt. Thus, like Levinas, Kierkegaard links the notion of creation to that of an obligation that precedes the I think" ("Commanded Love and Divine Transcendence in Levinas and Kierkegaard," 213-14.)

[5]Ibid., 103. I take such passages to undermine Julia Watkin's claim that God's creation of us, as free beings, is such that it imposes no obligation. She writes,

> in finite relationships, the recipient of a gift is not independent because he is obligated to the giver, who, in turn, lacks the power to give without creating obligation. Although God omnipotently creates human beings "out of nothing," in that humankind is not already in independent existence prior to creation, he renounces the obligation established through humanity's factual total dependence on him in order that human beings may truly be free ("The Logic of Kierkegaard's Misogyny, 1854-1855," in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 72).

Watkins has in mind here one of Kierkegaard's journal entries (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 2:62-3 (#1251)—an entry that I will address momentarily.

[*Skabelsen af Intet*]. Kierkegaard concludes that since God is our Creator, since we owe our very existence to Him[6]—not only our initial existence, but also our existence at every subsequent moment[7]—we *belong* to God; we are His "bond servants." As bond servants, we owe everything we have to God, including our unconditional obedience, love, and worship. We are "eternally" and "infinitely" indebted to Him, which is to say that no matter how much we do to make repayments on the debt, we never cease to be indebted. Because our debt to God in infinite, what we owe Him is everything.

Some undoubtedly will find this conclusion disturbing, and the reasoning that motivates it fundamentally flawed, on at least two counts. First, it does not follow that a person owes unconditional obedience to a being—to say nothing of love and worship—merely because that being is responsible for the person's existence. The fact that two people conceive a child does not give them the right to issue just any command they wish to the child, and it does not obligate the child to *unconditional* obedience, as becomes apparent when we consider a case in which parents command their child to do something horrible. Second, God's creating us does not entail that He *owns* us (that we *belong* to Him), for any state of affairs in which one rational being owns another is an immoral state of affairs. Human persons are autonomous moral agents and must be treated as

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[6]In "To Gain One's Soul in Patience," Kierkegaard claims that in "gaining one's soul" from God, an individual "extricates himself from debt to the world by giving to the world what is the world's and becomes a debtor only to God, which is not to be a debtor, since God is the only good and himself gives the possibility of becoming his debtor" (*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 167). This passage might seem, on a first reading, to claim that we are not really indebted to God. But in fact, this cannot be the right interpretation, for Kierkegaard says explicitly in a later discourse in the same series that ". . . every human being is in debt to [God], and eternally in debt" (ibid., 400). It seems, then, that in the earlier passage, Kierkegaard is pointing out a unique feature of our debt to God: that it is a debt—the only debt, in fact—that brings about the very possibility of being in debt: in other words, we are indebted to God for His creating us. One's having incurred the debt of creation is a necessary condition of one's being in debt—and of one's having any properties at all, for that matter.

[7]Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 155.

such. Since God is perfectly good, He upholds all His obligations, including the obligation to treat persons with the respect they deserve, which precludes His owning anyone.

I will save the second objection—and the response to it—for the final section of the chapter. In response to the first objection, we should note first that the parent-child relation is disanalogous to the Creator-creature relation in a crucial way: the former does not involve the creation of a person *from nothing*. The continual reiteration of this theme throughout Kierkegaard's authorship, and in particular his insistence that it is "*not by birth* but by creation from nothing" that a person belongs as a bond servant to God, makes it clear that Kierkegaard thinks this feature of divine creation is important and distinguishes it from the "creation" of a person that can be ascribed to human beings.[8]

However, this does not resolve the problem. For one, Kierkegaard never makes the connection between "creation from nothing" and "bond servanthood" entirely clear. The idea seems to be that if God creates us from nothing, then we are God's property, from which it follows that we are His bond servants. If this is Kierkegaard's reasoning, then he is not entirely alone in it—nor in the conclusions he draws.[9] There certainly is ample scriptural evidence to support the claim that we belong to God; as Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman note, "The idea of the world and of human beings as God's property is a

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[8]Shortly, I will discuss the connection between creation from nothing, divine love, and human freedom.

[9]See Baruch A. Brody, "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*, 2nd Edition, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 491-503; and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), especially chapter 11, "Perfectly Good and a Source of Moral Goodness," pp. 184-216. One of the most interesting—though perhaps lesser-known—discussions of the connections between divine creation, God's ownership of the world, and moral obligation is found in Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman, *Religion and Morality*, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995), 65-78.

leit-motif in the religious literature of all times."[10] And Richard Swinburne argues that the two primary characteristics of God "which make his commands impose moral obligations on a man which would not otherwise exist" are (1) "that he is man's creator and sustainer" and (2) "that he is the creator of the rest of the universe other than man; he brought it into existence and keeps it in existence and so is properly adjudged its owner."[11]

However, the inference from being created by God to being morally obligated to obey God remains unclear, as the following thought experiment indicates. Consider a possible world in which, for its own amusement, a malevolent god continually creates persons *ex nihilo* and then commands these persons to torture and murder one another to extinction, whereupon it begins again. It seems clear that, even *if* the persons have *some* kind of obligation of obedience to the god for its creating them, they certainly do not have the obligation to torture and murder one another, and thus they do not have the obligation of unconditional obedience. It follows, then, that being created from nothing does not, by itself, generate an obligation of unconditional obedience to one's creator.[12]

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[10]Sagi and Statman, *Religion and Morality*, 66. Sagi and Statman note, in particular, Psalm 24:1, Leviticus 25:24, Genesis 14:19, and Ezekiel 18:4; I Chronicles 29:11 is later discussed, as well.

[11]Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 212-13. Swinburne apparently takes (1) to establish man's obligation to strive to please God—based on the general principle that "men have an obligation to please their benefactors"—and (2) to establish God's right to determine how we are to relate to the rest of the world. Regarding the latter, he writes, "What greater claim could one have to property than having created it *e nihilo* [*sic*], and kept it in being by one's free choice, unaided? The owner of property has the right to tell those to whom he has loaned it what they are allowed to do with it. Consequently God has a right to lay down how that property, the inanimate world, shall be used and by whom" (ibid). This passage suggests, however, that Swinburne does not consider human beings to be included under the category of God's "property"—thus marking an important difference between his view and Kierkegaard's. Thus, Swinburne's reasoning is markedly similar to Kierkegaard's, though their conclusions differ somewhat.

[12]After stating his intention "to argue that if God has issued commands, they do have moral relevance," Swinburne claims, curiously, "Their relevance is nothing to do with the power of God" (*The Coherence of Theism*, 211). The claim is curious because Swinburne immediately follows it by stating that God's commands impose obligations because He is the creator and sustainer of both man and the rest of the universe. This indicates that Swinburne's statement—as well as his further claim that "Power does not give

Fortunately, Kierkegaard's view, much like contemporary divine command theories, is more nuanced than this—and in a similar way.[13] Most contemporary divine command theories ground moral obligations in the commands of a *loving* God, which, in one way or another, is intended to circumvent the objection that if DCT is true, it follows that God could make horrendous acts morally obligatory. It is not only God's creating us that obligates us to Him; it is also, crucially, His loving us and willing the best for us. God's essentially loving nature constrains the kinds of commands He could issue: in particular, it makes it impossible that God could command anything evil or *ultima facie* bad.

There is some textual evidence that Kierkegaard adopts a similar strategy—though misreadings of *Fear and Trembling* tend to obscure this. Throughout *Works of Love* and the signed discourses, Kierkegaard reiterates and emphasizes that God is love. The connection between God's love and moral obligation is stated clearly in the final discourse of the first series of *Works of Love*, entitled, "Our Duty to Remain in Love's Debt to One Another." Here, Kierkegaard notes that "love is perhaps most correctly described as an infinite debt."[14] Although the primary focus of the discourse is to explore the paradoxical principle that "the one who loves by giving, infinitely, runs into infinite

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the right to command, even if it is infinite power and even if it is benevolent power" (ibid., 212)—must be interpreted to mean that power—even infinite and benevolent power—*as such* do not give moral significance to a being's commands. It is only if a being's power has been used to create and sustain oneself (and the rest of the world) that one is morally obligated to obey the being. Understood in this way, Kierkegaard would agree with Swinburne on this point—as far as it goes. Curiously, though, Swinburne does not include God's love as one of the characteristics that give God's commands moral significance—and he even seems to deny that it is relevant in claiming that "benevolent power" is inadequate to impart moral significance to a being's commands. This makes Swinburne's view susceptible to the malicious god objection, whereas Kierkegaard's view, as I understand it, is not.

[13]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 137-8.

[14]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 176.

debt,"[15] Kierkegaard also endorses, at the outset, the more commonsensical principle that one incurs a certain debt by *receiving* love:

> Ordinarily we say that a person who is loved runs into debt by being loved. Thus we say that children are in love's debt to their parents because they have loved them first, so that the children's love is only a part-payment on the debt or a repayment. And this is indeed true.[16]

The principle, presumably, applies first and foremost to God, our "heavenly Father," who not only "loved us first,"[17] but also loves us perfectly and to a degree far outweighing that of earthly parents for their children. If, as Kierkegaard claims, our debt to love the neighbor is an infinite debt, it surely is the case that our debt to God, our loving Creator, also is infinite. This suggests Kierkegaard's response to the malevolent god objection: it is not our being "created from nothing," by itself, that makes us infinitely indebted to God, but rather the combination of His creating us *and* loving us.[18]

Having addressed why and to what extent we are indebted to God, our next task will be to understand why our moral obligations should be identified with these debts. Here, Kierkegaard does little of the work for us. But a reconsideration of what defines moral obligation helps to make it clear why reading Kierkegaard in this way is reasonable. First, there is the etymological connection: Richard Swinburne writes, "The original meaning of 'obligation' is something owed, and of 'duty' a debt."[19] But why

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[15]Ibid., 177. Passage italicized in original.

[16]Ibid., 176. See also *Pap*. VIII^2 B 37:3 *n.d.*, 1847, reprinted in the Hongs' Supplement to *Works of Love*, 444.

[17]1 John 4:19.

[18]As Evans notes, "It is true that the God to whom I am responsible, whose rigorous gaze falls upon me, is all-powerful, but there is no appeal in Kierkegaard to sheer, naked power, since such an appeal would truly subvert love by transforming it into self-interest" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 138).

[19]Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 20. John Hare informs me that Swinburne's claim is not quite accurate: the original meaning of "obligation" is from

think that *moral* obligation is a debt *to God*? Answering this takes us back to our discussion, in chapter three, of the foundation of Adams's and Evans's divine command theory. Following Adams and Evans, I take it that the *concept* of a moral obligation is *defined by* a certain linguistic role that it plays. (Recall that this is not to say that moral obligations themselves are *grounded in* or otherwise *identified in terms of* linguistic practices.) Specifically, moral obligations are obligations that have the features of being objective, universal, and overriding. The strategy for identifying what constitutes moral obligations in Kierkegaard's ethic is similar to the approach used by such divine command theorists, but here, what is important to note is that *our debt to God* has the same features. First, it is objective: assuming Judeo-Christian theism is true, it is an objective fact that God has created us, that He loves us, and that He wills the good for us, and in virtue of this, it is an objective fact that we are indebted to Him. That is to say, every person's debt to God holds regardless of the beliefs, attitudes, practices, etc. of any individual or group; it holds regardless of whether anyone even recognizes the debt. Second, our debt to God is universal, in the sense of applying to all people: since divine creation and love extends to every person without exception, the debt to God extends to all, as well. This, in turn, helps preserve the universality of moral obligation in the second sense:[20] namely, that demanded by the supervenience thesis. Everyone is equally, infinitely, indebted to God, and the only basis for a change in particular moral obligations from one person (or group) to the next is God's issuing divine commands whose scope is limited (either to an individual or to a group). This insures that there is no change in

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the Latin "*ligare*," which means to bind—for example, by oath. But Swinburne is right, I think, about "duty," whose origins lie in the Middle English "*duete*."

[20]See chapter three, pp. 116-7.

supervenient, moral properties without a change in subvenient, non-moral properties.[21] Finally, our debt to God is overriding: regardless of how we are indebted to one another, our debt to God "trumps" all others wherever these debts—including our ability to repay them—might conflict. What I will try to demonstrate in the remainder of the discussion is that, even though divine commands and debts to God both have the right features to qualify them as good candidates for being identified with moral obligations, identifying moral obligations with the latter provides a better balance of preserving what is most desirable about a theistic ethic while circumventing serious theoretical problems.

Before we get to this, however, we need to address an important objection—one that, I think, demonstrates the need for a refinement of the claim that moral obligations are debts to God. Thus far, we have discussed our indebtedness to God in terms of divine creation and divine love. But it seems that everything God has created—not just rational beings, but all of creation, sentient and non-sentient alike—shares the qualities of being created from nothing and being loved by God. If having these qualities is sufficient for being infinitely indebted to God, and if this infinite debt to God is to be identified with moral obligation, then it seems to follow that all of creation is morally obligated to God. But surely this is absurd; if it follows from Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation that *everything* in creation—from humans to birds to grubs to rocks—is morally obligated to God, then this serves as a *reductio* to the view.

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[21]The Kierkegaardian ethic enjoys an advantage over reductive versions of DCT at this point. Recall Murphy's argument that reductive divine command theorists face a problem in claiming that everyone who is in all relevant ways similarly circumstanced is similarly obligated (see chapter three, footnote 55). On the Kierkegaardian view, a moral obligation is not identical to a divine command (though divine commands do, of course, impose *particular* moral obligations), so being divinely commanded to *a* is not *itself* a moral property. (One's being divinely commanded to *a brings about* one's having the moral property of being morally obligated to *a*.) Thus, there is no difficulty, for the Kierkegaardian, in claiming that if two people are similarly circumstanced in all non-moral ways—which would include their being issued all the same divine commands—then they are morally obligated in all the same ways, as well. Thus, the supervenience thesis is upheld.

There are three ways one can respond to this objection. One is to revise the view of moral obligation under discussion so that it does not have this apparently untoward implication. A second response is to claim that, even though the nonrational beings in creation share with us the quality of being created from nothing by God, they do not share the quality of being loved by God, and—as we have already seen—both qualities are required to generate the infinite debt that constitutes moral obligation. A third response is to bite the bullet, claim that—contra our pre-theoretical intuitions—all of creation is indeed morally obligated to God: to argue, that is, that despite first appearances, the claim that all of creation is morally obligated to God is not obviously false and that, on the whole, the advantages of the Kierkegaardian account of moral obligation make it worth the cost of accepting this admittedly surprising conclusion.

To explore these options, we need to dig deeper into the discourses of the second authorship. Surprisingly, there are some passages in Kierkegaard's signed writings—especially in some lesser-known discourses—that seem to suggest that Kierkegaard himself inclines toward the view that the non-human creation is indeed obligated to God. The strongest support for this view is found in the second of the "Three Devotional Discourses" on "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air" from 1849.[22] In the opening prayer in the Preface to these discourses, Kierkegaard writes,

> . . . what it is to be a human being and what religiously is the requirement for being a human being—would that we might learn it or, if it is forgotten, that we might learn it again from the lily and the bird.[23]

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[22]Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 1-45.

[23]Ibid., 3.

What is the "requirement" for being a human being? Kierkegaard tells us, in the second discourse, that God "requires obedience, unconditional obedience"[24]—the Kierkegaardian theme so often encountered in the signed writings. Unconditional obedience, he claims, is the means to the end of becoming oneself before God. Since "the lily and the bird are unconditionally obedient to God," each "is itself"—that is, each is able "actually [to become] its full possibility," to "fulfill [its] potentiality."[25] In this, he claims, the lilies and the birds are masters [*Mestere*] and teachers [*Læremestere*] from whom we should learn the religious requirement.[26]

One way of interpreting the discourse is this: Kierkegaard is claiming that we are to learn from the nonrational creation, which, in perfect obedience to God, fulfills its requirement—that is, it repays its debt to God as much as it is able. Insofar as the religious requirement is the primary ethical task—becoming oneself before God through unconditional obedience to Him—the nonrational creation thus can be said both to be morally obligated—that is, indebted to God—and perfectly to fulfill its obligations. It is for this reason that we are to learn from the lilies and the birds: surprisingly enough, they serve as paradigm ethical models.

Undoubtedly, most will not find this view remotely plausible, much less convincing. Fortunately, alternative interpretations of the discourse find ample textual support, especially when combined with other parts of the signed authorship. The theme of what we can learn from the lilies and the birds is found throughout this authorship; at

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[24]Ibid., 24.

[25]Ibid., 26-8.

[26]Ibid., 26.

least fourteen discourses are devoted to the topic.[27] Scattered throughout these discourses are comments—some in passing and others extended passages—confirming that Kierkegaard intends the lilies and birds (that is, the nonrational part of creation, in general) to serve only as metaphors for a right relationship to God. The natural world's relation to God, while lacking the features that would give rise to genuine moral properties or obligations, possesses characteristics that allow it to serve as a model of how we are to behave in relation to God, so as to uphold our own, genuinely moral, requirements. In *Judge for Yourself!*, Kierkegaard writes,

> The lily and the bird certainly can with truth be said to serve only one master, but this is still only metaphorical and here a person's obligation *to imitate* is a poetic expression, just as the lily and the bird, considered as teachers, are in the strictest sense without authority.[28]

In the aforementioned discourse from *Without Authority*, Kierkegaard notes in a parenthetical comment that if we thoroughly learn unconditional obedience from the lilies and the birds, then we "become the more perfect one[s], so that the lily and the bird change from being the teacher to being the metaphor . . . ." We become "more perfect," presumably, because human obedience, unlike the obedience of the lilies and the birds, is freely chosen. This is confirmed elsewhere, in *Christian Discourses*, when Kierkegaard writes, "The bird has no other will than God's will, but the Christian has another will,

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[27]In addition to the three discourses from *Without Authority* already cited, the theme is explored in the three discourses in Part II of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, in the seven discourses on "The Cares of the Pagans" in Part I of *Christian Discourses*, and in the second discourse of *Judge for Yourself!*

[28]Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 187. Earlier in the discourse, Kierkegaard writes, "The lilies and the birds really do not express anything, and only [Jesus] is the truth of what the lily and the bird symbolize" (179).

which in obedience he always sacrifices to God—so much more obedient is he [the Christian]."[29]

Because human beings have free will (and a "self-will"[30]), their obedience to God is more glorifying than the obedience of any being that is a part of the "lower" creation,[31] for which "the moment it is not unconditionally God's will, it ceases to exist."[32] The lower creation metaphorically exemplifies the goal of "serving only one master," which is honoring to God, but this perfect obedience to God is both its perfection and its imperfection, because it lacks genuine freedom—a point that Kierkegaard, even though

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[29]Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 84. And later, he states,

> The bird obeys God in such a way that it is still doubtful whether this obedience is not identical with being self-willed; the Christian denies himself in such a way that this is identical with obeying God. . . . The bird has no self-will to give up; the Christian gives up his self-will. . . . The bird's obedience serves to the glory of God; the Christian's more perfect obedience is even more to the glory of God. . . ." (ibid., 91)

Another illuminating passage on the difference between our relationship to God and the "lower" creation's relationship to God is found in the discourse on "The Care of Presumptuousness":

> In their relation to God, the lily and the bird are like a baby when it is still as good as one with its mother. But when the child has grown older, even though it is in the parents' house and ever so close to them, never out of their sight, there still is an infinite distance between it and the parents; and in this distance lies the possibility of being able to presume. . . . In the same way a person, in the possibility of being able to presume, is infinitely far from God, in whom he nevertheless lives and moves and has his being. But if he returns from this distance and in this distance is at any time just as close to God as the lily and the bird are by continually willing and doing only as God wills, then he has become a Christian. . . . That there is a God in heaven without whose will no sparrow falls to the ground pertains indeed to the sparrow, but that there is a gracious God in heaven pertains only to the Christian. The bird keeps close to God by willing as he wills; but the Christian keeps even closer to him by keeping to his grace, just as the older but obedient child who wants to please its parents has and exists for the parents' love in a still more inward sense than the infant, who is one with the mother. In its need, the bird is as close as possible to God; it cannot do without him at all. The Christian is in even greater need; he *knows* that he cannot do without him. The bird is as close as possible to God; it cannot do without him at all. The Christian is even closer to him; he cannot do without—his grace (ibid., 65).

[30]See previous footnote. For Kierkegaard, free will is not identical to self-will. In fact, he thinks the highest act of freedom is the act of *relinquishing* one's self-will by (freely) willing to be the self that God intends one to be and willing to manifest the divine will in one's life, moment-by-moment.

[31]This is not Kierkegaard's term. I introduce it solely as a term that is shorthand for "the whole of creation not endowed with rational faculties."

[32]Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 26.

he sometimes speaks of the "freedom" of the lilies and the birds, makes clear in a passage from *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*:

> Nature does not serve two masters; there is no vacillating or double-mindedness in nature. The poor bird of the air and the humble lily of the field do not serve two masters. Even though the lily does not serve God, it still serves only to God's honor. . . . So it is with everything in nature; that is its perfection. But that is also its imperfection, because there is therefore no freedom [*Frihed*]. The lily standing out there in the open field [*i det Frie*] and the free bird of the air are nevertheless bound in necessity and have no choice.[33]

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[33]Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 205. Surprisingly, the question of what, exactly, Kierkegaard thinks this quality of freedom is that we possess and the lower creation lacks, turns out to be quite difficult to answer. What complicates the issue are passages in the signed writings that seem to indicate that Kierkegaard believes, first, in some form of divine determination, and second, that human freedom somehow consists in *voluntarily choosing* that which one is divinely determined to do—views that, to say the least, challenge any reading of Kierkegaard as advocating a straightforward libertarian conception of freedom. Though the issue is too complex to pursue in depth here, a few of the more significant passages are worth noting. First, the theme of *the voluntary* in Kierkegaard's writings is well known, and such passages commonly are cited to make a case for Kierkegaard's libertarianism. He writes in *Christian Discourses*,

> There is something that God cannot take away from a human being, namely, the voluntary, and it is precisely this that Christianity requires. God can take everything away from a human being, but he has left it up to the individual to give up everything voluntarily, and this is exactly what Christianity requires (179).

But, in his journals, Kierkegaard claims that even though we are free, God "still absolutely controls everything" (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 2:62-3 (#1251)). Further, on several occasions, Kierkegaard employs the language of "making a virtue of necessity" to describe our freedom. The first such passage is found in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, in which he claims that a person who is suffering

> . . . can freely take upon himself the suffering into which he in one way is forced, inasmuch as he does not have it in his power to liberate himself. . . . But what, then, is patience [*Taalmod*]? Is not patience the courage [*Mod*] that freely takes upon itself the suffering that cannot be avoided? . . . The external possibility of being able to free oneself from the suffering does not prevent the internal possibility of actually being able to make oneself free in the suffering, of being able freely to take the suffering upon oneself since the patient one gives *his consent* by *willing* to submit to the suffering. . . . Alas, the wisdom of many people seems to be intent upon doing away with the good. When the person of independent means freely chooses a laborious life, people say he is eccentric, "He who could have such an easy life in idleness and in comfort could indulge his every wish"; and when one who is constrained is patient in his suffering, they say of him, "Shame on him—after all, he can't do anything else and is simply making a virtue of necessity." Unquestionably he is making a virtue of necessity; that is the secret, that is the most typical expression for what he is doing—he is making a virtue of necessity, he is deriving a category of freedom (virtue) from what is defined as necessity (*Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 118-9).

Initially, it might appear that this passage bears little on the issue of whether Kierkegaard advocates, in general, a kind of freedom consistent with divine determination, because the discussion here is restricted to various types of suffering. It might be claimed that Kierkegaard simply is putting a theistic twist on the ordinary meaning of "making a virtue of necessity"—i.e., making the best of an unavoidable situation—by advocating the Christian attitude of bearing one's suffering patiently, which, for him, means recognizing that it is God's will for one to suffer in the way one is suffering and willingly submitting to it. But a second crucial passage on "making a virtue of necessity"—a lesser-known passage from *Without Authority*—suggests that Kierkegaard's view is more radical than this (footnote continued on next page):

In light of this, a modification—or, perhaps, merely a clarification—of the Kierkegaardian conception of moral obligation seems in order. Rather than conceiving of moral obligation as a debt to God—which, in its generality, seems to extend moral obligation to the lower creation—we should conceive of it as *a free creature's debt to God*.[34] Strictly speaking, God makes *requirements* only on His creatures who possess freedom—even though, for rhetorical purposes, Kierkegaard often finds it helpful to refer to the metaphorical "requirements" God makes of the lilies and the birds (just as he sometimes speaks rhetorically of the "freedom" of the lilies and birds) in order to illustrate the goal of perfect conformity to God's will that characterizes genuine (or, perhaps, ideal) Christian existence.

But then, what of the second response to the problem—the response which holds that the lower creation lacks moral obligations because it does not possess the property of

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> So it is with the lily and the bird, from whom we should learn. Therefore you are not to say, "The lily and the bird, it is easy for them to be obedient; after all, they cannot do anything else, or they cannot do otherwise. To become a model of obedience in that way is, after all, to make a virtue of necessity." You are not to speak this way; you are to say nothing at all, you are to be silent and obey, so that, if it really is true that the lily and the bird make a virtue of necessity, you also might succeed in making a virtue of necessity. *You, too, are indeed subject to necessity. God's will is still done anyhow; so strive to make a virtue of necessity by unconditionally obediently doing God's will.* God's will is still done anyhow; so see to it that you make a virtue of necessity by unconditionally obediently submitting to God's will, so unconditionally obediently that you might with truth be able to say of yourself with regard to doing and submitting to God's will, "I cannot do anything else, I cannot do otherwise" (*Without Authority*, 30, emphasis added).

This latter passage, in particular, is one of the most important—and overlooked—passages on freedom in the Kierkegaardian corpus, despite the fact that it is, almost without exception, ignored in scholarly treatments of Kierkegaard on freedom. And yet, this passage suggests that—contra the popular reading of Kierkegaard as a proponent of a radical, even existentialist, version of libertarianism—Kierkegaard's view of freedom bears much more in common with Lutheran compatibilism. I have pursued this topic in more detail elsewhere. Fortunately, though, we need not resolve the issue here. It is enough for present purposes that Kierkegaard clearly ascribes to humans a freedom of the will—regardless of what, exactly, this freedom consists in—that is denied of the lower creation.

[34]I assume that rationality is a necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, condition for the freedom required for moral responsibility—which, it should be noted, is the version of freedom at issue throughout this discussion.

being loved by God, which is a necessary part of the infinite indebtedness to God that constitutes moral obligation? It might seem that this response is less satisfying, since, to many, Scripture indicates that God loves all of His creation. Kierkegaard suggests, however, that the second and third responses are interrelated: that it is precisely God's love for us that both endows us with freedom of the will and brings into existence divine requirements for us. This becomes clear in the following passage from *Christian Discourses*:

> Everyone who assumes that there is a God of course considers him the strongest, as he indeed eternally is—he, the Omnipotent One, who creates out of nothing, and to whom all creation is as nothing—but presumably he scarcely thinks of the possibility of a reciprocal relationship.
>
> Yet for God, the infinitely strongest one, there is one obstacle. He himself has placed it—yes, he himself has lovingly, in incomprehensible love, placed it. He placed it and places it every time a human being comes into existence, whom he in his love makes into something in relation to himself. . . . God, who creates from nothing, omnipotently takes from nothing and says, "Become"; he lovingly adds, "Become something even in relation to me." What wonderful love; even his omnipotence is in the power of love.
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> From this results the reciprocal relationship. If God were only the Omnipotent One, then there would be no reciprocal relationship, because for the Omnipotent One the creature is nothing. But for love it is something. What incomprehensible omnipotence of love!
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> . . . But precisely for this reason love also requires something of human beings. Omnipotence does not require anything; it never occurs to omnipotence that a human being is anything other than nothing—for omnipotence he is nothing. . . . God's infinite love must already exist in order for a person to exist in such a way for God that there can be any question of requiring anything of him.
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> . . . Thus love, which made the human being into something (omnipotence made him come into existence, but love made him come into existence *for* God), lovingly requires something of him. Now there is the reciprocal relationship.[35]

What Kierkegaard calls "the omnipotence of love" is God's ability to create free beings, beings to whom He subsequently has a "reciprocal relationship"—that is, a relationship in which each one has the ability to know and consciously relate to the other. By creating

[35]Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 127-8.

us with freedom of the will—the “one obstacle” to divine omnipotence that God has “placed” in each of us—He thereby demonstrates His love for us, and He thereby creates an object capable of both giving—and genuinely receiving—love. God demonstrates his love for us in this, because, as Kierkegaard notes in a crucial journal entry, “[t]he greatest good, after all, that can be done for a being, greater than anything else that one can do for it, is to make it free.”[36] But in order to accomplish this, Kierkegaard thinks, “omnipotence is required.” He elaborates:

> Only omnipotence can withdraw itself at the same time it gives itself away, and this relationship is the very independence of the receiver. God’s omnipotence is therefore his goodness. For goodness is to give away completely, but in such a way that by omnipotently taking oneself back one makes the recipient independent. All finite power makes [a being] dependent; only omnipotence can make [a being] independent, can form from nothing something that has its continuity in itself through the continuous withdrawing of omnipotence.[37]

Thus, Kierkegaard takes this capacity of divine omnipotence—the ability to create free beings—to be its greatest expression of power. Once again, the theme of creation from nothing is central here:

> Therefore if a human being had the slightest independent existence over against God (with regard to *materia* [substance]), then God could not make him free. Creation out of nothing is once again the Omnipotent One’s expression for being able to make [a being] independent. He to whom I owe absolutely everything, although he still absolutely controls everything, has in fact made me independent. If in creating man God himself lost a little of his power, then precisely what he could not do would be to make a human being independent.[38]

But this love, which makes us free, is also, in turn, what makes us indebted to God in a moral sense: it introduces the possibility of divine requirements. These requirements set

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[36]Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, 2:62-3 (#1251); translated by the Hongs for the Supplement to Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 405-6.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid.

the moral task for us: by God's *requiring* some particular action of us, He thereby makes it morally obligatory for us. This, again, is why the sufficiency clause must be a part of the Kierkegaardian ethic. The most common—and important—way that God imposes a requirement on an individual or group is by issuing her / them a command. It is not, however, the *only* way that God can impose requirements—a point to which we will return shortly.

Though obligation arises in different ways and in different degrees, we have seen that, for Kierkegaard, at least two moral obligations—the obligation to love God and the obligation to love the neighbor—constitute infinite debts. Following his claim that "love is perhaps most correctly described as an infinite debt,"[39] Kierkegaard writes that "everything that is to be kept alive must be kept in its element; but love's element is infinitude, inexhaustibility, immeasurability"; for this reason, "to be and to remain in an infinite debt is an expression of the infinitude of love; thus by remaining in debt it remains in its element."[40] Though Kierkegaard's focus in the chapter from which these passages come is our duty to remain in this infinite debt toward the neighbor, the same can be said of our relationship to God: we have a duty to love Him, and thus we remain in a state of infinite debt to Him. God, having both created us from nothing and having loved us infinitely, has made us infinitely indebted to Him. Kierkegaard implies that it is only in and through the infinite debt of love that one remains in communion with God:

> God has truth's and infallibility's infinite conception of love; God is Love. Therefore the individual must remain in the debt—as surely as God judges it, or as

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[39]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 176.

[40]Ibid., 180-1.

> surely as he remains in God, because only in the infinitude of the debt can God remain in him.[41]

There is, then, a kind of "redoubling" (to use a Kierkegaardian term) of the infinite debt to God in the command to love Him. We are infinitely indebted to God as our loving Creator, who commands us to love Him ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"[42]). But by commanding us also to love the neighbor, God has made us infinitely indebted to the neighbor, as well. It is only by remaining in this infinite debt of love to the neighbor that we can remain in communion with God; i.e., that we can love God. Thus, it is only by remaining infinitely indebted to the neighbor that we can make a "part-payment" on our infinite debt to God.

Does this mean that the command to love the neighbor is the source of all our duties to the neighbor? It does not. We still would be morally obligated to the neighbor in some ways even if God had not issued this command, and some obligations to the neighbor hold prior to God's issuing the command to love.[43] This marks a crucial difference between the Kierkegaardian ethic and divine command theory. There are other ways, besides issuing commands, that God can make requirements of us. Some aspects of God's antecedent will[44] are revealed in creation by the essences that God has

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[41]Ibid., 190.

[42]Deut. 6:5, NRSV.

[43]Note that the first claim is a modal claim and the second a temporal claim. I will return to this point shortly in discussing the advantages of the Kierkegaardian view of obligation over DCT.

[44]On the notion of God's antecedent will, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.19. 6,ad 1. See also Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 259, Mark C. Murphy, "Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation," 18, and Murphy's entry on "Theological Voluntarism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/voluntarism-theological/).

selected to be instantiated.[45] For instance, assuming that human nature is such that it includes the *Imago Dei* and the *telos* of communion with God, God's decision that this essence be instantiated—carried out by His creating human beings—manifests a part of His antecedent will. We thus are obligated to the neighbor in many ways in virtue of the fact that the neighbor, as an instantiation of human nature, bears the mark of divine intentionality. Since the neighbor's *telos* is communion with God, this is the end that God antecedently *intends* for the neighbor; thus it is God's antecedent will that the neighbor achieve this end. God has equipped us with faculties (including reason and conscience) by which we have enough insight into human nature to be able (ideally, at least[46]) to perceive these aspects of God's antecedent will as they are manifested in creation, and our debt to God requires that we strive to fulfill His antecedent will insofar as we are able to discern it.[47] At the very least, knowledge of the human *telos* reveals an

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[45]T. J. Mawson claims that "some contingent moral truths are entirely determined by the 'creaturely essences' of the people whom God chooses to instantiate. . ." whereas others are determined by divine commands ("God's Creation of Morality," *Religious Studies* 38 (2002): 23). He uses the analogy of creating a board game:

> Supposing that we have already made the pieces and the board, there will still be decisions to be made about the rules. The same pieces and board might be used for several games. . . . However, if we have already made the pieces and the board, then the number of rules open for us to choose between will be to some extent constrained by their natures. . . . Thus it was with God's creation of morality (ibid., 18).

In other words, God was free to create or not create instantiations of human nature. But (freely) choosing to do so imposes certain restrictions on what He subsequently can command. In Mawson's terms, these restrictions on the commands ("rules") God can implement are simply "logically necessary consequence[s] of a contingent fact"—namely, the contingent fact that God has chosen to create human beings (ibid, 19). Whether I agree with Mawson depends on what, exactly, he means in claiming that some contingent moral truths are *entirely determined by* human nature. Regardless, though, it is important to note that the claim I am making in the main text concerns a point about God's *promulgation of divine requirements*. In choosing to create instantiations of certain essences rather than others, God *thereby* has revealed (to certain creatures) a part of His antecedent will and *thereby* has made certain requirements (of those creatures).

[46]I add this qualifier because some—perhaps much—of our ability to discern God's antecedent will in creation may be impaired by sin, in which case, some moral ignorance may be culpable. I will discuss this point further, momentarily.

[47]Note that the Kierkegaardian view is not subject to Adams's worries about divine will theories: e.g., that they imply an "unattractive picture of divine-human relations" in which it is possible that "uncommunicated volitions impose obligations" (*Finite and Infinite Goods*, 261). The possibility I am

obligation not to impede deliberately the neighbor's progress toward communion with God. It also implies that one has an obligation to strive to achieve the end of one's own communion with God, since one bears this divine intention in one's own nature. One achieves this end by loving God, and thus, one's obligation to love God manifests itself in yet another way.

Subsequent to God's issuing the command to love the neighbor, we have an obligation to strive to *help* the neighbor achieve communion with God (as opposed to merely *not impeding* the neighbor's achieving communion with God), as well. The neighbor achieves her intended purpose by loving God; thus, our obligation to the neighbor is to help her love God. This explains Kierkegaard's emphasis that to love the neighbor is to help her love God—the (in)famous "middle term" thesis that we encountered in chapter one:

> *Worldly wisdom is of the opinion that love is a relationship between persons; Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person—God—a person,*

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describing in the main text is one in which God *reveals* part of His antecedent will to us by creating us with faculties capable of discerning it. (See footnote 90 on the question of whether Adams would regard the situation I am describing as one of God's issuing a command.) Nor is the Kierkegaardian view, as I am developing it here, susceptible to the objection that it precludes the possibility of supererogation (see Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 260-1). Denying supererogation, on an ethic of divine authority such as the one under discussion, would commit one to claiming that, at every moment, there is some "positive" action (as opposed to acts of omission, such as refraining from lying or stealing) that God requires of oneself. (To see this, suppose, for *reductio*, that there is some time at which God does not require some positive action of oneself. At this time, one can perform either an action that has moral value—such as volunteering at a shelter—or an action that is morally neutral—such as watching a baseball game on TV—without violating one's duties. If one opts for the former, one performs an action that is morally good but not obligatory: arguably, a paradigmatic supererogatory action. Thus, supererogatory action is impossible only if there is no time at which God does not require some positive action of oneself.) But it is compatible with the view under discussion that God does not require some positive action of oneself at every moment, and that there are some actions such that God *prefers* that we do them but does not *require* that we do them—which makes room for the possibility of supererogation. Regarding God's antecedent will, the Kierkegaardian need only hold that God's *intentions* for some part of creation, insofar as these intentions are manifested to us, should be taken as revealing God's *requirements* for us as to how we are to behave toward that part of creation. It may be, however, that Kierkegaard *himself* rejects the possibility (or perhaps only the actuality) of supererogatory actions—an issue I hope to address at a later time. But if he does, one can reject this part of Kierkegaard's own view without rejecting the rest of the Kierkegaardian ethic.

> *that is, that God is the middle term. . . . To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved.*[48]

By issuing the command to love the neighbor, God has made each individual's task of striving toward human fulfillment interconnected with every other's task: one achieves one's end by helping others achieve theirs. In short, one has some obligation to the neighbor prior to being issued the command to love, in virtue of the way the neighbor bears the mark of divine intentionality, but the command to love imposes (or, at least, may impose[49]) new obligations. And since the command is to *love* the neighbor, it is a command that makes our obligation to the neighbor infinite.

Two points are worth stressing. First, the account I have given of creation's manifesting part of God's antecedent will is not to be taken as the claim that *all* of one's moral obligations can be discerned from observing, reflecting on, and/or correctly reasoning about any part of creation, including human nature. The account I am defending is not a deductivist human nature theory—i.e., a theory on which "the moral precepts can be *deduced* from true statements about human nature."[50] The Kierkegaardian can remain neutral about the extent to which God's requirements are revealed within creation: they may be fairly minimal—extending only to the most general moral truths—or they may, in principle at least, be fairly far-reaching.

This brings us to the second point: It is not clear whether (1) the command to love the neighbor merely reveals our moral obligations to the neighbor, or (2) it greatly

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[48]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 106-7 and 120, italics in original.

[49]See following discussion and footnote 118.

[50]Hare, *God's Call*, 54. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52-3.

expands our obligations and/or imposes new obligations. If Kierkegaard is right throughout *Works of Love* in his analysis of what this command entails, then (2) almost certainly is the case. On the other hand, if what the command entails is more minimal than what Kierkegaard claims, it may be that the command simply reveals the obligations we already have—obligations imposed by God's antecedent will as manifested in creation, obligations to which we often are blinded by the noetic effects of sin. It may be that, in principle, we cannot know whether it is (1) or (2) that is true since we see the world *as* fallen creatures. Which divine intentions *would* we see manifested in creation if our moral perception were not impaired by sin? It seems doubtful we could ever know for sure. We can discern certain minimal requirements (e.g., you shall not murder the neighbor or otherwise act toward her in ways that make it impossible that she attain the fulfillment God intends for her), but it is likely impossible for us to know, in our present fallen state, exactly how much of the love commandment already is contained in God's antecedent will as manifested in creation.

At this point, we are in a position to see how the account of moral obligation under discussion provides the foundation for a unified Kierkegaardian ethic. By creating us and loving us, God has given us, quite literally, everything we have—including our very being—and thereby has made us infinitely indebted to Him. As bondservants, we belong to God "in every thought, . . . in every feeling, . . . in every movement . . . ." This debt to God constitutes our moral obligation, in general, and grounds our (derivative) duties to other parts of creation—most notably, to the neighbor. To say that we are *infinitely* indebted to God is simply to say that, no matter how much we have "repaid" to God through our obedience, love, worship, etc., we never will have fulfilled our debt

completely. However, we are obligated to strive to "make repayments" on this debt even though repayment never will be complete.

Since, on the view being discussed, divine commands are sufficient for obligation, these commands can be conceived as specific ways that God "calls in" part of our debt. God commands us to perform some action, and we make a partial repayment, so to speak, on our debt to Him by performing this action. A divine command takes a general, infinite debt and gives it a specific, local content: it is because of our general, infinite debt to God that we are indebted to Him to obey His command to perform some action. As I began arguing in chapter one, Kierkegaard's middle term thesis primarily expresses the hierarchical status of our relationships with and obligations to God and the neighbor. It states that all our moral obligations ultimately are grounded in our relationship to God, and our obligations to the neighbor are derived from our obligation to God. The most common way this "derivation" occurs is by God's issuing us commands that instruct us how we are to make a partial repayment on our debt to Him. Kierkegaard writes,

> If you want to show that your life is intended to serve God, then let it serve people, yet continually with the thought of God. God does not have a share in existence in such a way that he demands his share for himself; he demands everything, but as you bring it to him you immediately receive, if I may put it this way, a notice designating where it should be forwarded, because God demands nothing for himself, although he demands everything from you.[51]

God's demands—made to us primarily in the form of issuing us commands—often indicate to us where we are to "forward" the payment we are making on our debt to Him. He thereby obligates us—for example—to serve the neighbor; by serving the neighbor,

[51]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 161. I have altered the translation slightly so that several words or phrases accord with the Hongs's earlier translation of *Works of Love* (London: Collins, 1962), 159. Specifically, I have substituted the word "demands" for the phrase "asks for" (and "demands nothing" for "does not ask for anything"), and I have substituted the word "forwarded" for the phrase "delivered further." (Unless otherwise stated, all further references to *Works of Love* are from the Hongs's 1995 translation.)

we serve God and make a partial repayment on our infinite debt to Him. All our moral obligations to the neighbor ultimately are based in divine requirements, which, in turn, are grounded in our infinite debt to God.[52] But, as previously noted, not all divine requirements are revealed via commands. Some are made known to us by God's creating us with the ability to discern part of His antecedent will as it is manifested in creation—that is, His intentions for how we are to relate to other parts of creation, given their respective natures.

Expansion and Development

Having outlined what I take to be Kierkegaard's view of moral obligation, I will now expand these ideas, taking Kierkegaard's view as a foundation upon which to construct a broader normative ethic and corresponding metaethic.[53] I do not take Kierkegaard to have been much concerned with the project of systematizing his normative and metaethical views into a logically-rigorous, theoretical structure. Thus, I am not attributing to Kierkegaard the claims I make in this chapter that go beyond the ethical view thus far developed.[54] Nevertheless, I take it that the ethic I will be

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[52]Our debt to God is the only debt that is intrinsically, rather than derivatively, infinite. We are infinitely indebted to God because of His creating us and loving us, and we are infinitely indebted to the neighbor because God requires of us that we remain indebted to the neighbor. In this way, our infinite debt to the neighbor is derived from our infinite debt to God.

[53]Given that these terms often are used in ways that obscure both their intended, respective meanings and the distinctions between the two, let me state explicitly what I mean by each. By "normative ethic," I mean an account of what it is that one is morally obligated to do; by "metaethic," I mean an account of the metaphysical underpinnings of moral obligation, including what a moral obligation is, what grounds moral obligation, what makes moral truths true, and how it is that one comes to be morally obligated. I am not claiming that these characterizations of the terms are either standard or exhaustive.

[54]I ask the reader to bear these qualifications in mind when, in the following discussion, I refer to the view I am defending as "the Kierkegaardian ethic." My use of this label is employed simply for ease of reference. It should not be taken as attributing to Kierkegaard the technical theses discussed in this section—most of which Kierkegaard likely never entertained, must less explicitly advocated—nor as begging the question against those proposing rival interpretations of Kierkegaard's ethic.

developing here is broadly Kierkegaardian, for at least three reasons. First, it incorporates all the major claims that I have attributed to the Kierkegaardian ethic thus far; it is an ethic that takes these claims as the foundation.[55] All of the further claims are compatible with this foundation; no major revisions to the foundation are necessary to endorse these further claims (though one could endorse these further claims without endorsing the Kierkegaardian foundation). Second, the further claims I will make are fairly minor, in comparison with the rich ethic that it builds upon—the ethic Kierkegaard himself developed. The additions are needed primarily to explain how, exactly, the Kierkegaardian ethic differs from rival views—and how it avoids the main problems that plague these rivals.

I will begin with a series of questions that, it seems to me, an adequate account of moral obligation must be able to answer:

(1) What *is* a moral obligation (metaphysically speaking)?
(2) What is it for one to be morally obligated? That is, to what state of affairs does the proposition that one is obligated to perform some action *a* refer?
(3) What *grounds* moral obligation?
(4) What *makes it true* that some action is morally obligatory for oneself?
(5) How does one come to be morally obligated?
(6) What *are* one's obligations (ethically, rather than metaphysically, speaking)—i.e., what is it that one is morally obligated to do?

These questions obviously are tightly interconnected, but oftentimes, the important differences between them are overlooked, resulting in confusion and/or a failure to recognize and address certain problems that affect a particular ethic. (1) through (4) pertain to metaethics; (6) pertains to normative ethics; (5) does not fit neatly into either category: it resides at the intersection between the two. My development and expansion

[55]This is largely a stipulatory claim. I am not claiming that it will be possible to *derive* the aspects of the Kierkegaardian ethic I already have discussed from the further claims for which I will argue in this section.

of the Kierkegaardian ethic will proceed by way of addressing each of these questions, in turn.

I have argued that a central insight of Kierkegaard's ethic is that the basis of moral obligation is a free creature's debt to God. I will now state—and subsequently explain—each of the claims of the Kierkegaardian Christian ethic that I wish to defend, beginning with the following:

(1) The state of affairs of one's being morally obligated is identical to the state of affairs of one's being infinitely indebted to God.
(2) (a) A moral obligation *is* (metaphysically identical to) a debt that a free creature owes to God. (b) For an action to be morally obligatory is for it to be the case that a free creature owes it to God to perform the action.[56]
(3) To fulfill a moral obligation is to make a kind of partial repayment on one's debt to God.[57, 58]

The first thing to notice is that none of these are definitional claims; none of them is a claim about the *meaning* of "obligation" or "being obligated" or "fulfilling an obligation." Like the central claims of the Adams-Evans model of divine command theory, these are claims about what an obligation *is*, about *what it is* to be obligated, etc. The view under discussion is thus an ontic, rather than a semantic, thesis. Second, the

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[56]The notions of "debt" and "being indebted" can be cashed out in terms of the three-place predicate, "owes," defined as Oαβγ: α owes β to γ. First, *y* is a debt iff ∃*xyz* O*xyz*; second, *x* is indebted to *z* iff ∃*xyz* O*xyz*. Here, "owes" is taken as a primitive. The reader should bear in mind that the present project does not attempt to give an account of the whole of obligation, in which case taking a term like "owes" as a primitive obviously would be problematic. It is, instead, only an attempt to give an account of *moral* obligation. See also footnote 61, below.

[57]Continuing the logical scheme introduced in the previous footnote, we can partially analyze the notion of repayment on a debt if we add the primitive, three-place predicate, "pays," defined as Pαβγ: α pays β to γ. Under this scheme, *y* is a repayment on a debt only if ∃*xyz* (O*xyz* & P*xyz*).

[58]It is important to note that (1) refers to moral obligation, in general—which pertains to one's infinite debt to God—whereas (2) refers to particular moral obligations—which are identified with "smaller," individual debts that one owes to God. (3) combines elements of both, stating that by one's fulfilling individual moral obligations, one thereby makes partial repayments on one's infinite debt to God. In general, in the discussion to follow, when I speak of "one's debt [singular] to God," I mean to refer to one's infinite debt to God, and when I speak of "one's debts [plural] to God," I mean to refer to the particular, finite debts that God "calls in" by requiring us to perform specific actions. See also footnote 66, below.

identity asserted by (2a) is the identity of constitution, rather than a weaker version of identity (such as logical equivalence or the kind of identity asserted by claiming that two proper names refer to the same object: as in, "the morning star is the evening star").[59] Again, this is structurally parallel to Adams's DCT (at least[60]), which holds divine commands to be constitutive of moral obligations.

There is further overlap with the Adams-Evans model of DCT. I agree with Adams and Evans that obligations, in general, arise out of social relations and are partly constitutive of those relations. But I think, a bit more specifically, that an obligation is a *social debt* that is grounded in features of the relationship between the parties involved.[61] There are many ways that such debts can originate. They can be incurred through one's performing a certain commissive illocutionary speech act: making a promise to keep a secret, for example. They also can be incurred simply by persons' coming to have a certain kind of relationship to one another: e.g., by a student's enrolling in a teacher's class. A moral obligation, however, is a special kind of social debt: it is one that arises from one's relation to God and holds—in part, at least—between oneself and God.[62]

[59]I am indebted to Robert Audi for bringing to my attention this distinction in an unpublished essay on divine command morality.

[60]As I noted in chapter three, Evans seems to vacillate on whether he endorses (and attributes to Kierkegaard) Adams's constitutive version of DCT or a more general version.

[61]I will not attempt to defend here any general claims about obligation. I am only trying to suggest the way that Adams's social theory of obligation can be modified so that, in combination with the Kierkegaardian ethic, a unified account of obligation, both moral and non-moral, could be worked out. (The suggestion, in short, is that an obligation is a social debt, and a moral obligation is a special kind of social debt: namely, one that is owed to God.) I think Adams's social theory of obligation is mostly correct, so I take it to be an advantage of the Kierkegaardian ethic that it accords well with this theory (a point I will discuss next). But I do not attempt to defend Adams's theory, or this modification of it, in the present project. The reader who has concerns about the suggestion I make here—that obligations, in general, are social debts—can reject it without rejecting the Kierkegaardian ethic.

[62]Recall Kierkegaard's "middle term" thesis.

Like Adams and Evans, I take it that our relationship to God is a social relation and thus a relation capable of generating obligations. Further, I agree with Adams and Evans that at least some of these obligations bear the right properties to qualify them as being moral obligations, in that they are objective, universal, and overriding. But I claim, further, that *all* of our obligations to God bear these qualities, and thus all of our obligations to God are moral obligations. This enables the Kierkegaardian ethic to avoid a major difficulty that plagues metaethical divine command theories: it can account for the moral status of certain fundamental obligations to God that DCT cannot. It can do so, first, because *it accords better with the social theory of obligation*. As discussed in chapter three, the Adams-Evans model of DCT appears internally conflicted, in that some of our obligations to God are such that the social theory of obligation suggests they should be moral obligations, but DCT entails that they are not. For example, the social theory of obligation allows that the parent-child relation itself generates some obligations without any action of commanding involved. Children are obligated to love and respect their parents in virtue of the nature of the parent-child relationship: the parents need not command their children to love or respect them in order for these obligations to hold. Presumably, the Creator-creature relation also is sufficient, by itself (that is, in the absence of any commands), to generate the obligations on us to love and respect God. The social theory of obligation certainly suggests as much. But the divine command theorist must deny that these obligations are *moral* obligations unless they are backed up by divine commands. And yet, the divine command theorist apparently lacks the conceptual resources to make this claim, for the obligations in question seem to have all the properties—being objective, universal, and overriding—that characterize moral

obligations and distinguish them from their pre-moral counterparts. Thus, the Adams-Evans model seems conflicted: *qua* social theory of obligation, the obligations to love and respect God always should be moral obligations, but *qua* divine command theory, in the absence of divine commands, they cannot be.

The Kierkegaardian ethic fares better. Given that a moral obligation is a debt that a free creature owes to God, and that, for an action to be morally obligatory is for it to be the case that a free creature owes it to God to perform the action, we can account for why love and respect for God are morally obligatory. The nature of the Creator-creature relation is such that it generates moral obligations: God's actions of creating us as free beings and loving us indebts us to Him. But—as I will argue shortly—we are obligated to strive to repay our debt to God. Two of the most important ways that we do so are though loving and worshiping Him.[63] Of course, a minimal condition of worshiping God is respecting Him. So love and respect for God are both morally obligatory actions.

Similarly, the Kierkegaardian ethic fares better than DCT on another, related count. Recall from chapter three[64] that a major problem for DCT is that it is forced to claim that our obligation to obey God is a pre-moral obligation: if the divine command theorist claims that it is a moral obligation, she either will face an infinite regress in trying to ground this moral obligation in divine commands, or she will be forced to abandon DCT at this crucial point and adopt an alternative criterion for grounding the

[63]There are, then, at least three distinct sources of our obligation to love God:

(1) We are obligated to strive to repay our debt to God, and one way we do this is through loving Him (the present argument).
(2) We are commanded by God to love Him (Deut. 6:5; see also p. 180, above).
(3) We are obligated to strive toward attainment of our *telos*, which we do, in large part, by loving God (see p. 180-2).

However, each of these ultimately is based upon our debt to God.

[64]Pp. 118-124.

moral status of the obligation. But, on the other hand, it seems implausible to deny that the obligation to obey God is a moral obligation. For one thing, it seems intuitively obvious that it *is* a moral obligation, and for another, it is (like the obligations to love and respect God) an obligation that bears all the qualities that, by the divine command theorist's own account, distinguish moral from pre-moral obligations.

The Kierkegaardian ethic, on the other hand, can account for the moral status of the obligation to obey God, without facing infinite regress or internal inconsistency. The most general ways that we make repayments on our debt to God is through obedience,[65] love, and worship (which includes a special kind of respect and gratitude). Since we are obligated to make repayments on our debt, all three of these are morally obligatory acts. Of course, the three are interrelated: we worship God, in large part, by loving Him, and we express our love, in large part, through obedience. It is important to note, though, that our duty to love and worship God derives *ultimately* not from His having commanded us to do so but from His having created and loved us first. As bondservants to God, we owe everything to Him—including our love and worship. Our obligation to obey is grounded in the same way: no command on God's part is necessary to impose the duty, so there is no infinite regress to plague the Kierkegaardian ethic on this point.

One might worry, however, that a different problem undermines the Kierkegaardian account: namely, that it is circular. The Kierkegaardian account works only if one can make sense of—and plausibly endorse—the following claim:

(4) One is morally obligated to strive to repay one's debts to God.

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[65]Construed broadly as "doing that which God requires *because*—or, at least, *partly because*—God requires it."

But—the critic might contend—this claim is viciously circular on the Kierkegaardian model of obligation, because a moral obligation *just is* a debt to God.

In fact, though, (4) is not circular; rather, it expresses—according to the Kierkegaardian account—a necessary truth. The following set of sentences, which are logically (though not semantically) equivalent on the Kierkegaardian account, can be used to demonstrate this:

(4') One is [morally obligated] to [strive to fulfill one's moral obligations].
(4) One is [morally obligated] to [strive to repay one's debts to God].
(4'') One is [indebted to God] to [strive to repay one's debts to God].

The bracketed phrases in each sentence are logically equivalent to the corresponding bracketed phrases in the other sentences. (4') expresses an analytic truth, and thus a necessary truth. (4) and (4'') express propositions logically equivalent to (4'); they simply substitute—to various degrees—the bracketed phrases with their logical (though, again, not semantic) equivalents. (4)—the claim used in the previous arguments[66] to demonstrate the moral status of the obligations to love, respect, and obey God—makes one of the two substitutions. Though (4') is analytic, it is not circular, because it does not express (nor does it attempt to express) a definition. Given that (4') is not circular, (4) is not either.

This discussion raises, however, two important points—points that bear on the third and fourth questions raised at the beginning of this section: namely, (3) *what grounds moral obligation?* and (4) *what makes it true that some action is morally*

[66]I have employed variations on (4), sometimes speaking of "one's *debt* to God" and sometimes of "one's *debts* to God." Recall (from footnote 58, above) that the former refers to one's infinite debt to God, and the latter refers to the particular, "smaller" debts that God "calls in" by requiring us to perform specific actions. We are obligated to strive to repay even our infinite debt—even though we know we never will be able fully to repay it—but we do this by continually repaying the "smaller" debts (through obedience, love, worship, etc). That is, we are obligated to repay our (particular, finite) debts, and we are obligated to *strive* to repay our (general, infinite) debt.

obligatory for oneself? The first point is that the answers to these questions may vary, depending, first, on the moral obligation in question, and, second, on the kind of answer or explanation that is being requested by each. The second point is that some moral truths are contingent, while others are necessary. These two points are intertwined, and both are best demonstrated by way of an example.

Suppose that, as Scripture reports, God commanded the Jews during the time of the Exodus to gather manna, but not to gather more at one time than they could consume that day: more specifically, that—with the exception of the day before the Sabbath—they were not to keep any of one day's manna for the next morning.[67] It follows—by the sufficiency clause—that the following expresses a true proposition:

(5) For all *x*, if *x* is a Jewish person living during the time of the Exodus, then *x* is morally obligated not to keep for the following morning any of the manna that *x* collects during the day.

Suppose we raise the following question: Why is (5) true? That is, what makes it the case that (5) expresses a true proposition?

What is important to see is that, in the case of many obligations, there are (more or less) proximate truth-makers for a proposition expressing the moral obligation, and an ultimate truth-maker (or truth-makers) for a proposition expressing the moral obligation. Propositions referring to the proximate truth-makers will be contingent, whereas those referring to the ultimate truth-makers will be necessary. In this case, the proximate reason that (5) is true is that God has issued a command to the Jews that each is not to keep for the following morning any of the manna that he or she collects during the day. But one could then raise the question, "What makes it true that the Jews are obligated to

[67]Exod. 16.

obey God's commands?" Here one is seeking a more ultimate grounding for the obligation, and the answer to this question provides a less-proximate reason for why (5) is true: namely, that God has created and loves each of the persons to whom (5) refers, and thus each of these individuals is infinitely indebted to God. This indebtedness is what constitutes the Jews' moral obligations, one of which is to obey God, who has commanded each of them not to keep for the following morning any of the manna that he or she collects during the day.

Note, however, that (5) is contingent: there are worlds in which God does not issue this command to the Jews during the Exodus. In at least some of these worlds—worlds in which God commands the Jews continually to stockpile all the manna they can, for example—(5) is false. But in fact, even the following, more general proposition is contingent:

(6) The Jewish people at the time of the Exodus are morally obligated to obey God's commands.

(6) expresses a less proximate reason why the Jews are obligated not to keep manna overnight: because, in general, they are obligated to obey God. (6) also is contingent, but for a different reason than (5): it is contingent because the Jews' existence is contingent, and the event of the Exodus is contingent. There are possible worlds, then, in which the referent of (6) does not exist and thus (6) fails to refer to anything, and these are worlds in which (6) does not express a true proposition.

There are, however, necessary moral truths pertaining to moral obligation in the vicinity. One is

(7) Necessarily, any (free) person whom God creates is morally obligated to do what God commands her to do,[68]

formally rendered

$\Box \forall xy\ (((Px \ \&\ Rgx) \ \&\ Cgxy) \rightarrow Mxy)$

under the translation scheme,

Pα: α is a free human person
Rαβ: α creates β
Cαβγ: α commands β to bring it about that γ
Mαβ: α is morally obligated to bring it about that β

and where “g” is a proper name referring to God.[69] Unlike (5) and (6), there is no world in which the subject of (7) fails to refer, because (7) does not express an existential proposition. (There are worlds in which no object satisfies the conditions of the *antecedent* of the conditional in (7), of course, but this does not render (7) false. In fact, quite the opposite: in every such world, the antecedent is false, which renders the conditional trivially true.)

(7) expresses an ultimate reason why (5) is true—that is, an ultimate reason the Jews are morally obligated not to keep for the following morning any of the manna that

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[68]Proposition (7) perhaps can be rendered more succinctly—though, I think, a bit less precisely—as “Necessarily, instantiations of human nature are obligated to obey God.” Alternatively, the claim can be rendered in possible world semantics: “For any world *W* and any instantiation of human nature *P*, if God creates *P* in *W*, then *P* is morally obligated to obey the commands that God issues to *P* in *W*.”

[69]I take it that it is not necessary to render the antecedent of the conditional as $(((Px \ \&\ Rgx) \ \&\ Lgx) \ \&\ Cgxy)$, where Lαβ: α loves β, because I assume that God is essentially loving, and thus the addition of “L*gx*” is superfluous. If one rejects this assumption, the antecedent can be modified in this way without change to the argument that follows. I am less certain whether it is necessary to include “Cg*xy*” in the antecedent, because I am unsure whether there are genuinely possible worlds in which human persons—which, on my account, essentially bear the divine image—come into existence in some way other than God’s creating them. I have included the predicate because of the *apparently conceivable* possibility that they could. If this “possibility” is not a genuine, metaphysical one, the antecedent can be modified, simply by deleting the last predicate, without change to the argument that follows.

they collect during the day.[70] The Jews are morally obligated to do this because, in every possible world, anything God commands one of His (human) creatures to do imposes a moral obligation on him or her to do it. Another such ultimate reason is that

(8) Necessarily, one is morally obligated to strive to repay one's debts to God,

the model version of a proposition that we already have encountered. For the same reasons given in our discussion of the non-model version of (8) and its variants,[71] (8) is logically, though not semantically, equivalent to

(8') Necessarily, one is morally obligated to strive to fulfill one's moral obligations.

Note, then, that some of the propositions expressing ultimate reasons are analytic necessary truths, such as (8');[72] others are non-analytic necessary truths, such as (7).[73]

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[70]It is important to note that it is no part of my view that propositions expressing ultimate reasons by themselves *entail* propositions expressing proximate reasons. (Necessary truths, by themselves, never entail contingent truths; they entail only other necessary truths.) Ultimate reasons express necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for the truth of contingent moral propositions; they must be combined with more proximate reasons to fully account for contingent moral truths. Thus, the view I have presented is *not* one in which there is a hierarchy of more-and-less ultimate reasons, grounding the truth value of contingent propositions like (5), with less ultimate reasons, like (6), being *entirely derived from* more ultimate reasons, like (7). Rather, the view I am presenting is one in which there are more-and-less general reasons that a contingent proposition like (5) is true, and the more specific ("proximate") reasons are, in turn, *explained by*—though they do not *follow from*—more general reasons, ultimately terminating in necessary truths, which provide final ("ultimate") explanations.

[71]Pp. 193-4.

[72]I take it that all analytic propositions are necessary, so the modal versions of analytic truths are themselves analytic.

[73]Swinburne seems to think that (7) is analytic. He claims that ". . . it is an analytic truth that if anyone with certain properties commanded us to do such and such actions, we would have an obligation to do them," and he later makes it clear that he has in mind God's properties:

> . . . given that there is an omnipresent spirit, perfectly free, creator of the universe, omnipotent, and omniscient—not merely is it coherent to suppose that he is perfect good and the source of the obligatoriness of many duties, but that it would be incoherent to suppose anything else. An individual's being perfectly good and the source of obligatoriness of many duties *follows from* his possession of the other properties just listed" (Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 211 and 215-16, emphasis added).

It is unclear to me whether Swinburne is using "analytic" here in the way he defines it in an earlier article:

> I understand 'analytic' in a wide sense. I understand by a logically necessary or analytic statement a statement, the denial of which states nothing which it is coherent to suppose could be true. I

The upshot of all this is that some moral truths are contingent, some are analytically necessary, and some are non-analytically necessary. This is a point that, it seems to me, often is either overlooked by ethicists or ruled out by the theories to which they are committed,[74] but one that must be true for a Christian metaethic to function

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> understand by a synthetic statement a statement which is not analytic (Swinburne, "Duty and the Will of God," in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 125).

From the discussion that follows in this latter essay, it seems to me that Swinburne intends "analytic necessity" to be, roughly, what most philosophers today intend by "broadly logical necessity." (He contrasts it with "factual necessity" in this article.) If so, then there may be no disagreement between Swinburne and me on this point. I am using "analytic" in a different sense than this, however, to refer to a kind of necessity that holds in virtue of the meanings of terms. As I am using it, to say "The statement, 'a is b,' is analytic" is to say that *being b* is a part of the *meaning* of 'a.' This understanding of analyticity leads me to think that it is possible for two propositions to be logically equivalent while only one of the two is analytic. This can happen because it is possible for propositions to be logically equivalent without being semantically equivalent. Analyticity is (I think) a property had by a proposition in virtue of the meanings of its terms, whereas logical equivalence is not necessarily a relation that holds between two propositions in virtue of the meanings of their respective terms.

[74]Exceptions include Swinburne and Mawson (who follows Swinburne's view, with some modification). Swinburne claims that

> . . . if it is a necessary truth that under circumstances C, A is obligatory, then God as the author of circumstances C is responsible for the contingent truth that A is obligatory. This holds whatever the form of necessary moral truths (Swinburne, "Duty and the Will of God," 130).

Elsewhere, he elaborates this view in more detail. He identifies his view as a form of "naturalism," in that it holds moral properties to be *entailed by* the natural properties of things. (His endorsement of the sufficiency clause makes it clear that he is using "natural" in a fairly idiosyncratic sense to include properties like "being commanded by God.") However, his is a version of naturalism on which moral and natural properties are distinct: he denies that "right" is simply the name of some natural property ("forwarding the greatest happiness of the greatest number," for example—or "commanded by a loving God," for that matter). This leads him to a conclusion similar to the one for which I have argued. He writes,

> The naturalist must claim that there are two kinds of moral truth—(logically) necessary moral truths and contingent moral truths. The naturalist claims that when an object *a* has a certain moral property, say *M*, its possession of it is entailed by it possessing certain natural properties, say *A*, *B*, and *C*. Then it is a necessary truth that anything which is *A*, *B*, and *C* is *M*; but a contingent truth that *a* is *M* or that there is an object which is *A* and *M*. Contingent moral truths hold because of the contingent feature of the world that certain objects have certain natural properties. . . . Contingent moral truths hold because the world is as it is in respect of natural properties. But that those moral truths hold under those circumstances is itself a necessary moral truth (Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 188-92).

There are important differences between Swinburne's view and the one I am defending, however, besides the one discussed in the previous footnote. He holds that God may have moral obligations (*The Coherence of Theism*, 184-8)—a claim that, as I will discuss in the final section, the Kierkegaardian ethic rejects. More importantly, Swinburne holds that some moral obligations would hold even if God did not exist (*Responsibility and Atonement*, 123). As I understand him, Swinburne takes the necessity of many moral truths pertaining to our obligations to the neighbor—that torturing innocents for fun is morally wrong, for example—to hold completely independently of divine intentions or requirements, which is crucially different from the Kierkegaardian account (*Responsibility and Atonement*, 134; see also "Duty and the Will

properly. For any given moral truth, there generally are more-or-less proximate reasons that it is true[75]—and these reasons will be expressed by contingent propositions—and some ultimate reasons that it is true—and these will be expressed by necessary propositions. The dichotomy, sometimes implicitly assumed, that *either* (all) moral truths are necessary *or* (all) moral truths are contingent, is false. Many moral truths, such as (5), are contingent, while others, such as (7), (8), and (8') are necessary.

However, one might be tempted to ask the same question about (7) (and other such propositions) that was raised about (5): namely, "Why is (7) true? That is, what makes it the case that (7) expresses a true proposition?" The answer to this question might seem dismissive: What makes (7) true is the same as whatever it is that makes similar kinds of necessarily true propositions true. In fact, though, this answer is not dismissive; it simply highlights the limits of the present discussion. It is an interesting question what grounds the truth values of necessary propositions—especially those, like (7), that are not analytic—but it is not one that needs to be settled here, except to point

of God," 123-4). Mawson's view differs from Swinburne's "in that it evacuates the category of necessary moral truth of all substance . . ."; that is, it holds that "if necessary moral truths are seen as analytically/logically so, then, *pace* Swinburne, they cannot be regarded as substantive principles" ("God's Creation of Morality," 1). Mawson's reason for thinking this is, in short, that "[n]o particular action can be obligatory of logical necessity unless one picks it out under a description which entails that it is, and one's success in securing reference with such a description will always be a contingent matter" (ibid., 3). In other words, Mawson rejects Swinburne's claim that some sets of "natural" facts entail substantive moral facts. But Mawson errs, I think, in holding that "[n]ecessary moral truths should be understood as necessary truths about moral *concepts*" (ibid., emphasis added). If this were true, then all necessary moral truths would be analytic: they would be true in virtue of the meanings of their terms. But this is not the case: there are some non-analytic necessary moral truths, such as the proposition that a moral obligation is a debt that a free creature owes to God (or so I claim). This proposition states a constitutive identity, rather than a semantic equivalence; if it is true, it is not true merely in virtue of the meanings of its terms—i.e., it is not a necessary truth "about moral concepts."

[75]I say "generally," because obviously there are no proximate reasons (in the sense in which I am using this term) for the truth value of necessary moral truths.

out that presumably it is not God's will that grounds them.[76, 77] Whether the truth values of necessary propositions are determined by something else in God—God's nature, perhaps, or even His noetic activity—is left open.[78]

Is it a problem for the Kierkegaardian ethic that God does not freely determine the truth value of every moral truth? It is not. The truth values of broadly logically necessary propositions of all kinds traditionally are not held to be within God's power to determine.[79] To claim otherwise plunges one almost immediately into a conceptual morass.[80] Theists who defend an ethic in which God is subject to the moral law often appeal to this point, claiming that moral truths are necessary, and thus God's lack of

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[76]Although see William E. Mann, "Modality, Morality, and God," *Noûs* 23 (1989): 83-99. Beginning with the doctrine of divine simplicity, Mann argues that for any necessarily true proposition *p*, God brings it about that *p* is necessarily true by willing it to be so, but—and this is the crucial clause that prevents his view from being a version of universal possibilism, such as Descartes held—God *could not have willed otherwise*.

[77]Consider an analogous question: *What makes it the case that water is composed of H_2O?* Does God determine by divine fiat that the proposition that water is composed of H_2O is necessarily true? Presumably not. God does not determine the content of essences; rather, what He determines is whether or not a particular essence is instantiated in creation. Everything is what it is (adopting a Parmenidian point), and God does not determine what a thing is. What is true of water also is true of moral obligation: God does not determine by fiat what it is. However, He *does* determine by fiat whether or not a moral truth is *binding* upon anything—a point to be discussed shortly.

[78]For more on God's relation to necessary truths and necessarily existent objects, such as propositions and other abstracta, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980) and "How to Be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1982), 47-70; Michael J. Loux, "Toward an Aristotelian Theory of Abstract Objects," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XI*, ed. P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, and H. K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 495-512; Thomas V. Morris, "Absolute Creation," in *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 161-78; and Philip L Quinn, "An Argument for Divine Command Ethics," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosoph*y, ed. Michael D. Beaty (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 289-302, "The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, Supplement (1990): 359-63, and "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," 263-8. See also the references in footnote 80, below.

[79]Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.25.3.

[80]Cartesian universal possibilism provides an instructive historical example. See Harry Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *The Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 36-57; Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 92-146; and E. M. Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *The Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 569-97.

sovereignty over the moral law is no more troublesome than His inability to make it the case that triangles have four sides. The reason many theists find this objectionable, however, is that it precludes God's *bringing about* any moral obligations—which rules out, not insignificantly, both the possibility of individual obligation and calling. What the Kierkegaardian ethic demonstrates is that one can preserve everything desirable about divine sovereignty as it pertains to the moral realm—especially God's ability to impose obligations on us by commanding us—as well as religious intuitions about morality—including our obligations to obey, love, worship, and be grateful to God, as well as our obligations to the neighbor prior to God's issuing any commands—without embracing a full theological voluntarism.[81]

This brings us to the grounding question. It is important to see that what *grounds* a moral obligation is closely tied to *what makes it true* that something is obligatory, but these are not the same. What grounds our actual moral obligations (our outstanding debts to God) is God's voluntary activity: specifically, His creating us (which includes giving us freedom and the ability to discern His will), loving us (which includes willing our good), and requiring certain things of us. What *makes it true* that something is morally obligatory may be, depending on the obligation, proximately in God's control (e.g., His freely issuing some command), but ultimately, the reasons for something's being morally obligatory are necessary truths, such as (7) and (8)—propositions whose truth values, like those of all necessary truths, are not in God's control. However, in a different sense, what *grounds* the actual moral obligations we have—that is, what *makes it the case that*

[81]I am here using "theological voluntarism" to refer to the view that, for any action *a*, the moral status of *a* (whether permissible, obligatory, or forbidden) is due to God's volitional activity (e.g., His issuing—or refraining from issuing—commands regarding *a*-ing and/or regarding act types under which *a*-ing falls). The label is not used univocally in the literature.

certain obligations are *binding* in the sense of *applicable to something that actually exists*—is God's creating and loving us. In this way, God's will (activity) grounds the obligations we have, though it is something else (whatever it is that makes non-analytic, necessary truths true) that grounds the truth value of the proposition that we are obligated to obey God (and other such necessary moral truths). So it is important to be clear about what one means when one asks what grounds moral obligation. One either could be asking what grounds the truth value of a certain set of propositions, or one could be asking what brings it about that certain moral truths become binding, in the sense of coming to apply to something actual. The answer is different in each case.

That the Kierkegaardian metaethic denies that the truth values of propositions like (7) are in God's control is the primary reason it is not a version of theological voluntarism.[82] Not all true propositions expressing binding moral obligations are true because of God's commanding or willing something. Claiming otherwise is what drives metaethical versions of theological voluntarism to infinite regress or inconsistency. On the Kierkegaardian view, the proximate reason that an action is morally obligatory may be that God commands it, but this rests on the more basic reason that we are required to obey God's commands, which, in turn, is grounded in the necessary truth that all free, created, human persons are obligated (indebted to God) to strive to repay their debt to God. Thus, on the Kierkegaardian model, some obligations, such as the obligation to obey God, are not even proximately grounded in divine commands, and because of this, the Kierkegaardian ethic is able to circumvent one of the most difficult problems for metaethical divine command theories.

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[82]I take it that, as I am using the terms (see previous footnote), metaethical divine command theories are (and must be) versions of theological voluntarism, though not necessarily vice-versa.

This is not to deny, however, that a *part* of the Kierkegaardian ethic reasonably could be categorized as a *kind* of normative divine will theory. This brings us back to the fifth and sixth questions from our list at the beginning of this section: namely, *how does one come to be morally obligated?* and *what is it that one is morally obligated to do?* We already have discussed how one comes to be morally obligated: proximately, it is by God's requiring something of one—for example, by issuing one a command—and ultimately, it is by God's creating and loving one, which makes one infinitely indebted (obligated) to Him. The basic tenet of the Kierkegaardian view with which we began this section is that

> (1) The state of affairs of one's being morally obligated is identical to the state of affairs of one's being infinitely indebted to God.

It follows from this that

> (9) A free creature *c*'s being infinitely indebted to God is necessary and sufficient for *c*'s being morally obligated.

(9) is a weaker claim than (1), because (9) makes a claim of logical equivalence, rather than a claim of metaphysical identity: specifically, (9) states that free creatures are morally obligated in all and only those worlds in which they are indebted to God. There is a difference, however, between being indebted to God and being indebted to God to perform some *specific* action, *a*.[83] Even in a world in which God required of us no specific actions—if such a world is possible[84]—we still would be indebted to Him for

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[83]By "*specific* action," I mean to rule out actions whose descriptions do not, by themselves, entail any specific, concrete content. Actions whose descriptions do not entail any specific, concrete content ("non-specific actions," we could call them) include obeying God and striving to repay one's debt to God. Granted, this distinction between specific and non-specific actions is far from precise, though it will suffice, I hope, for present purposes.

[84]I doubt that it is, because the requirements to love and worship God seem to me to be requirements that God makes of us in every world in which we exist, and yet these arguably fall under the category of "specific actions." Nevertheless, the distinction I am trying to make here is a conceptual one

creating and loving us.[85] This means that, in this world, our relation to God still would be such that, if He *were* to issue any commands, we *would be* obligated to obey them.

Let us focus, then, on the normative ethical question: that is, on the question of what it is that one is morally obligated to do. We already have discussed that

> (2b) For an action to be morally obligatory is for it to be the case that a free creature owes it to God to perform the action.

But what actions does one owe it to God to perform, on the Kierkegaardian model? The answer: *all and only those actions that God requires one to perform*.[86] It is up to God to decide how He will "call in" our debt—that is, what He will require us to do, and when, in order to make a partial repayment on the infinite debt that we owe Him. God requires of us that we perform some specific action, *a*, and by performing it, we repay a part—an infinitely small part—of what we owe. It follows, then, that

> (10) A free creature *c*'s being required by God to *a* is necessary and sufficient for *c*'s being morally obligated to *a*.

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that, if nothing else, can be made by imagining worlds that, while perhaps not genuinely metaphysically possible, are at least partially conceivable. As Morris argues, the list of worlds that fall under this category (i.e., "partially conceivable though not genuinely possible") may be much greater than ordinarily assumed. If so, it may be that consideration of such worlds provides a reliable theoretical apparatus for modal reasoning. See Thomas V. Morris, "The Necessity of God's Goodness," in *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 44-7.

[85]As Swinburne notes, "The obligation to please a benefactor may be more extensive than the obligation to obey his commands; he may issue no commands, but there is (with a large benefit, and to a limited extent) an obligation on the recipient to find out and satisfy some wish of the benefactor" (*The Coherence of Theism*, 215).

[86]The sense of "required" being used here is one that is restricted to free actions. That is, God only requires—in the relevant sense—actions that an agent is free to will to perform. It would be incoherent to claim, for example, that God requires me (in the present sense of "requires") to grow to seventy inches tall, even though God has willed that the state of affairs of my growing to seventy inches tall obtain. This is consistent with Kierkegaard's use of "requirement," discussed in section one ("Foundations for a Kierkegaardian View of the Right").

(10) states that one is morally obligated to *a* in all and only those worlds in which God requires one to *a*. Thus, the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for being indebted to God to *a* and being required by God to *a* are the same.

This is not to say, however, that the property of being indebted to God to *a* and the property of being required by God to *a* are identical. They may not be. The relations of necessity and sufficiency at issue are logical relations, which hold among propositions, and, just as it is possible for two propositions to be true in all the same worlds without their being identical,[87] so also it is possible for two properties to be instantiated in all the same worlds without its being the case that the properties are identical. One reason for thinking the properties of being indebted to God to *a* and being required by God to *a* are not identical is that the reason one is indebted to God to *a* may not be the same as the reason one is required by God to *a*. Presumably, the reason one is indebted to God to *a* is that one is indebted to God *and* God requires it of one to *a*.

Fortunately, the issue of property identity can be largely circumvented when addressing the issue of what moral obligations we have, because the logical relations of necessity and sufficiency are enough to ground a normative ethic. The Kierkegaardian account of moral obligation, *at the level of normative ethics*, may be classified as a kind of divine will theory: one on which every action bearing the property of *being morally obligatory* also bears the property of *being required by God*, and vice-versa, because an action's being required by God is necessary and sufficient for its being morally obligatory. This applies not only to contingent moral obligations, such as the obligation

[87]One can see this by considering most any two necessary propositions: that two plus two equals four and that water is composed of H_2O, for example. They are true in all the same worlds, though they clearly are not identical propositions.

binding on the Jews at the time of the Exodus not to keep manna overnight, but also on moral obligations that are necessary, such as the obligation on all free creatures to obey God: these necessary obligations still are *requirements* of God.[88] But this does not lead to contradiction or infinite regress, as it does in DCT. God requires, for example, that we obey Him, but it is not His requiring it that ultimately makes it obligatory that we obey Him. Rather, what ultimately makes it obligatory is that it is a necessary truth that all free creatures are (infinitely) indebted to the One who creates and loves them, and thus what makes it true that we are obligated to obey God is the same as (or similar to) what makes other, relevantly similar, necessary truths true.

However, this highlights the degree to which one must stretch the term "divine will theory" to make it applicable to the Kierkegaardian view even in its normative aspect. What is missing from it that is present in any standard divine command or divine will theory is some unrestricted version of the asymmetrical relation clause: the claim that there is an asymmetrical relation of dependency between God's commands/will/requirements such that, necessarily, for any morally obligatory action *a*, *a* is morally obligatory *because* God commands/wills/requires that *a*, and not vice-versa. The Kierkegaardian view denies this claim in its unrestricted version ("for *any* morally obligatory action . . ."). There are *some* morally obligatory actions—such as free creatures' obligation to obey God—that are morally obligatory not because God requires them, but rather because the propositions stating them are necessary.

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[88]It follows that there is no possible world in which God issues us a command not to obey Him. I take it that God's issuing such a command is impossible for much the same reason that God's lying is impossible: namely, both are incompatible with His perfectly good nature.

This leads to another reason it is somewhat of a stretch to classify the Kierkegaardian normative ethic as a divine will theory. Some of God's requirements—such as the requirement to obey Him—are such that it is necessary that God requires them. But on the assumption that one genuinely wills only that which one freely wills, and on the further assumption that one freely wills only that which it is within one's power not to will, the Kierkegaardian ethic is not one on which all of our moral requirements are willed by God.[89]

I think one reasonably can challenge these assumptions, however. Though I will not pursue the arguments at this point, it seems to me that one reasonably can deny the claim that the only things God can require/antecedently will are those things that it is within His power not to will, in which case—the previous objection concerning the asymmetrical relation clause aside—one reasonably could classify the Kierkegaardian normative ethic as a divine will theory, for it then is a view on which all and only those things that God requires/antecedently wills us to do are morally obligatory for us. And I think one reasonably could retain the label of "divine will theory" for a normative ethic that includes only a restricted version of the asymmetrical relation clause.

However, even if one is willing to stretch the notion of a divine will theory this far, one may not be willing to consider the Kierkegaardian normative ethic, as I have developed it, to be a divine *command* theory. As we already have discussed, the Kierkegaardian ethic allows for the possibility that God issues requirements in ways other than by issuing commands, even if issuing commands is the most common way. Many divine command theorists, I take it, are not willing to stretch the concept of a divine

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[89]On the issue of whether one genuinely wills only that which it is within one's power not to will, see William E. Mann, "Modality, Morality, and God."

command to include God's manifesting some part of His antecedent will by His choice to create instantiations of certain essences (such as human nature) and by His equipping us with some faculty by which we can discern this part of His will in creation.[90] This applies even to some divine command theorists willing to embrace some notion of general revelation, such as Evans. Anyone not willing to stretch the concept of a divine command this far must choose, then, between denying that Kierkegaard's ethic is a divine command theory and denying that the ethic I have developed is appropriately characterized as "Kierkegaardian."

Advantages of the Kierkegaardian Ethic

In the course of the discussion so far, we already have noted a number of advantages of the Kierkegaardian ethic over its (arguably) closest rival, divine command theory. The principle advantages discussed so far are (1) the Kierkegaardian ethic's greater compatibility with the social theory of obligation, and (2) its ability to account for the *moral* status of our obligations to obey, love, and worship God. In this section, I will

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[90]I am not confident that all divine command theorists would rule this out as a command, however, because of the very liberal characterization that some are willing to give to the concept of a divine command. Richard Mouw claims that his own commitment "in dealing with issues of religious authority, is to the kind of *sola scriptura* emphasis that was a prominent feature of the Protestant Reformation . . .", but he notes that there are other Christians who understand divine commands differently:

> For example, some Christians . . . understand 'natural law' in such a way that when someone makes moral decisions with reference to natural law that person is obeying divine commands. Others hold that submission to the *magisterium* of a specific ecclesiastical body counts as obedience to divine directives. Others assume that individual Christians . . . can receive specific and extrabiblical commands from God, such as 'Quit smoking!". . . Still others hold that the will of God can be discerned by examining our natural inclinations or by heeding the dictates of conscience" (*The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 8).

Adams quotes this passage from Mouw, stating, "It is important to my project to insist on a range of possibilities at least as wide as Mouw suggests for the communication or revelation of divine commands" (*Finite and Infinite Goods*, 263). However, other comments Adams makes (e.g., 265 ff.) leave me uncertain whether he would count as a divine command God's revealing His antecedent will in creation.

discuss some further advantages of the Kierkegaardian ethic over its most prominent theistic rivals, beginning with several more that it enjoys over DCT.

First, Kierkegaard's ethic avoids a problem that plagues DCT concerning the issue of accounting for moral motivation. Many divine command theorists have sensed the need for care in distinguishing DCT itself, a theory about what a moral obligation is and/or what grounds moral obligation, from a theory of moral motivation, which is intended to answer the question, "Why should I be moral?"[91] In order for an ethic that endorses a divine command theory of moral obligation to be complete, it needs some additional motivational theory to supplement it. The most plausible candidate for a version of DCT like Adams's and Evans's is the view that we are motivated to obey God's commands (and thus be moral) out of gratitude for what God does (past, present, and future) for us. Since what God wills is best for us, and since God's intention for us is to be reconciled to Him and spend eternity in blessed communion with Him, it is certainly fitting and appropriate for one to feel gratitude toward Him and for this gratitude to motivate one to obey Him.[92]

But this raises the question: *Is gratitude toward God morally obligatory?* It seems that it should be, somehow. One who obeys God grudgingly, or even solely out of a sense of duty, without any gratitude toward God for what He has done for her, seems to be not only deficient in her character, but also morally culpable to some degree. It is

[91]Of course, some prominent proponents of DCT do tend to conflate the two, as our discussion of Quinn in chapter three revealed.

[92]This account is crucially different from a motivational theory in which one obeys God solely because doing so is a means to one's own happiness, or because doing so is a means for avoiding divine punishment, hell, etc.

right to be grateful to God; it is not merely a good thing. Evans initially seems to agree with this intuition when he writes,

> If theism is true, creatures owe their very existence to a being whom they understand to be a just and loving Creator, and it would seem reasonable to conclude that such creatures owe to God respect and gratitude of a particular sort, as well as a duty to obey the commands the Creator might issue to them.[93]

But unless gratitude itself is commanded by God, the proponent of DCT cannot account for the *moral* obligation of gratitude. She at most can say that it is good, fitting, appropriate, etc. to be grateful to God, and it is (or may be) obligatory in some pre-moral sense—the same stance she must take on similar obligations to God, such as obedience.[94] Thus, in order to remain consistent to the commitments of DCT, Evans is forced to immediately hedge the aforementioned claim:

> One might say that a response of love and gratitude to the Creator is *fitting and proper* in light of human nature and its ends, and that this response gives human individuals a reason to obey God's commands.[95]

The Kierkegaardian ethicist, on the other hand, can give a more satisfactory account of gratitude. She can point out that we are infinitely indebted to God, and we are obligated to strive to repay this debt in the ways we can. One method of partial repayment is obedience; another is gratitude. Not only are we motivated by gratitude to obey God, we are morally obligated to be grateful to Him for all the wondrous things He

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[93]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 14.

[94]Even if God in fact has commanded our gratitude (and one might argue that this is so on the basis of such passages as 1 Thessalonians 5:18), the issue still is problematic for the proponent of DCT in that it seems we still *would be* morally obligated to be grateful to God even if He had not commanded this, assuming all other features of the world were the same.

[95]Ibid., emphasis added.

has done for us.[96] It is one of the ways we offer a small repayment—no matter how meager—towards the infinite debt we owe Him.[97]

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[96]It might be thought that gratitude cannot be morally obligatory on the basis that "ought implies can": that is, given that being grateful includes having *feelings* of gratitude, we cannot be obligated to be grateful since we do not have direct volitional control over our feelings. Here the insights of virtue ethics are helpful. We are obligated to become persons of a certain character, and part of what this entails is becoming persons who have feelings, emotions, passions, etc. appropriate to their circumstances. Though we cannot directly will to have some feeling rather than another at a particular time, there are many ways that our feelings, emotions, beliefs, and passions are under our *indirect* control. For more on this, see C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's "Philosophical Fragments" (*Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 134; Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's "Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), 77; Roberts C. Roberts, "Passion and Reflection," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 87-106; and Robert M. Adams, "The Virtue of Faith," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9-24. For a discussion of whether love for God and neighbor can be willed, see William E. Mann, "Theism and the Foundations of Ethics," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William E. Mann (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2005), 283-304.

[97]Several important objections to this account of gratitude are suggested by Sagi and Statman. They claim that "[t]wo main approaches to the concept of gratitude are possible" (*Religion and Morality*, 76). The first treats gratitude according to the model of justice:

> If we receive something, then, we ought to requite our benefactor. . . . Thus, when an individual benefits another, the benefactor thereby imposes on the recipient some kind of debt, which is more or less proportionate to the benefit granted (ibid.).

This clearly is the model the Kierkegaardian ethic advocates. But, in response to this model, Sagi and Statman raise the objection that "A true benefit is an act aiming to benefit someone without any expectation of return, thus distinguishing it from a regular contractual relationship in which the parties are bound by a prior mutual commitment. Paying a debt is different from an act of gratitude" (ibid.). It is true that there can be no "contract" in God's creating us, for there is no "us" with whom to enter into a contract prior to our being created. But we do speak of being "indebted" to one who benefits us, and God has benefited us above all others. It is far from obvious, then, that a "true benefit" must be one in which there is no expectation of any kind of return—especially in the "extreme" case of God's creating, sustaining, and loving us. It also is far from obvious that repaying a debt cannot be an expression of gratitude. If someone saved one's life, it would not be strange at all that one greatly would *want* to try, somehow, to repay the debt, as an expression of one's gratitude. All the more, then, that we should want to try to repay our debt to God. Sagi and Statman claim that, in response to the aforementioned (supposed) problems with the justice model of obligation, an alternative model of obligation has been developed according to which it is simply

> a means of expressing the recipient's appreciation for the benefactor's deeds. Gratitude thus conveys, first and foremost, an attitude or feeling toward the benefactor, and not any specific *action*. Beneficiaries are not debtors, and are under no obligation to return anything to the benefactor, as the benefactor's good deed has not created a debt. . . . The mere notion of an *obligation* imposed on the beneficiary is incompatible with the concept of a genuinely free gift bestowed by the benefactor (ibid., 76-7).

This conception of gratitude obviously is incompatible with the Kierkegaardian view, but I see no reason why rejecting this second conception of gratitude is unreasonable, especially if one successfully can defend the first conception. Both Derrida and Levinas seem to me to incorporate an extreme version of the second conception of gratitude. Levinas even suggests that if the recipient of a work of love expresses gratitude for it, then the work of love is disqualified, because a genuine work of love is something that is given "without return"—that is, it must be given without receiving anything in return to qualify as a genuine

Another advantage of the Kierkegaardian ethic over DCT is that it can account for what *seems* to be an important feature of the world: namely, that we have more moral obligations than can be accounted for solely by the divine commands that God has (ordinarily been thought to have) issued.[98] Certainly, it is not the case that for every morally obligatory action *a* that is binding upon us, God has issued a command to *a*. But this in itself is not the problem for DCT: the divine command theorist can argue that for every moral obligation we have, there is some divine command that has been issued that *entails* that obligation. Nevertheless, it seems doubtful that *every* obligation we have can be traced back to some command in this way: some contemporary ethical debates are such that, arguably, they cannot be decided by appeal to any revealed command despite many theists' conviction that they are morally serious issues with regard to which right and wrong courses of action can be taken. This especially seems true in light of the way that radically different social contexts and/or technological advancements give rise to unique circumstances and moral issues. In some such cases, no general theistic (nor specifically Christian) moral principle seems applicable.

For instance, many Christians believe it is morally wrong to attempt to clone human beings. But has any divine command been issued from which a prohibition on human cloning plausibly can be deduced? And if not, does this mean that human cloning

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work of love (Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 163-4). In a similar vein, Derrida analyzes the concept of "the gift" as "the impossible," because, in Ferreira's interpretation, ". . . to intentionally give a gift conceptually implies the correlative acknowledgement of it as a gift—and so disallows it as a gift" (ibid., 165). For Derrida, a genuine gift cannot even be acknowledged as such by the receiver without disqualifying the gift as a gift. Obviously, these conclusions about gratitude and the concept of "gift" are incompatible with the Kierkegaardian ethic. But, again, I can see no compelling reason to accept them and thus do not regard them as posing serious problems for the Kierkegaardian analysis of the moral obligation of gratitude to God. For more on this issue, see "Love's Gift," chapter ten of Ferreira's *Love's Grateful Striving* (151-68).

[98]I stress "seems," because I do not want to beg the question against DCT.

is morally permissible? Not obviously. But the divine command theorist seems committed to holding that if there is no divine command that entails that *a* is forbidden, then *a* is at least morally permissible—thus leaving the divine command theorist with no way to support many Christians' moral intuition that human cloning is wrong even if there is no divine command that God has issued from which its prohibition follows.[99] Debates over human reproductive procedures—especially those pertaining to eugenics—provide further examples of the kinds of issues on which, it seems, divine command theories come up short.

The view of moral obligation that Kierkegaard's writings suggests, however, can account for such Christians' moral intuitions—at least in principle. In general, ethical issues like cloning and eugenics raise the question: *Could we have moral obligations that arise independently of God's commands?* Could it be, perhaps, that God has equipped us to "see" that some things are wrong even when He has not issued a command forbidding these things? If so, what are we "seeing"? A Kierkegaardian has the resources to argue that we are perceiving God's antecedent will in such cases—a will that has not been expressed in commands, but is binding, nevertheless, because God has equipped us with faculties that allow us to perceive it (in some way or another). If God's antecedent will is that practices like human cloning or eugenics should not be attempted, and if this will is somehow displayed in creation, and if He has further equipped persons (whether all or

[99]Of course, whether or not any divine command been issued from which a prohibition on human cloning—and other such controversial practices—plausibly can be deduced depends on how liberal one's account of divine commands is. If one endorses a very inclusive conception of divine commands—one in which divine commands can be issued not only through scriptures, but also through natural law, contemporary religious authorities, individual conscience, and perhaps other sources—one may be able to circumvent the problem being discussed here. On the issue of what a divine command is and how it may be issued, see especially Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 262-70, and Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 156-79. See also footnote 90, above.

only the redeemed) with moral faculties capable of perceiving this will, then Christians are justified in holding that it is morally wrong to attempt such procedures, even in the absence of a divine command that entails their prohibition. A divine command theorist, on the other hand, apparently has no such resources with which to address these issues.[100]

Another significant advantage of the Kierkegaardian ethic is that it can account for obligations that hold *prior to* God's issuing any (relevant) command.[101] The account of Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis, for example, can be regarded as depicting a morally wrong action, even though there is no scriptural indication that God had, up to that point, issued a divine command prohibiting the taking of innocent human life. Divine command theorists are forced to say that, if God indeed had not yet issued such a command, then Cain's act was at most a *bad* thing to do: i.e., that, unlike murders committed subsequent to the issuing of the Law, it was not a morally wrong thing to do. But this seems implausible. Cain's murder of Abel was wrong in virtue of Abel's nature—in virtue, that is, of what Abel was: a fellow creation of God who bore the *Imago Dei.* His nature as a human person bore the imprint of divine intentionality; it contained

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[100]If I am right about this, then the issue highlights a significant advantage of normative divine will theories over normative divine command theories. Often ethicists—especially those critical of theological voluntarism in its various forms—tend either to overlook the differences between the two or to regard the differences as trivial. For example, regarding the debate between Adams and Murphy on whether it is God's commands or God's will that obligates us, Roberts writes, "[t]he debate, which gives the impression that a great deal is at stake here, is really a lot of wind whipped up by a conceptual confusion inherited from modern moral philosophy" ("Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory," p. 14 in manuscript). I take it that considerations such as these, regarding contemporary ethical debates, demonstrate that this is false. For further comparison of divine command vs. divine will theories, see Mann, "Theism and the Foundations of Ethics," 286-91.

[101]Kierkegaard suggests that the possibility of sin exists even prior to God's issuing a commandment when he writes, "Scripture says that sin takes its occasion from the commandment [*Bud*] or the prohibition [*Forbud*]. . . . The occasion, like a middleman . . . merely prompts the bringing about of what in another sense already existed as possibility. The commandment, the prohibition, tempts because it wants to constrain the evil; and now sin takes the occasion, it *takes* it; the prohibition *is* the occasion" (*Works of Love*, 297).

a "design plan" for his earthly flourishing, the possibility of which Cain cut short. As such, Cain's action was contrary to God's antecedent will, even if that will had not yet been revealed through a command. On the Kierkegaardian account, God created mankind equipped with faculties of moral perception capable of discerning sufficient portions of this antecedent will as it is manifested in creation. It is for this reason that Cain's action was wrong, rather than merely bad—a verdict that seems to be supported by the evidence of God's reaction to Cain, as recorded in Genesis.[102]

As the reader no doubt has noticed, in its inclusion of the view that we are able to perceive certain of our obligations from observing and reflecting on the nature of creation—and human nature, in particular—the Kierkegaardian ethic overlaps somewhat with human nature theories of ethics, especially natural law theory.[103] There are, however, many differences between the two—arguably many more differences than there are commonalities—and these differences allow the Kierkegaardian ethic to avoid the most serious problems that plague traditional versions of theistic human nature theories, as well.

For one, human nature theories often hold that, in principle, all moral duties can be deduced from a complete knowledge of human nature. Christian versions of such theories often are criticized for minimizing the role of divine revelation; it is charged that they place too much confidence in unaided human faculties of moral perception and

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[102]"The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth" (Gen. 4:10-12, NIV).

[103]A number of scholars have noted the connection between Kierkegaard's ethic and human nature theories, in general (Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 10-23 and 85-111) and/or natural law theory, in particular (Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 41; see especially footnote 46).

rationality. Whether this charge is fair or not, it is clear that Kierkegaard's ethic is not susceptible to it in light of his view of the gravity of the Fall (and its noetic effects) and the central role his ethic assigns to revelation. Kierkegaard's emphasis on the need for *developing* proper moral vision, through personal ethical development, guided continually by divinely revealed moral principles, makes it clear that he takes very seriously the theme of man's need for God in coming to know his moral obligations.

Similarly, the Kierkegaardian ethic does not include the view—typical of deductivist human nature theories—that we can discern the good and/or the right by reflecting on that toward which human beings are naturally inclined.[104] Certainly, Kierkegaard would reject the claim that that toward which human beings naturally strive "is consequently the source of their *true* happiness and satisfaction."[105] One of the central themes of *Works of Love* is that the agape love God has commanded of us runs directly counter to the preferential forms of love that come naturally to us. Our relationship with God is, for Kierkegaard, the true source of our ultimate (eternal) happiness and satisfaction, but—as he makes clear throughout the pseudonymous and signed authorship—an authentic relationship with God is characterized essentially by suffering, which certainly is not something that normal human beings naturally seek. Consequently, the Kierkegaardian ethic is not susceptible to the objection that it does not take seriously enough the naturally selfish and sinful orientation of human beings subsequent to the Fall.[106]

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[104]See Hare, *God's Call*, 30 and 54-5.

[105]Henry Veatch, *Aristotle: A Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974). Quoted in Hare, *God's Call*, 54.

[106]Hare, *God's Call*, 55.

Nor is the Kierkegaardian ethic susceptible to the objection that it restricts God's freedom, another common charge against theistic human nature theories, such as Aquinas's. As Evans points out, "for Aquinas, the commands of God, at least according to one prominent school of interpretation, seem to follow for the most part directly from the character of the human nature God has created."[107] If all these commands follow directly, then it seems that God is restricted in what He can command. But on Kierkegaard's ethic, God can issue commands that are aimed at someone's personal ethical development, which might include obligations unique to that individual: some commands might be directed toward one's personal calling, for example.[108] God also can "call in" our debt to Him for any number of other reasons, including issuing commands solely intended to result in His own glorification by our obeying them. Thus, God is not nearly so restricted by His initial creation in what He subsequently can command—either of individuals or of groups—on Kierkegaard's view.

The Kierkegaardian ethic has a number of advantages over virtue theories, as well—both secular and theistic. Regarding the former, Aristotelian virtue theory often is regarded as obsolete and untenable, in the eyes of much of the contemporary philosophical community, due to its commitment to teleology and final causes. Separated from a theistic framework, such a metaphysic indeed seems implausible. But within a theistic framework, the notion of teleology—and especially the notion of a human *telos*—has long been recognized as helpful and even indispensable to ethics, as demonstrated by a host of medieval thinkers (most notably Aquinas). Kierkegaard's ethic inherits this

[107]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 12.

[108]Evans makes this point in *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 24-26.

advantage that Christian virtue ethics has over classical, secular versions. It enjoys a number of advantages over contemporary, secular virtue ethics, as well. First, contemporary views often struggle with the problem of relativity. Which characteristics are regarded as virtues varies from one social context and/or worldview to another, and thus it is difficult, for the secular virtue theorist, to avoid the conclusion that virtue is relative. Because of this, such ethicists often are charged with being unable to justify the superiority of, say, the virtues of democracy over the virtues of Nazi fascism.[109] Further, contemporary versions of virtue ethics typically are susceptible to a grounding objection: it is not easy to say what natural features of the world are responsible for qualifying one characteristic as a virtue and disqualifying another. The Kierkegaardian ethic avoids all these problems by endorsing both a strong form of moral realism and a divinely created order—which includes a particular conception of human nature—that displays a divinely ordained teleology and manifests divine intentions. The virtues are not relative to social context or worldview; there is an objective fact of the matter about which characteristics constitute excellences in the person who possesses them. The “design plan” for human nature dictates which characteristics promote human flourishing and which do not. It still may be difficult in some instances to determine whether a particular characteristic is a virtue or not: many—both believers and nonbelievers—understand the Judeo-Christian tradition to have instituted a system of values that is radically opposed to pagan views, elevating such characteristics as humility, meekness, and self-sacrifice to the status of virtues. Thus, on Kierkegaard's view, revelation plays a central role in determining how to classify various character traits.

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[109]Related to this is the problem of determining which virtues are normative for a particular individual and whether any virtues are objectively normative.

More importantly, perhaps, the Kierkegaardian ethic avoids the most serious problems for a reductive, theistic, neo-Aristotelian, virtue ethic, which—by the lights of theists who share the intuition that God is sovereign over the moral realm—locate the ground of obligation in the wrong place.[110] Since God's activity—in creating the world and in issuing commands—grounds moral obligation, the Kierkegaardian ethic not only is one on which everything that God commands is obligatory, but also one on which most everything that God commands is obligatory *because of* some activity of God (for example, because He commands it).[111] Thus, God is essential to grounding moral obligation—it is not the case that moral obligation simply is compatible with theism—which accords with many theists' intuitions about divine sovereignty. The advantage of the Kierkegaardian ethic that results from this commitment is that it preserves the best features of DCT—the sufficiency clause and the asymmetrical relation clause (in a restricted form)—which, in turn, allows it to avoid the worst features of theistic virtue accounts: namely, their inability to account for God's capability of generating new moral obligations simply by issuing commands, which is necessary to ground individual obligation and personal calling.

Some Objections

Despite these advantages, the Kierkegaardian ethic I have defended faces several potential objections that need to be addressed. Some of these I have dealt with already, in

[110]As discussed in the final section of chapter two ("The Problem of Moral Obligation for Virtue Readings of Kierkegaard").

[111]The phrase "because of" here refers to proximate reasons, rather than ultimate reasons. Recall, also, the closing remarks of section two ("Expansion and Development"), which explain the need for the qualifier, "most." Scripture records God as often commanding the Israelites to obey Him, but, as we have discussed, the obligation to obey God holds prior to and independently of this command.

the process of formulating and developing the view. In closing, I will raise, and respond to, what I anticipate to be the most prominent objections I have not yet addressed. Fortunately, none of these objections is unique to the Kierkegaardian view: most are objections leveled at DCT—objections that apply also to the Kierkegaardian ethic because of its substantial overlap with DCT—and already have been addressed adequately by divine command theorists. In such cases, I will rehearse the responses given by proponents of DCT that seem to me adequate for meeting the objection, and, where applicable, discuss what is unique about the Kierkegaardian ethic pertaining to the issue in question. However, the final objection, though not unique to the Kierkegaardian ethic, is perhaps uniquely *difficult* for the Kierkegaardian; consequently, I will devote a disproportionate amount of attention to the task of developing and addressing this problem.

The Problem of Intolerance

The first objection I anticipate being raised against the Kierkegaardian ethic is that it fosters intolerance toward those with rival views, both those who hold opposing theological views and those who hold non-theistic views of ethics. This is not a unique problem for the Kierkegaardian ethic, of course, but rather an objection that often is raised against religious ethics, in general. Nevertheless, the objection is so often raised—and even more frequently and forcefully in light of much recent violence in the name of religious fundamentalism—that I feel a brief response is necessary.

The problem of intolerance actually is two objections combined. The first, which Quinn calls “the divisiveness objection,” [112] is the claim that, wherever ethics is

[112]Quinn, “God and Morality,” 573-5.

constructed on a religious foundation, intense moral disagreement is bound to follow. In ethics, the only hope for rational dialogue—not to mention consensus—is if religion is left out of the matter, altogether. The second part of the objection claims that the moral disagreement and divisiveness generated by religious ethics encourage intolerance toward those who hold differing views. Not uncommonly, this intolerance ultimately leads to violence—and violence in the name of duty, at that.

To answer these objections, we first have to separate legitimate theoretical concerns about religious ethics from concerns about its potential for abuse. Typically, those who voice the (supposed) problem of intolerance—especially its second part—have in mind the latter, though it really is only the former that would constitute a problem for the religious ethicist. The potential-for-abuse version of the objection simply is fallacious. In addition to the obvious *ad hominem* nature of this objection, it should be noted that virtually any theory of practical significance, no matter how lofty, humane, or pure its original intent, can be—and typically is—(mis)used by someone for base and immoral ends. If this were a legitimate critique, it would be an equally damning one for every ethic, religious and secular alike. There is no logical connection between moral disagreement and intolerance, much less between moral disagreement and violence toward those holding opposing views. That many have done evil in the name of religion, in general, and in the name of some religious ethic, in particular, is undeniable. But this proves nothing about the veracity of either the religions or ethics in whose name such acts have been committed. The inference from "horrible things have been done in the name of *p*" to "*p* is false" simply is invalid.

On the other hand, if the objection is supposed to constitute a theoretical problem, it is hard to see what the purported problem is. If the claim is simply that a religious ethic (Kierkegaardian or otherwise) is likely to be disputed by many people, then the claim certainly is true but hardly constitutes an objection, since the same is true of all secular ethics. If the claim is that one's defending a religious ethic precludes one's engaging in rational ethical discourse and objective deliberation (where "objective" refers to some property of which secular ethicists are capable), then the claim is obviously false. If the claim is that religious ethics impair the way to ethical consensus, then, while possibly true, the claim, once again, hardly constitutes an objection. As Adams and Quinn both note, ". . . it seems utterly unrealistic to expect agreement on all matters of moral and political principle as long as disagreement in moral theory persists," and yet, ". . . nothing in the history of modern secular moral theory gives us reason to expect that general agreement on a single comprehensive moral theory will ever be achieved or that, if achieved, it would long endure in a climate of free inquiry."[113] What this means, then, is that advocating a religious ethic—whether DCT, the Kierkegaardian ethic, or any other—does not, by itself, make the prospects of ethical consensus any worse; but if we refrain from advocating such an ethic merely out of worry that it will be divisive, we forfeit the opportunity of defending what might be the truth. In order to decide whether a religious ethic is plausible, it must be "subject to testing by public critical scrutiny in the

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[113]Quinn, "God and Morality," 574. See also Robert M. Adams, "Religious Ethics in a Pluralistic Society," in *Prospects for a Common Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and J. P. Reader, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 93-113.

marketplace of ideas"[114]—which is to say, an ethic should be publicly advocated and defended by those who are inclined to believe it.

The Problem of Moral Diversity

A slightly more difficult problem concerns the fact that, especially when we compare different cultural practices, we find that there are large groups of people who do not share each others' moral judgments. Although this observation often is used to construct arguments (often grossly fallacious) for ethical relativism—arguments I will not address—it also, when applied to the Kierkegaardian ethic, raises the following, pointed question: How can the Kierkegaardian account for the fact that many people apparently fail to discern the moral obligations that are most basic in the Kierkegaardian ethic, such as the obligation of unconditional obedience to God and the obligation of agape love? Is not the Kierkegaardian committed to claiming that, by and large, defective moral judgment obtains on a mass, even societal scale? And if so, does not this serve as a *reductio* against the theory?

The answer Kierkegaard suggests in response to this question varies depending on the moral obligation(s) in question. In regard to the particular obligation of unconditional obedience to God, Kierkegaard apparently thinks that, by and large, people are (to quote

[114]Quinn, "God and Morality," 574. Quinn makes two additional points about the divisiveness objection that are worth repeating. "First, religious disagreement does not inevitably lead to disagreement about moral principles." That is, a Kantian, a divine command theorist, a utilitarian, a Thomist, and a Kierkegaardian all can agree that, for example, torturing innocents for fun is morally wrong, even though they disagree both on religious matters and on the question of *why* the action is wrong. "Second, not all moral disagreement is decisive. A Kierkegaardian Christian may think that Mother Teresa was only doing her duty toward her neighbor as specified by the Love Commandment in the Gospels, when she devoted herself to caring for wretched people in India, and regret the failure of the rest of us to satisfy her high standard of duty. One of her secular admirers may believe that much of the good she did was supererogatory . . . . But if they agree that she did a great deal of good for others and that the earth would be better off if it had on it more people like her in this respect, their disagreement . . . is not apt to be especially divisive" (ibid.).

the apostle Paul) without excuse. Though he never says so explicitly, Kierkegaard at times suggests that he, like Calvin, holds the view that man has been created with an immediate sense of the divine (*Sensus Divinitatis*).[115] Kierkegaard regards the "inability" to discern God's existence—and, by proxy, one's obligation to God—to originate in the will, not the intellect or the conscience. For this reason, any "ignorance" of God's existence and the duty to obey Him is culpable.

Whether a contemporary Kierkegaardian should follow Kierkegaard in this judgment is another matter. It is one thing to argue—as Plantinga and many other Christian philosophers do—that the *Sensus Divinitatis* is a source of warranted theistic belief; it is another to claim that failure to believe in God always is unwarranted. Nevertheless, many theists will find Kierkegaard's claim that unbelief originates in the will rather than the intellect or conscience to be true in many, if not all, cases.

Regardless, the Kierkegaardian may regard some other moral obligations as *genuinely* unknown to many or even most persons, and may—or may not—regard this as a culpable kind of moral ignorance.[116] One of the most prominent effects of sin is its ability to impair moral judgment—both that of individuals and of groups (or "the crowd," to use Kierkegaard's term). The moral intuitions of fallen creatures often are unreliable; practices that seem perfectly "natural" may well be at odds with the divine plan for human flourishing. Kierkegaard's discussion of agape vs. preferential love certainly suggests this point. One could add that if many of the predominant cultural practices and

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[115]C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard on Religious Authority: The Problem of the Criterion," *Faith and Philosophy*, 17 (2000): 48-67. See especially section four, pp. 62-4.

[116]Whether one conceives of this ignorance as culpable depends on how one views the Fall, its effects, and individuals' relation to it.

institutions of some society are immoral or otherwise defective—especially those practices and institutions pertaining to children's' upbringing—then this plausibly could engender defective moral vision on a wide scale.

For fallen creatures like ourselves, the obligation to love, Kierkegaard thinks, must be divinely revealed. He claims that "no intimation is to be found in paganism" of the Christian conception of neighbor love.[117] The obligation of agape love—and all the stringent self-sacrifice it entails—must be revealed via divine command, even if it is something that humans originally were intended to be able to discern "on their own"—that is, with the moral faculties with which humans were created. Apart from this divine revelation, the obligation of agape love remains unknown to the world.[118] In Kierkegaard's view, each person should begin with her own relationship to God and learn the moral law from Him directly, rather than from the world, for the latter prefers to make the requirements of morality more "sensible" and lenient, more compatible with natural human inclinations. Speaking of the "mutiny against God" by which the world tries to bring it about that "it ultimately is people who determine the Law's requirement instead of God," Kierkegaard writes,

> . . . God wants each individual, for the sake of certainty and of equality and of responsibility, to learn for himself the Law's requirement. When this is the case, there is durability in existence, because God has a firm hold on it. There is no

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[117]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 44.

[118]As discussed in chapter three, Evans criticizes Kierkegaard on this point, arguing that it is implausible that the obligation to love the neighbor was unknown in paganism. Whether Kierkegaard is right depends, I think, on how we understand the command to love the neighbor and what we understand its implications to be. If the obligation to love the neighbor is taken to be coextensive with the whole of the moral law, then it indeed seems implausible to claim that there is no knowledge of it prior to and outside of the special revelation. If, on the other hand, Kierkegaard's conception of neighbor love is something more specific than this—the obligation of a kind of love that is self-sacrificing and exemplificatory of the Christian virtues, for example—then it may well be that no such obligation is recognized in "paganism"—at least, as Kierkegaard intends the term.

> vortex, because each individual begins, not with "the others" and therefore not with evasions and excuses, but begins with the God-relationship and therefore stands firm and thereby also stops, as far as he reaches, the dizziness that is the beginning of mutiny.[119]

The idea that the requirements of the moral law must be both grounded in and learned from man's relation to God, rather than man's relation to man, could—if defensible—account for much moral confusion in the world.

Thus, Kierkegaard's answer to the problem of widespread moral ignorance is, in short, that "the world does not understand what love is."[120] The secular ethics of the world are constructed on the assumption that love is not obligatory, that something much less stringent—respect for others' life, property, basic rights, individual pursuit of happiness, etc.—serves as the basis of one's duty to others. Worldly love consists in "hold[ing] together in self-love with some other self-loving people, particularly with many other self-loving people . . . ."[121] The idea that we owe others—even those with whom we have no friendship, familial connection, or other preferential relationship—Christian agape love—especially in the radically self-sacrificial form that Kierkegaard explicates it—is foreign to worldly common sense. If Kierkegaard is right about

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[119]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 118. In the passage leading up to the one quoted here, Kierkegaard writes,

> Only when all of us, each one separately, receive our orders at one place, if I may put it this way, and then each one separately unconditionally obeys the same orders, only then are there substance and purpose and truth and actuality in existence. Inasmuch as the order is one and the same, one person could of course be informed of it by another—provided it was certain or at least certain enough that this other person communicated the right thing. Nevertheless, it would still be a disorder, since it conflicts with God's order, because God wants each individual, for the sake of certainty and of equality and of responsibility, to learn for himself the Law's requirement (ibid., 117-8).

I think Kierkegaard goes too far in his claim, if he means it literally rather than rhetorically, that a moral state in which we learn some of God's requirements from others must be one of "disorder." Taken literally, this would indicate an undue pessimism on Kierkegaard's part concerning the possibility of authentic Christian community.

[120]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 119.

[121]Ibid.

neighbor love, then it is not surprising that most people fail to discern many of their moral obligations.

Of course, whether Kierkegaard expounds the requirements of Christian love entirely accurately is another question. Perhaps, as many people believe, many of the actions Kierkegaard regards as morally obligatory are, in fact, supererogatory, in which case peoples' "failure" to perceive these duties requires no error theory. The response I have discussed is intended to explain the resources available to the Kierkegaardian for responding to the problem of moral diversity; the issue of the degree to which Kierkegaard correctly discerns the content of our moral obligations must be decided separately.

The Problem of Moral Autonomy

A third objection concerns a worry some undoubtedly will have about the implications of the Kierkegaardian ethic for moral autonomy. It often is charged that moral action is possible for us only if our wills are free and autonomous. If morality is "given to us"—whether through divinely issued commands or through a divinely created order that manifests divine intentions—then the situation is one of heteronomy of the will, in which case genuine moral action is impossible. This worry is tied to an objection voiced earlier concerning the way that our status as "bond servants" arises from divine creation: God's creating us (says the critic) does not entail that He *owns* us—that we literally *belong* to Him—for any state of affairs in which one rational being owns another is an immoral state of affairs. Human persons are autonomous moral agents and must be treated as such. Since God is perfectly good, He upholds all His obligations, including

the obligation to treat persons with the respect they deserve, which precludes His owning anyone.

The Kierkegaardian response to this objection comes in three parts.[122] The first part challenges the Enlightenment assumptions that motivate the objection. Kierkegaard argues that the Enlightenment ideal of human autonomy, which seeks a kind of freedom and morality that excludes God, really is nothing more than a thinly-disguised attempt at "mutiny" against God. Following his claim in *Works of Love* that we are bond servants to God and thus belong to Him in every "thought," "feeling," and "movement," Kierkegaard writes,

> Yet this bond service is found [in the world today] to be a burdensome encumbrance and therefore there is a more or less open intent to depose God in order to install human beings—in the rights of humanity? No, that is not needed; God has already done that—in the rights of God. If God is dismissed, the place will indeed be vacant.[123]

The Enlightenment ideal of autonomy, Kierkegaard thinks, is an illusion, a chimera born of human pride and rebellion. As mentioned in chapter one, Kierkegaard regards the Kantian view of morality-as-self-legislation as "lawlessness" and as "not being rigorously earnest any more than Sancho Panza's self-administered blows to his own bottom were vigorous."[124] Kierkegaard's response to the objection that we cannot literally belong to

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[122]The following response is adapted, almost entirely, from Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*. For a more in-depth version of this response, see pp. 23-6, 127-39, 151-3, and 303-4.

[123]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 115.

[124]See chapter one, section one ("'Kierkegaard's Ethics': The Challenges of Pseudonymity"). Whether Kierkegaard understands Kant rightly is, of course, another matter. For an argument that Kant does not pit divine authority against human autonomy, see Hare, *God's Call*, 87-119. Hare characterizes Kant's view as one in which ". . . we and God are jointly but non-symmetrically engaged in our moral life, and . . . we share our membership in the kingdom of God." This allows for the possibility of what Hare calls "autonomous submission," a "recapitulating in our wills what God has willed for our willing"—which, Hare argues, is a crucial part of the Kantian view (114-9). See also John E. Hare, "Kant on Recognizing Our Duties as God's Commands," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000): 459-78.

God would be the same: whereas human ownership of one person by another certainly is "abominable,"[125] God's ownership of us not only is permissible but something of a necessary state of affairs, given His relation to us as loving Creator, and the Enlightenment rejection of it simply is rebellion.[126]

The second part of the Kierkegaardian response is to argue for an alternative account of human autonomy. Kierkegaard writes,

> But also in the world of spirit, precisely this, to become one's own master, is the highest—and in love to help someone toward that, to become himself, free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone—that is the greatest beneficence.[127]

The Kierkegaardian ideal of moral autonomy lies in becoming oneself. In achieving this, the individual achieves the highest state of freedom and independence available to human beings. "Duty," Kierkegaard writes, "makes a person dependent and at the same moment eternally independent," for "without law, freedom does not exist at all, and it is law that gives freedom."[128] It is by upholding the divine law and "receiving oneself from God"—achieving one's own, divinely-appointed, individual vocation—that one achieves genuine freedom.[129] This brings us to the third part of Kierkegaard's response: his view that

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[125]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 115.

[126]On the objection that an all-just being cannot own a human being, see Brody, "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," 500. Brody thinks the objection is "difficult to assess," because it is unclear whether it is only that "it is wrong for one human being to possess another" or whether it is wrong, more generally, "that a human being be a possession, a piece of property." He notes that theists often have opted for the former, claiming, "This is evidenced in the Talmudic idea (*Kedushin*, 22[b]) that it is wrong for man to sell himself into slavery because God would object on the grounds that 'they are my slaves, and not the slaves of slaves'" (ibid., footnote 17).

[127]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 274.

[128]Ibid., 38-9.

[129]This is, of course, a somewhat paradoxical view, which highlights once again the complex—and, as noted in footnote 33, sometimes baffling—view of freedom found in Kierkegaard's writings. To

divine authority not only is not at odds with genuine moral autonomy, but actually requires it. As we already have discussed at length, the path toward becoming oneself is, at every step, essentially founded upon the individual's relationship to God. God's dispensing of both commands—to help one know one's obligations, both general and individual—and grace—to allow one to uphold these obligations—is indispensable for attaining the ethical ideal.[130]

The Problem of Divine Duties

The fourth objection focuses on a certain implication of the Kierkegaardian ethic that undoubtedly will trouble some theists: namely, that it follows from this ethic that God has no moral obligations. After all, if a moral obligation is a free *creature's* debt to God, then even if God could be indebted to Himself—which seems counterintuitive, to say the least—He by definition cannot have moral obligations, because He is not a created being (a creature). But God *does* have moral obligations. After all, if He did not, we would not be able to attribute moral goodness to Him. But an affirmation of God's moral goodness is an essential part of orthodox theism. God is described and depicted in Scripture as *being just*, as *keeping His promises*, and engaging in other such paradigmatically moral behaviors. Since the Kierkegaardian ethic is committed to denying even the possibility of divine duties, it must be rejected.

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fully address the issue of moral autonomy in Kierkegaard's thought, one would need to get to the bottom of the problem of freedom in his writings—a project I will not undertake here.

[130]For more on the relationship between moral autonomy and divine authority, see Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*, 1-22; Merold Westphal, "Commanded Love and Moral Autonomy: The Kierkegaard-Habermas Debate," in *Kierkegaard Studies 1998*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 1-22; Robert M. Adams, "Autonomy and Theological Ethics," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 123-7, and *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 270-6; and William Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, 117-22.

In response to this objection, the first thing to notice is that, if the objection were decisive, it would undermine divine command theory, as well. If moral action is constituted by one's obeying a divine command, as divine command theorists typically hold, then God acts morally only if He issues commands to Himself and obeys them dutifully—which most would regard as an absurd state of affairs. So it apparently follows from DCT, as well, that God does not have moral duties.[131]

Of course, spreading the guilt is not, by itself, an adequate response to the objection. The real solution to this problem is to reject the argument's second premise, that God has moral obligations. Although this initially might seem an unbearable bullet for the orthodox theist to have to bite, in fact, it is not. There are a number of alternatives to the standard version of the so-called duty model of divine goodness, according to which God's moral goodness is constituted by His perfectly upholding His moral obligations.[132] Most of these options deny the duty model altogether, but the most plausible option, it seems to me, is an analogical version of the duty model in which God

[131]See Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*, 130-1, Robert M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 115, and William Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosoph*y, ed. Michael D. Beaty (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 303-26.

[132]Perhaps the most famous example of this is Kant's ethics. Kant holds that God has no duties because He has a "holy will": that is, His will always is in perfect accordance with the moral law (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Third Edition, trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 32-3). It seems to me that Kant's argument here is primarily a semantic one: he claims that the term "obligation" "implies a constraint to an action," and since God's will is never restricted by the moral law, God is never under obligation. "Obligation," for Kant, always implies one's being *bound by* something. Semantics aside, I think Kant's view is mistaken primarily on metaphysical grounds, not only because it implies (or typically is taken to imply) that there is a moral law independent of God, but also because it most naturally suggests that—in principle, at least—creatures could "outgrow" their duties (perhaps in the afterlife), such that moral obligations no longer are binding upon them. As I argued in chapter three (pp. 104-8, and especially footnote 25, pp. 106-7), the view that it is possible for duty ever to "cease to exist as duty" for a person seems to me mistaken. My analysis in the present chapter of what I take a moral obligation to be, metaphysically speaking, further should clarify why I regard it to be impossible that persons *ever* cease to be morally obligated, regardless of the state of their will or natural inclinations.

necessarily acts *in accordance with* moral principles, though He is not actually *bound by* these principles—a view defended by Thomas V. Morris.[133] On this view, "employing the duty model as at least a partial explication of divine goodness need not commit one to holding that God actually has any duties at all"[134]—a claim that, while initially paradoxical, is rendered intelligible as follows:

> We human beings exist in a state of being *bound* by moral duty. In this state we act under obligation, either satisfying or contravening our duties. Because of his distinctive nature, God does not share our ontological status. Specifically, he does not share our relation to moral principles—that of being bound by some of these principles as duties. Nevertheless, God acts *in accordance with* those principles which would express duties for a moral agent in his relevant circumstances. And he does so necessarily. So although God does not literally have any duties on this construal of the duty model, we still can have well grounded expectations concerning divine conduct by knowing those moral principles which would govern the conduct of a perfect, duty bound moral agent who acted as God in fact does. We understand and anticipate God's activity by analogy with the behavior of a completely good moral agent. And this is an application of analogy in our understanding of God which in no way impedes that understanding.[135]

Morris argues convincingly, I think, that the analogical version of the duty model preserves everything orthodox theism wishes to claim about God's moral goodness, while avoiding the logical problems that arise from claiming that God is bound by moral duties.[136] By appropriating this account of God's moral goodness, the proponent of the

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[133]Thomas V. Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," in *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 26-41.

[134]Ibid., 36.

[135]Ibid., 36-7.

[136]One concern that may remain for some theists, however, is that God has some moral obligations to Himself: for example, a moral obligation to value His own honor, a moral obligation binding on each person of the Godhead to love the other persons of the Godhead, etc. It is true that the Kierkegaardian ethic cannot account for these as moral obligations. But this is not to say that it cannot account for them as obligations. It may well be the case that God "owes it to Himself," in some sense, to perform certain actions—that is, there may be obligations that God has to Himself that are non-moral. I think it plausible that moral obligations essentially involve relations in which at least one of the relata is a creature (or creatures). For this reason, I do not take the consequence of the Kierkegaardian ethic mentioned here to be worrisome.

Kierkegaardian ethic—or DCT, for that matter—can circumvent the aforementioned objection. Given that God does not have moral duties—a conclusion that seems to be forced by a number of independent considerations having nothing to do with Kierkegaard's ethic[137]—the fact that the Kierkegaardian ethic rules out the possibility of divine duties, by definition, is not especially problematic.

The Moral Objection

The final objection to the Kierkegaardian ethic that I will address—and the one that seems to me by far the most difficult for the Kierkegaardian—arises from concerns about the limits and constraints, or lack thereof, of divine commands. In response to DCT, the moral objection[138] often is raised: it follows from DCT (claim its critics) that God could make absolutely any action morally obligatory, no matter how horrendous, simply by commanding it. God could, for example, make torturing innocents for fun morally obligatory by issuing us the command to torture innocents for fun. But it is impossible that torturing innocents for fun is permissible, much less obligatory. So DCT is false.

The moral objection stems from DCT's endorsement of the sufficiency clause, and since the Kierkegaardian ethic shares this commitment, the objection also may be

[137]For example, the line of reasoning that leads Morris to this conclusion begins with considerations of God's libertarian freedom and necessary goodness, which, when combined, apparently entail a contradiction if God's goodness is even partly construed along the lines of the duty model.

[138]This objection stems from the Euthyphro dilemma, and it sometimes is referred to as "the arbitrariness objection." This title can be misleading, however, because another standard objection stemming from the Euthyphro dilemma more aptly deserves the title: namely, the objection that, if good actions are good solely because God commands them, then God has no reason to command acts like loving one's neighbor over acts like murdering one's neighbor, since either would be equally good if God commanded it—in which case God's choice of which actions to command is completely arbitrary. I thus have opted for the title, "the moral objection," since no other title really is standard and this one seems to convey better than most the main thrust of the objection.

raised against it. In both cases, the initial response is the same, and it is one that already has been mentioned: it is the commands of a *loving* God—or, even better, the commands of God, who is essentially loving—that impose moral obligations. God's nature imposes restrictions on His actions, in general,[139] and one specific way it does so is that His loving nature constrains what kinds of commands He could issue. There are many actions such that God's commanding us to perform them would be inconsistent with His loving us; presumably, torturing innocents for fun is one of these.[140]

This, however, is a very cursory answer to a very difficult problem, and the reader likely would balk—no doubt, justifiably—if this were all that a proponent of the sufficiency clause had to say about the matter. A Kierkegaardian, in particular, must say more about the issue, given that Abraham is presented in *Fear and Trembling* as being praiseworthy for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and given that Kierkegaard instructs us

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[139]For example, God's holiness precludes His sinning, His omniscience precludes His (literally) forgetting, His omnipotence precludes His creating rocks so heavy He cannot lift them, etc. The restrictions placed on divine action by God's possessing essential qualities have led some to deny that God has a nature. One of the best treatments of this problem is found in Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* Plantinga argues forcefully that the most prominent alternatives to the view that God has a nature all are plagued by serious problems.

[140]A slightly different question can be raised about the Kierkegaardian ethic that does not pertain to a standard version of DCT. The objection concerns the constraints of divine creation and is raised by the following question: Could God have created the world such that certain things possessed a vicious or "immoral" teleology? Could He, for example, have created a free, rational being whose *telos* or flourishing included its constantly engaging in acts of wanton cruelty? If so, then it appears that God's creating such a being would reveal part of His antecedent will—namely, that this being freely engage in acts of wanton cruelty—in which case God brings it about that horrendous acts are, for this creature, morally obligatory. The response to this objection is both fairly obvious and structurally similar to the response to the standard objection raised against DCT. If it were possible for such an essence to be instantiated, God would not create its instantiation, because—as noted—in doing so He thereby would be revealing His antecedent will that this being engage in acts of wanton cruelty. But God's antecedent will is restricted here in the same way that His commands are restricted: namely, by His perfectly good and perfectly loving nature. God can neither command nor antecedently will anything that is inconsistent with these aspects of His nature; thus, divine love and goodness place restrictions on divine creation, just as they place limits on the range of divine commands. However, this reveals that the assumption with which we began—that it is possible for an essence like the one described to be instantiated by something in God's creation—is false. Since God is *essentially* loving and good, there is no possible world in which He creates an instantiation of any such essence.

in *Works of Love* that our love for God requires “unconditional obedience, even if what he requires of you might seem to you to be to your own harm, indeed, harmful to his cause.”[141] Is not Kierkegaard implicitly claiming that God can make absolutely any action morally obligatory? And if so, must we not reject Kierkegaard's ethic—or at least modify it significantly to make it tenable?

Evans addresses this problem at some length, focusing specifically on the question raised by *Fear and Trembling* of whether God could command child sacrifice of any of us today.[142] He concludes that, whereas Abraham was rationally justified in believing that God had commanded him to sacrifice his child, no one today could be rationally justified in believing God to have issued her a similar command, except in the possible case “where God miraculously intervenes to causally determine an individual to believe this is what God requires,” in which case, “the belief is one that the person has no responsibility for.”[143] Although, for reasons I will explain shortly, I do not find Evans’s solution to the problem entirely satisfying, his treatment of the issue raises an important point. The moral objection actually is two different objections. One concerns *a metaphysical issue*—whether God could, in fact, make horrendous acts morally obligatory—and the other concerns *an epistemic/hermeneutic issue*—whether one ever could be justified in believing that God has issued one a command to perform some action that *seems* to oneself to be *ultima facie* bad or evil: an action that, in short, runs

[141]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 20.

[142]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 304-18.

[143]Ibid., 315, footnote 9.

directly counter to one's deepest moral intuitions.[144] The first objection is much easier to answer: God's essentially good and loving nature insures that *if* some action is in fact *ultima facie* bad, evil, or unloving, then God cannot command that it be performed.[145] But this does not, by itself, resolve the problem raised by *Fear and Trembling*, because it does not tell one *which* acts are *in fact* bad or evil. The epistemic/hermeneutic version of the moral objection, then, turns out to be significantly more challenging.

In what follows, I will try to explain in more depth exactly why the issue is so difficult—and perhaps even intractable. Rather than survey all the philosophers, or even all the Kierkegaard scholars, who have addressed this issue (a task for a project devoted just to this topic), I will focus on Evans's treatment of the problem, which I take to be one of the best in the contemporary literature, using it as a representative example of why, in my view, no completely satisfying solution to the problem presently is available. Following this, I will sketch what I take to be Kierkegaard's own "solution" to the problem. I will not, however, undertake either to defend or critique Kierkegaard's solution, as the problems and issues it raises are too numerous to address adequately here—though I assume my use of scare-quotes around "solution" conveys, from the outset, my reservations about its prospects. I will end the section with a word about why I do not think it entirely inappropriate to leave the issue unresolved for the purposes of the present project.

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[144]Kant certainly recognized the epistemological dimension of the issue, as Evans notes: "Kant argues that we can know with certainty that killing a child is wrong, but we could not know with certainty that a voice or vision commanding such an action is truly from God" (ibid., 306). The Kantian verdict is that Abraham should have rebuked the voice commanding him to sacrifice Isaac—perhaps (we could add) reminding himself that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14, NRSV). Kant's reasoning relies crucially on the assumption that knowledge of God is obtained only through knowledge of the moral law (see Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, 119)—an assumption Kierkegaard rejects.

[145]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 316-18.

The initial reason the epistemic/hermeneutic version of the moral objection (henceforth: "the epistemic problem") is so pointed is that there seems to be a fundamental tension between what the Christian believes about God *qua* loving being and what she believes about God *qua* transcendent being—or, at least, there is a fundamental tension when one combines these theological tenets with an obvious and general observation about the human condition. The believer trusts that God, *qua* loving being, will treat her only in ways that, ultimately, are in her own best interest,[146] and will issue only commands that, ultimately, are aimed at her own and others' flourishing. But she also believes that, *qua* transcendent being, God *could* behave toward her in ways that *seem* to her (at the time, at least) indifferent, unloving, or even hateful, and that He *could* issue her some command that *seems* to be directing her to do something bad—even evil.

By itself, this juxtaposition does not create an insurmountable problem: the believer could, in all such cases, believe that her own, limited understanding is to blame, so that, were she capable of knowing everything God knows, she would see the *ultima facie* goodness and love of all that God does and commands. This seems to be the response Kierkegaard favors, because he holds that humans do not, by their own lights, know what genuine love (neighbor love) really is; fallen humankind in its "natural" state must be taught what love is by a divine revelation. If we are justified in believing this, then we are justified in doubting our intuitions about which acts are (and are not) loving, and about what a loving God would (and would not) command. Thus, Kierkegaard seems to be placing the emphasis on divine transcendence, suggesting that God could issue a command—such as the one He issues to Abraham—that *appears* to us unloving

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[146]Rom. 8:28.

but *in fact* is an expression of divine love, and that we—as essentially finite, limited, creatures—should keep this fact in mind and simply obey what we are commanded.

The epistemic problem arises, however, when we take into account that humans are doxastically fallible creatures, prone to confusion, misunderstanding, errors of judgment, and deception of all kinds (both self-induced and at the hands of others): more specifically, the problem arises when we take into account that the believer *knows* that this is the human condition and that it applies to her judgments about God's revealed will. Given this fact, the believer is faced with a choice whenever she finds herself in a situation in which it seems to her *both* that God is issuing her a command *and* that the command being issued to her is not something a loving God would command. The choice is between (1) placing her trust in the former (that God has issued her a command) and concluding that, despite appearances, the command is something good and morally obligatory for her to obey, and (2) placing her trust in the latter (that the command in question is not something a loving God would command) and concluding that the command must not, then, be from God, but rather from some other, untrustworthy source.[147]

[147]This same tension is palpable in scriptural exegesis. The claim that God is love (1 John 4:7-21) typically is regarded by Christians as one of the most important and revelatory statements about God's nature in the New Testament. Yet, throughout Scripture, not only is God's transcendence and its implications—that God's thoughts and ways are higher than our own (Isa. 55:9), and so forth—continually reaffirmed, but also Scripture is filled with accounts of God's issuing commands and acting in ways that, *prima facie* at least, seem incompatible with a perfectly loving nature. (God's treatment of Job and His command to Saul, through the prophet Samuel, to slaughter every Amalekite man, woman, child, infant, and beast (1 Sam. 15:1-3) provide two of the more obvious—though by no means only—examples.) For one who takes the whole of scripture to be inspired, this has a tendency to weaken the meaning that is conveyed by statements about God's attributes: God is love, but His love is nothing like the love with which we are familiar; God is good, but His goodness is nothing like what we think of as goodness; and so on. In short, the emphasis on transcendence pushes one toward (though not necessarily all the way to) negative theology. (Or—if we agree with Mill—it pushes the theist to asserting falsehoods. Mill writes, "To say that God's goodness may be different in kind from man's goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good? To assert in words what we do not think in meaning, is as suitable a definition as can be given of a moral falsehood. . . . All trust in a Revelation

This brings me to the issue of why Evans's treatment of the problem seems to me insufficient fully to resolve the difficulty. Evans focuses on the specific case of child sacrifice that *Fear and Trembling* raises. The dilemma for such an approach, however, is that this particular case either is representative of the more general problem under discussion, or it is not. Evans seems to want to have it both ways. On the one hand, he argues that the issue is *not* representative of the general problem, but, on the other hand, he offers a solution to this particular issue as if it *is* representative of the general problem—i.e, as if offering a solution to the particular problem solves the general problem. Let me explain.

Evans argues—convincingly, I think—that the central message of *Fear and Trembling* is that ". . . obedience to God may require the individual to oppose conventional moral views, and even suffer as a consequence of this nonconformity."[148] He goes on to argue, however, that this need not lead one to worry that one ever could be in a position in which one is rationally justified in believing that God has demanded of oneself that one sacrifice one's child to Him.[149] The reason it need not do so is that none of us is in the same epistemic situation as Abraham. More specifically, we—unlike

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presupposes a conviction that God's attributes are the same, in all but degree, with the best human attributes" (*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 4th ed. (London, 1872), 128-9; reprinted in Norman Kretzmann, "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality," in *Hamartia, The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition: Essays in Honor of John Crossett*, ed. Donald V. Stump, James A. Arieti, Lloyd Gerson, and Eleonore Stump (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 36)). But the alternative—insisting that God's love is qualitatively similar to human love, only infinitely more and perfect, and that we can, therefore, understand the implications of the scriptural claim that God is love—tends to lead one to deny the veracity, integrity, or authority of certain parts of scripture: namely, those passages in which God is depicted as doing or commanding something that seems—by one's own lights—unloving.

[148]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 314.

[149]With the possible exception of God's supernaturally bringing it about that one forms such a belief.

Abraham—are now at a point in history in which God has issued a command prohibiting child sacrifice. God neither gives contradictory commands nor revokes commands "that were given as universal and absolute in character," Evans claims, so we need not worry that any of us—as modern proponents of an ethic that includes the sufficiency clause—ever will be in a position in which child sacrifice is morally obligatory.[150] In short, Abraham's plight is unique to him (as one living prior to the command prohibiting child sacrifice) and could not become our own. The lesson that Kierkegaard[151] thinks Abraham should teach us, on Evans's reading, is that God can issue us commands that are "counter-cultural," in the sense of running directly counter to deeply-established social norms. This is the salient feature of Abraham's situation that could overlap one's own, at some point.[152] What could *not* ever be a common feature of Abraham's situation and one's own, Evans thinks, is one's being warranted in taking God to have issued oneself a command to sacrifice a child.

It is crucial to note that, under this interpretation, the story of Abraham really is not exemplificatory of the epistemic problem, because Abraham does not find himself in a situation in which he seriously doubts either that God has issued him a command or that he has misjudged the content of what God has commanded. Abraham's faith is exemplified by his willingness to obey God rather than social convention—not his

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[150]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 309.

[151]I take it that, on Evans's reading, it is Kierkegaard himself, even more than de Silentio, who is trying to convey this message. It is questionable whether de Silentio understands, in full, the message he "carries" to the reader—thus the opening Epigraph of *Fear and Trembling*. On this point, see C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: "Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 9-28.

[152]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 312-3.

willingness to perform an action that he is uncertain God has commanded. Abraham's plight *in a way* is contemporarily relevant—for we also could be commanded to defy the norms of our society—but the specifics of his situation (being warranted in believing he has been commanded by God to sacrifice his child) are not; thus, the epistemic issue is avoided.

Of course, if the problem is simply avoided, it is not solved, and herein lies the main difficulty for Evans's treatment of the issue. But before we address this problem, it is worth pausing to note several, initial features of Evans's approach that seem problematic. The first concerns his claim that our epistemic situation is fundamentally different from Abraham's, because God has subsequently issued a "universal" command prohibiting child sacrifice. The assumption here seems to be that God *never* will revoke a command previously issued to all persons, or issue to a particular individual a command that is different from what He has commanded all other people to do, thereby "calling out" the individual and making an exception of her. But what reason do we have to assume this? Evans's answer is that

> a God who revoked commands that were given as universal and absolute in character would be a God so inconsistent and unpredictable in character that it is questionable whether or not such a God would merit our obedience. . . . A God who gave contradictory commands could hardly be a God who could be counted on to fulfil [*sic*] his promises, and such a God would not seem to be a being to whom a relationship would necessarily be the highest human good.[153]

But this argument should leave the Kierkegaardian uneasy. Given that God is transcendent and His ways are beyond our understanding, what reason do we have for being certain that God will not call one out as an exception, as "the single individual," to use Kierkegaard's phrase? Does not divine transcendence, so far from ensuring

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[153]Ibid., 309.

predictability, actually ensure that God sometimes will behave in ways that are unpredictable to us? Why assume that God could not issue a command at t_1 to all persons not to *a*, and then single out a particular individual at t_2 and command her—for some reason not evident to the individual or to anyone else—to *a*?[154]

In fact, if Evans were right that God cannot give "contradictory commands," this would undermine the divine command theorist's solution to other scriptural accounts of so-called "immoralities of the patriarchs." Some of these (at least as traditionally interpreted) record accounts of God's issuing an individual a command to *a* that contradicts a previous, seemingly "universal" command not to *a*. So even if it is true that the story of Abraham does not include God's revoking any universal commands, there are other stories in Scripture that apparently do include this feature.[155] Adopting a solution that emphasizes the lack of any universal, divine prohibition on child sacrifice at the time God issued His command to Abraham, then, appears at best simply to move the focus to one of these other stories—stories in which God is recorded as commanding something that both seems (*prima facie*, at least) bad or evil *and* clearly is at odds with a previously-issued divine command.[156]

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[154]A similar point is raised by Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, 194.

[155]Of the standard three—the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the command to the Israelites to steal from the Egyptians, and the command to Hosea to marry a prostitute—the third, at least, displays this feature. A more troubling case, already mentioned, is God's command to Saul—issued well after the command not to murder, revealed in the Mosaic Law (Exod. 20:13)—to slaughter every Amalekite, *including children and infants*.

[156]One might worry that an additional difficulty for Evans's treatment of the problem—i.e., the approach of isolating the most troubling features of Abraham's plight and arguing that these are not features of a situation any of us could find ourselves in today—is that it seems, in a way, out of keeping with the spirit of *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes de Silentio writes,

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is. Or if Abraham perhaps did not do at all what the story tells, *if perhaps because of the local conditions of that day it*

This brings us to what, in my view, are the most serious difficulties with Evans's treatment of the problem. First, there appears to be a fundamental tension in his position. By introducing the general epistemic problem and immediately addressing, at length, the issue of child sacrifice that *Fear and Trembling* raises, Evans implies that he regards a solution to this particular issue to offer a solution to the general epistemic problem, as well. But if this were right, it would run contrary to the implications of his own analysis of *Fear and Trembling*, according to which Abraham's plight is not about the epistemic problem at all, but rather about the possibility of God's issuing "counter-cultural" commands. Thus Evans's dilemma: if his reading of *Fear and Trembling* is right, then Abraham's plight (as de Silentio presents it) *avoids* the epistemic problem—in which case, solving "the problem of Abraham" leaves the epistemic problem untouched.

Fear and Trembling aside, though, it appears that a solution to the epistemic problem that focuses on the particular example of child sacrifice as exclusively as Evans's solution does, cannot be generalized to other cases, both actual and merely possible, in which the epistemic problem does (or could) arise. Even if—contra the arguments I presented—he is right that no one today could find herself in Abraham's situation of being rationally justified in believing herself to have a binding moral obligation to sacrifice her child, this gives us no reason to assume that no individual

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> *was something entirely different*, then let us forget him, for what is the value of going to the trouble of remembering that past which cannot become a present (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 30, emphasis added).

If the "local conditions of the day" include some crucial feature that is lacking from our situation and that resolves the difficulty—say, that it is a feature of the former, but not the latter, that God had not yet revealed His Law, which, when revealed, includes a prohibition on child sacrifice—then the story of Abraham indeed loses its sting . . . but also, according to de Silentio, its relevance. I do not think this objection is compelling, however, because I think Evans plausibly can respond that the passage above is meant to highlight the fact that Abraham still *is* relevant, *in that* God still could issue any (or all) of us a "counter-cultural" command. See Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 312-4.

could find herself in a situation that has *all the salient features* of Abraham's situation: namely, a situation in which it seems to one *both* that God is issuing one a command to *a* and that one's *a*-ing is not something God would command, because *a*-ing is (by one's own lights) an *ultima facie* bad or evil action. Thus, offering a solution to the particular problem of Abraham is insufficient to resolve the general epistemic problem.

Interestingly, Evans seems, towards the end of his discussion, to concede this. Following his claim that "God could not command any act that is truly evil in the sense of being fundamentally bad," he notes,

> Of course, given that our understanding of good and evil is fallible, this is compatible with the possibility that God might command an action that appeared to be evil, at least initially.[157]

And shortly thereafter, he describes the troubling scenario we have been discussing—and seems to regard it as a genuine possibility:

> if confronted by commands apparently from God that are deeply and squarely antithetical to what is known to be good and loving, the believer in a divine command theory will be thrown into a quandary. Such a person might conclude that such commands do not really come from God, the being we have identified as the source of moral obligation. A second alternative, which may be compelling if the person is convinced that the command is from God, and firmly convinced that God is trustworthy, is to rethink what is good and loving. . . . Yet another alternative, if a person is convinced that a command which is fundamentally unloving did come from the being the individual had been calling 'God', would be to say that there is no such being as God; the being previously regarded as God is not a being worthy of our total devotion.[158]

What this means, I take it, is that the *general* problem still stands: there is nothing about our contemporary situation that precludes a believer's facing a situation analogous to Abraham's in all the morally salient ways, even if (contra my previous arguments) Evans

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[157]Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 315.

[158]Ibid., 316.

is right that we can be sure the *particular* case of actually being commanded by God to sacrifice a child could not arise for anyone today.[159]

Thus far, we have been discussing the discussion to which Kierkegaard's writings (especially *Fear and Trembling*) give rise. What, then, does Kierkegaard himself have to say about the epistemic version of the moral objection? Surprisingly, Kierkegaard often gives the impression in his signed writings that he believes there is no problem at all. The "problem," he seems to think, is nothing more than a diversionary tactic that people often use: namely, feigning ignorance about God's will in order to justify their own willful disobedience.

> This is why we human beings, sly as always with regard to God and divine truth, have directed all our attention to understanding, to knowing. We make out as if the difficulty were there and as if it would follow naturally that if we only understand the right it follows automatically that we do it. What a grievous misunderstanding or a sly fabrication![160]

In speaking about Scripture—which, for many believers, is the most important source of knowledge of God's commands—Kierkegaard makes this point regarding the supposed hermeneutical obstacles:

> . . . oh, how enormously complicated—strictly speaking, how much belongs to "God's Word"? Which books are authentic? Are they really by the apostles, and are the apostles really trustworthy? Have they personally seen everything, or have they perhaps only heard about various things from others? As for ways of reading, there are thirty thousand different ways. And then this crowd or crush of scholars and opinions, and learned opinions and unlearned opinions about how the particular passage is to be understood ….. [*sic*] is it not true that all this seems to be rather complicated? . . . All this interpreting and interpreting and scholarly research and new scholarly research that is produced on the solemn and serious principle that it is

[159]Wainwright's version of the critique that Evans "unduly sanitizes Johannes's message" focuses on the issue of whether (contra Evans) God could bring it about, in the contemporary context, that an individual is warranted in believing that God has commanded of her an act like child sacrifice, without thereby undermining the individual's freedom to obey. See Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, 194-5.

[160]Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 115-6.

> in order to understand God's Word properly—look more closely and you will see that it is in order to defend oneself against God's Word.
> . . . The most limited poor creature cannot truthfully deny being able to understand the requirement—but it is tough for flesh and blood to will to understand it and to have to act accordingly.[161]

The difficulty, Kierkegaard thinks, is not the task of understanding God's requirements, because

> [t]here can be no reason in existence unless every man may be assumed to have as much understanding as he needs, if he will honestly labor. If he has great talents and can also raise many doubts, so also he must have powers in himself to gain understanding, if he seriously wills it.[162]

Since a genuine lack of understanding would impair ethical progress, and the possibility of ethical progress is possessed essentially by everyone, lack of understanding is not, Kierkegaard thinks, a genuine encumbrance for anyone.[163] The real problem, rather, is that "every person—the most knowing and the most limited—is in his knowing far beyond what he is in his life or what his life expresses"—that is, the amount of each individual's knowledge of God's requirements is far greater than the degree of his obedience to those requirements.[164]

Interestingly, even in *Fear and Trembling*, the epistemic issue is almost entirely—and very conspicuously—absent from the discussion (contra Sartre and other existentialists, who have tended to read the issue back into the text).[165] The assumption

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[161]Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 25 and 34-5.

[162]Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / The Book on Adler*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Everyman's Library, 1994), 118. This quote is from the latter text.

[163]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 346 and 356.

[164]Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 118.

[165]Again, I think this lends support to Evans's basic reading of *Fear and Trembling*—i.e., that the text is not about the epistemic problem, but about God's ability to issue "counter-cultural" commands—which suggests that the problem lies with de Silentio's avoidance of what is, arguably, the most difficult issue raised by the story of Abraham.

seems to be that Abraham was certain that God had issued him a command to sacrifice Isaac.[166] There is no indication that Abraham doubts whether the one issuing him the command really was God, and no indication that Abraham doubts whether the command issued to him really was to sacrifice Isaac. Johannes de Silentio reports in his "Eulogy on Abraham" that

> [Abraham] *knew* it was God the Almighty who was testing [*prøvede*] him; he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he knew also that no sacrifice is too severe when God demands it—and he drew the knife.[167]

There are, of course, passages in Kierkegaard's writings that emphasize divine transcendence, some even suggesting the possibility that God might command one to do something of which it seems incomprehensible to one that God would command: thus the aforementioned quote from *Works of Love* in which Kierkegaard argues that we are to obey God even when it seems to us that God's command is harmful to us or even harmful to God's own cause. The way the passage continues—"for God's wisdom is beyond all comparison with yours, and God's governance has no obligation of responsibility in relation to your sagacity"—indicates that Kierkegaard has in mind here considerations of divine transcendence and the implications it has for the commands that God might issue. But note that, even here, Kierkegaard does not seem particularly worried that one might

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[166]As Outka notes, "Kierkegaard appears to assume without question that Abraham hears with certainty, for it is God who permits him to recognize that it is a divinely imposed trial" ("Religious and Moral Duty: Notes on *Fear and Trembling*," 236). Evans concurs: "It is noteworthy that *Fear and Trembling* does not discuss the question as to how Abraham came to know that God had asked him to perform the act. The book simply assumes that Abraham knows this and knows it with certainty" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 310).

[167]Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 22; emphasis added. There is some indication that de Silentio himself has worries about what it would be like to be in the shoes of "the knight of faith," for he questions what possibility of salvation there is for the individual if he "makes a mistake" or "has misunderstood the deity" (60-1), but—putting aside the fact that the passage from which these quotes are taken is more than a bit opaque—these comments do not seem to indicate that de Silentio thinks that *Abraham* doubted the source or content of the command issued to him or that Abraham was unwarranted in believing as he did.

find oneself in a situation in which, because of the nature of the command one believes oneself to have been issued, one is unsure whether the command really is from God and/or whether one has understood the command correctly. Anyone who *wants* to know what God requires of oneself will discover it soon enough:

> Christianity begins immediately with what *every* person *should become*. That is why Christianity calls itself a guide and rightfully so, because no one will futilely ask Christ, who is the Way, or Scripture, which is the guide, about what he must do—the questioner will find out immediately—if he himself *wants* to know.[168]

In this way, the emphasis in Kierkegaard's signed writings always is on *obedience*—on whether or not one will choose to do what one *knows*—if one is honest with oneself—God has commanded one to do.[169]

Cumulatively, all of this leaves the impression that Kierkegaard underestimates the problem. He certainly seems right that theists[170] can, and often do, use supposed hermeneutical difficulties as an excuse with which to avoid action and justify their disobedience, just as it is true that people can, and often do, use philosophical and theological quandaries to generate doubt and thereby justify their not making a decision about whether or not to believe (in Kierkegaard's sense of "believe"[171]) in God.

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[168]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 180.

[169]Thus Kierkegaard puts the issue not in terms of whether one *happens* to understand (a passive condition), but rather in terms of whether one "*wills* to understand."

[170]And it often seems that, by Kierkegaard's assessment, everyone is a theist of some kind or another. As Roberts notes, "A look at Kierkegaard's writings gives the impression that atheism was inconceivable to him. Indeed, he says, "but just as no one has ever proved [God's existence], so has there never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew (that the God exists) get control of their minds' [Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 3:662 (#3606)]" ("The Socratic Knowledge of God," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: "The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*,*"* ed. Robert Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 133).

[171]Kierkegaard regards belief in God as an act of the will, rather than an intellectual assent to some proposition (which arguably is both passive and involuntary). I have explored this issue more in "Passion, Reason, Will, and the Transition to Faith in Kierkegaard's *Fragments* and *Postscript*" (unpublished).

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that *all* such difficulties are mere facades, masking, via the help of self-deception, willful disobedience.

In fact, though, a careful reading of Kierkegaard reveals that he does not regard all epistemic/hermeneutical difficulties as contrived. He admits, for example, that there are difficult and obscure passages in Scripture; his point, however, is that this fact ought not be used as an excuse for not obeying the passages we do understand that issue clear commands to us:

> "But," you perhaps say, "there are so many obscure passages in the Bible, whole books that are practically riddles." To that I would answer: Before I have anything to do with this objection, it must be made by someone whose life manifests that he has scrupulously complied with all the passages that are easy to understand; is this the case with you? . . . In other words, when you are reading God's Word, it is not the obscure passages that bind you but what you understand, and with that you are to comply at once. If you understand only one single passage in all of Holy Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all, but you do not first have to sit down and ponder the obscure passages. God's Word is given in order that you shall act according to it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure passages. If you do not read God's Word in such a way that you consider that the least little bit you do understand instantly binds you to do accordingly, then you are not reading God's Word."[172]

The implication of Kierkegaard's writings, taken together, is that the only adequate response to the epistemic problem is the response of faith. The believer has *faith* that if the individual honestly seeks to know God's will, then God will reveal to him what he really needs to know and will not let him fall into dire moral error. He possesses a *hope* that, since God has commanded us to seek out His commandments and precepts,[173] Jesus's promise, "Seek, and you will find,"[174] applies not only to salvation, but also to

[172]Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, 29.

[173]1 Chron. 28:8; Mal. 2:7.

[174]Matt. 7:7.

knowledge of God's will as it applies to oneself, individually, on a daily basis, so that if God requires of one something beyond what He requires of all, ". . . God will surely let him understand and in that case will also help him further . . . ."[175] He places his *trust* in God that He works *all things* for good for those who love Him—including the believer's sincere seeking of His will.[176]

None of this is to deny that there are obscure and difficult passages in the Scripture; the Kierkegaardian view does not deny that one sometimes may honestly seek God's will and—for a time, at least—remain in question about what it is; it is not even to deny that one might find oneself in a situation in which one feels unsure whether one is perceiving a divine command being issued to oneself or whether one merely is being deceived. It advocates, rather, a confidence that, in the end, God will "see one through"—that God will not allow a loving servant and devoted disciple of Christ to fall into moral perdition in the process of honestly trying to discern and sincerely striving to obey God's will. It urges a belief that, if one but seeks God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, He will not let one perish, that God faithfully answers the one whose heart's cry is expressed by the words of the psalmist:

> With my whole heart I seek you;
> do not let me stray from your commandments.
> . . . Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
> and I will observe it to the end.
> Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
> and observe it with my whole heart.[177]

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[175]Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 67.

[176]Rom. 8:28. See Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 191.

[177]Ps. 119:10, 33-34, NRSV.

Nevertheless, none of this amounts to a theoretically satisfying solution to the problem, regardless of whether, in practice, this response is existentially adequate. Neither Kierkegaard nor his pseudonyms offer any *argument* that the apparent dilemma described in what I have called "the epistemic problem" in fact could not arise for anyone. Kierkegaard simply leaves us with an appeal to faith in the essential goodness and love of God. As it stands, then, the problem cannot be regarded as satisfactorily resolved—not from a theoretical standpoint, at any rate. Could the Kierkegaardian response be *developed into* a rigorous and/or fully satisfying solution? I will not attempt to answer this question here.[178] For now, I retreat—perhaps lamely, but I trust not completely unjustifiably—to the fact that the project at hand is not one of religious epistemology, but of religious metaethics, and thus, for present purposes, the epistemic problem—as well as the suggestion Kierkegaard offers towards a possible solution—can be bracketed. Since the metaethical version of the moral objection has been adequately answered in the literature on divine command theory, and since this response can be appropriated equally well by the proponent of the Kierkegaardian ethic, I will leave the issue here—saving, for another time, a fuller treatment of the epistemic version of the problem.

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[178]For more on the epistemic problem, see David B. Fletcher, "Particular Divine Moral Commands," in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher, and Mark Nelson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 145-61; Outka, "Religious and Moral Duty: Notes on *Fear and Trembling*"; Philip L. Quinn, "Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 195-212, and *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*; Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 277-91; and Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, 120-2 and 180-208.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to articulate the basic features of the ethic that seems to me most consistent with Kierkegaard's signed writings, and to develop and expand upon these ideas toward the end of constructing a theoretically rigorous metaethic. Creation, virtues, and divine commands each play a central role in this ethic: the ultimate grounding of our obligation to God lies in the nature of creation; the acquisition of the Christian virtues toward the end of becoming oneself is the central task and goal of ethico-religious existence; and divine commands provide the guidance for reaching this goal by way of revealing many universal obligations, as well as some individual obligations and—perhaps most importantly—one's unique calling. Though a central purpose of my project has been to demonstrate that creation and our resulting debt to God play a crucial role in Kierkegaard's ethic, it certainly is not my intent to diminish the importance of the roles that virtues and divine commands play in it, as well.

In fact, I have tried to make the case that, ultimately, an important *part* of Kierkegaard's ethic is a *kind* of virtue ethic (although not a standard one): many prominent themes of virtue ethics are developed in Kierkegaard's writings and occupy a central place in his ethic. And an important *part* of Kierkegaard's ethic is a *kind* of divine command ethic (although not a standard one): an action's being required by God (broadly understood) is logically necessary and sufficient for its being morally obligatory. Taken together, what these claims suggest is that there could be a kind of rapprochement of virtue ethics and divine command ethics. If these categories are flexible enough, one can be a proponent of both without conflict by endorsing the kind of ethical and metaethical view that Kierkegaard's writings suggest. This possibility of synthesizing virtue ethics

and divine command ethics is a feature of the Kierkegaardian view that many Christians may find attractive.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion:
A Sketch of Further Applications

Introduction

In closing, I would like to suggest, briefly, some further applications of the Kierkegaardian view of moral obligation, as I have defended it. The point of departure for these is the striking etymological connection between “guilt” and “debt” in Danish. As Louis Mackey points out,

> Kierkegaard's word for guilt (*Skyld*) means originally “debt.” To know oneself guilty in a religious sense is to know oneself *in debt to* God. The religious man *owes himself* completely to God.[1]

This connection suggests that the model of obligation found in Kierkegaard's writings also underlies his analyses of some other key Christian concepts. In this conclusion, I will attempt to apply the model of *moral obligation as a free creature's debt to God*, developed in chapter four, to the tasks of illuminating other parts of the Kierkegaardian corpus: specifically, of developing the interesting versions of the concepts of guilt, repentance, resignation, and worship that are found in it. The following are intended only as preliminary sketches—suggestions for further research that I hope to pursue at a later time.

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[1]Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 97. In the Danish bible, “forgive us our debts” (from the Lord's Prayer) is “*forlad os vor skyld*.”

On Moral Guilt

As discussed in chapter four, on the theory of obligation that Kierkegaard's writings suggest, all obligations are types of social debt, though only moral obligations are debts to God. This provides a way of explaining how obligations to God are importantly similar to other types of obligation, but it also allows one to account for the overriding nature of moral obligations. Our debt to God is, by far, our greatest and most pressing debt. It is our only debt that is fundamentally (rather than derivatively) infinite,[2] and it is that debt without which we could incur no other debt.

In addition to the metaethical advantages already discussed, this view of obligation has certain theological advantages, the first of which comes out in Kierkegaard's analysis of moral guilt. If a moral obligation is a debt to God, then moral guilt can be conceived fruitfully in terms of *defaulting on a debt to God*. Because it is an infinite debt, simply paying the "principle" on our debt to God requires everything we have: our perfect compliance with God's will at all times, not to mention a complete surrender of all we have—in the broad sense of ownership, including our time, our abilities, our unique talents, etc.—to Him. This implies that any part of the debt that is not repaid when God demands it cannot be repaid later.[3] In order to repay the amount of debt owed to God at time t_2, one must uphold God's will perfectly at this time, thus leaving no opportunity or resources at t_2 for making up a payment on which one defaulted

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[2]See chapter four, footnote 52.

[3]Kierkegaard warns against the temptation to believe that the passage of time itself mitigates this guilt: "If a person is guilty of something—if only some time passes, especially if during that time he seems to have made some improvement, how mitigated his guilt appears to him! But is this really so? Is it also the case that when the thoughtless person has in the next moment forgotten his guilt, it is then forgotten? . . . Is there any more accurate expression for how infinitely far a person is from fulfilling the requirement [of the Law] than this, that the distance is so great that he actually cannot begin to calculate it, cannot total up the account!" (*Works of Love*, 134).

at an earlier time, t_1. In short, once one has incurred moral guilt, there is nothing one can do to make amends for it oneself: as Kierkegaard puts it, "a past sin . . . can never be entirely annihilated in time."[4] This conception of guilt has obvious affinities with Christian theology. It helps to explain why one transgression makes one "guilty of the whole Law" and why there is a need for a substitutionary repayment on one's behalf in order to make one "right" with God. This, in turn, helps explain the Christian doctrine of atonement, of Christ's death as providing the satisfaction for our own debt of sin.[5] As Kierkegaard puts it,

> At the Communion table you are capable of less than nothing. At the Communion table it is you who are in the debt of sin, you who are separated from God by sin, you who are so infinitely far away, you who forfeited everything, you who dared not step forward; it is someone else who paid the debt, someone else who accomplished the reconciliation, someone else who brought you close to God, someone else who suffered and died in order to restore everything, someone else who steps forward for you. . . . You cannot be Christ's co-worker in connection

[4]*Pap*. V B 212:2 *n.d.*, 1844, reprinted in Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 453.

[5]It is important to note, however, that sin is distinct from guilt on the model Kierkegaard suggests. While guilt can be conceived in terms of debt, Kierkegaard thinks sin does not work like debt in at least this respect:

> . . . sin is a position that on its own develops an increasingly established continuity. The law for the growth of this continuity is not the same as the law for the increment of a debt or of a negation. For a debt does not grow because it is not paid; it grows every time it is increased. But sin grows every moment that one does not take leave of it (*Sickness Unto Death*, 106).

Here sin is defined as a state, a position of being oriented away from God's will. Every moment that one remains in this state, one commits "new" sin—or, perhaps more accurately, the sum total of one's sin increases. This is not necessarily in conflict with the view of moral guilt as a default on one's debt to God, however. It simply marks an important distinction between guilt and sin. Sin is a state in which one continually incurs new guilt because, first, one remains unrepentant of past sins, which is contrary to God's will, and, second, one is not presently oriented towards God's will, and thus one is continually in the process of defaulting on one's debt to God. Kierkegaard also implies that sin is distinguished from guilt in that one sins only if one is related to God in a certain way: ". . . what really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty one has the consciousness of existing before God" (ibid., 80). This leads Kierkegaard to give multiple, seemingly conflicting, perspectives on whether the guilt of the pagan constitutes sin. He writes,

> Therefore, from a higher point of view, it may be correct to regard paganism as immersed in sin, but the sin of paganism was essentially despairing ignorance of God, of existing before God; paganism is "to be without God in the world." Therefore, from another point of view, it is true that in the strictest sense the pagan did not sin, for he did not sin before God, and all sin is before God (ibid., 81).

This apparent conflict is what makes the issue, for Kierkegaard, a "dialectical" one.

> with the reconciliation, not in the remotest way. You are totally in debt; he is totally the satisfaction.[6]

Scripture teaches that the forgiveness of sins is the forgiving of a debt: in the Lord's Prayer, Christ teaches us to pray that God will "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."[7] Kierkegaard writes in *Works of Love* that forgiveness is a kind of loving act of forgetting—not a naïve ignorance or a self-deceived repression of something one knows, but rather a decision not to focus any more on the other's transgression, a decision to "hide it behind one's back."[8] In forgiving our sins, God erases the debts on which we have defaulted: He blots out our transgressions; He takes the debt "back into nothing."[9] In the same way, we forgive those who are indebted to us by their actions that have wronged us. We forgive the debt by a loving act of "forgetting."

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[6]Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 299. See also *Without Authority*, 157-8.

[7]Matt. 6:12, NRSV. The Greek word for "debt" used here means "sin" or "transgression"; in fact, Luke records this passage of the Lord's Prayer as "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, NRSV). Thus, both the etymology of the Greek and the juxtaposition of these two passages suggest that a sin is a kind of debt to God. But since Scriptures teach that we already are indebted to God as our loving Creator, this debt must be of a different kind than what we owe Him as Creator. I think this supports the interpretation that sin is a debt on which one has defaulted and no longer can repay: it is a debt that only can be forgiven or paid by someone else on one's behalf (or some combination of both, as Christian doctrine teaches).

[8]"It is blotted out, it is forgiven and forgotten, or, as Scripture says of what God forgives, it is hidden behind his back. But of course one is not ignorant of what is forgotten, since one is ignorant only of what one does not and never has known; what one has forgotten, one has known. Forgetting in this highest sense is therefore not the opposite of recollecting but of hoping. To hope is in thinking to give being; to forget is in thinking to take away being from that which nevertheless exists, to blot it out. . . . Forgetting, when God does it in relation to sin, is the opposite of creating, since to create is to bring forth from nothing, and to forget is to take back into nothing" (Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 295-6).

[9]Ibid.

On Repentance

Arguably, our most important way of making partial repayments toward our infinite debt to God is by loving Him. We have seen how love for the neighbor and for oneself is linked to love for God: to love the neighbor truly is to help the neighbor love God; to love oneself truly is to love God. But what does it mean to love God? Some of the best clues for answering this are found outside *Works of Love*. Kierkegaard writes in the journals that ". . . you who feel so far removed from your God, what else is your seeking God in repentance but loving God[?]"[10] And in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*:

> . . . a person can truly love God only when he loves him according to his own imperfection. Which love is this? It is the love that is born of repentance, which is more beautiful than any other love, for in it you love God. It is more faithful and more fervent than all other love, for in repentance it is God who loves you. In repentance, you receive everything from God, even the thanksgiving that you bring to him, so that even this is what the child's gift is to the eyes of the parents, a jest, a receiving of something that one has oneself given.[11]

To love God is, first and foremost for fallen creatures, to seek Him in repentance, for we all have failed to uphold God's will perfectly, and repentance is the act by which we demonstrate that we regret the damage to our relationship with God that this failure has caused, that we desire the relationship to be renewed, and that we are thankful to God that He has offered the means of its renewal.

Because we owe everything to God, we never are justified in insisting that we are in the right in opposition to His will. The Jutland priest who writes the "Ultimatum" at the end of *Either/Or* sees this clearly:

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[10]Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 3:33 (#2390), reprinted in Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 396. Note especially the heading: "*what it means to love God*."

[11]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 45-6.

> Yet Scripture says: You are not to argue with God. . . . When it says that you are not to argue with God, it means that you must not insist on being in the right in relation to God; you may argue with him only in such a way that you learn that you are in the wrong.[12]

In fact, the priest insists, this is what we should want: we should *want* to be in the wrong against God, because to admit that we are always in the wrong against God is to proclaim God's perfection, which is an act of worship, an expression of one's love for Him.[13]

Since repentance is tied essentially to man's capacity for disobedience, it involves, paradoxically, both man's greatest shortcoming (his disobedience) and his perfection (his *capacity* for disobedience). His perfection is freedom, which sets him apart from all the rest of creation and enables him to choose whether to obey God. Thus the priest writes,

> To be forbidden to argue with God indicates your perfection and in no way says that you are an inferior being who has no significance for him. The sparrow falls to the ground—in a way it is in the right in relation to God; the lily fades—in a way it is in the right in relation to God. Only man is wrong; to him alone is reserved what is denied to everything else—to be in the wrong in relation to God.[14]

Since obedience is not compulsory for man, his obedience can be an expression of love for God. But love but does not wish to be in the right in relation to the beloved, for

> wishing to be in the wrong is an expression of an infinite relationship, and wanting to be in the right, or finding it painful to be in the wrong, is an expression of a finite relationship! Hence it is upbuilding always to be in the wrong—because only the infinite builds up; the finite does not![15]

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[12]Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 344.

[13]Mackey explains that to say we are always in the wrong against God "is to say that [one] has no rights (*have altid Uret*) to maintain against God. God's claim on man is absolute, but man has no claim on God or the world or himself" (*Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 125).

[14]Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 344.

[15]Ibid., 348.

Repentance is a way of seeking God and expressing one's love for Him in light of—and in recognition of—one's fallen state:

> . . . this thought, that he is always in the wrong, is the wings upon which he soars above the finite. This is the longing with which he seeks God; this is the love in which he finds God.[16]

The thought on which repentance meditates—that in relation to God we are always in the wrong—is an unsettling thought that rouses us from complacency and "animates and inspires [us] to action"; it is an edifying thought that expresses "that God's love is always greater than our love."[17] It is the path by which reconciliation with God is sought.

On Resignation

Repentance is tied closely to *resignation*, a category both Johannes de Silentio and Johannes Climacus develop at length. Infinite resignation is the state in which one holds everything before God with an open hand, ready and willing for Him to take anything—and possibly everything—from one at any moment. It is a matter of having an "absolute commitment to the absolute" and relativising all one's other commitments. Resignation parallels repentance in several ways; in fact, they often seem to be two sides of the same coin. Repentance is the movement whereby one turns away from everything in one's life that is opposed to God's will, and resignation is the movement whereby one "cuts the roots" to all the worldly attachments that stand in the way of one's absolute commitment to God.[18] Both are movements essential to religious existence: according to

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[16]Ibid., 352-3.

[17]Ibid., 353.

[18]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 410. Interestingly, in his discussion of Agnes and the merman, de Silentio speaks of "the infinite movement of repentance" as being the movement just prior to "the movement by virtue of the absurd," thus suggesting a possible equation of infinite repentance

de Silentio, resignation is "the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith,"[19] and Johannes Climacus claims that repentance, "viewed religiously, will not have its day and then be over; . . . the consciousness of sin will not have its day and then be over—in that case we return to the esthetic."[20] The difference between repentance and resignation, however, is that the former is tied essentially to the consciousness of sin and forgiveness,[21] whereas the latter could be a response simply to the sovereignty, love, and authority of God.

Conceived in terms of our debt to God, resignation can be viewed as an act prompted by one's realization that one owes everything to God and that God's claim on oneself is thus absolute, while repentance can be viewed as an act prompted by one's realization that one has failed—likely on many occasions—to repay this debt in the ways God has commanded. Repentance is an act of acknowledging these past defaults and admitting that there is nothing one can do to repay them. In infinite resignation, one repays to God as much of the debt as one can, but this is not enough to repay one's past "missed payments." Again, this highlights the need for Christ's satisfaction of the debt on one's own behalf—the need for atonement and forgiveness.[22]

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and infinite resignation; at the very least, it suggests that infinite repentance is the analogous category in the merman's case (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 99).

[19]Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 46.

[20]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 524, footnote.

[21]Ibid., 524.

[22]For more on Kierkegaard's view of repentance and forgiveness, see Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 191-221. For more on the notion of resignation, see Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 406-11.

On Worship

Finally, the Kierkegaardian view of obligation contains important insights about Christian worship. The connection between worship and debt is captured in the Kierkegaardian insight that man is capable of *absolutely nothing* without God—a theme prevalent in both the *Postscript* and the non-pseudonymous discourses.[23] Scripture teaches that it is in God that we live and move and have our being,[24] and Kierkegaard develops this to its logical conclusion: man's dependence on God is absolute and unconditional. Man is indebted to God not merely for his initial creation, but for his continual endurance, for every power he possesses to do anything, including the very power to will.[25] What is striking is that Kierkegaard identifies this as man's perfection. In one of his most important early discourses—entitled, "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection"—Kierkegaard claims that the highest achievement for a human person "is this: that a person is fully convinced that he himself is capable of nothing, nothing at all."[26] To realize this is to realize the truth: as Mackey puts it, "Man's truth is his annihilation."[27] It is by coming to this realization, Kierkegaard thinks, that an individual first comes to know God:

[23]Climacus claims that the religious task is "to comprehend that a person is nothing at all before God" and "existentially expressing that the individual is capable of doing nothing himself. . . ." (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 461). Climacus writes this in the context of a discussion of *dying to immediacy*—a category that parallels de Silentio's category of infinite resignation—thus suggesting an interesting interrelation between resignation and worship.

[24]Acts 17:28.

[25]This provides an important clue, I think, to understanding Kierkegaard's view of freedom. Note, again, Climacus's claim that man "is capable of doing *nothing* himself. . . ." See also chapter four, footnote 33.

[26]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 307.

[27]Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 120.

> This view, that to need God is a human being's highest perfection, does indeed make life more difficult, but it also views life according to its perfection, and in this view a person, through the piecemeal experience of [this need], which is the right understanding with God, comes *to know God*.
>
> Insofar as a person does not know himself in such a way that he knows that he himself is capable of nothing at all, he does not actually become conscious in the deeper sense that God *is* [*er til*].[28]

By coming to the realization that one is capable of nothing without God, and by affirming its implications—especially concerning the extent to which one is indebted to God and the extent to which God is superior to oneself—one enters into worship. Anti-Climacus claims that to worship is to affirm and express the fact that God is wholly other, that there is an infinite qualitative difference between oneself and Him:

> The person who does not take offense *worships* in faith. But to worship, which is the expression of faith, is to express that the infinite, chasmic, qualitative abyss between [God and oneself] is confirmed.[29]

Climacus concurs, adding that worship is an aspect of the human *telos*:

> Precisely because there is the absolute difference between God and man, man expresses himself most perfectly when he absolutely expresses the difference. *Worship* is the maximum for a human being's relationship with God, and thereby for his likeness to God, since the qualities are absolutely different. But worship signifies that for him God is absolutely everything, and the worshiper is in turn the absolutely differentiating one. The absolutely differentiating one relates himself to his absolute telos, but *eo ipso* also to God.[30]

This reveals an important point about the human *telos* of communion with God. Creation—on the Kierkegaardian model—bears the imprint of divine intentions; the natures of the things God has created reflect part of His antecedent will for those things. We are creatures created for worship, created to achieve the end of realizing our own

[28]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 321.

[29]Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 129.

[30]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 413. See also 545-6, where Climacus ridicules "proofs" for God's existence, claiming that ". . . one demonstrates the existence of God by worship—not by demonstrations."

nothingness before God, the magnitude of our dependence on Him, and the absolute transcendence and authority of our Creator. This is the meaning of Climacus's initially perplexing claim that, in worship, man maximally expresses "his likeness to God, since the qualities are absolutely different." God has created man in His image for the purpose of communion with Him, but, paradoxically, man achieves this end by an act of "self annihilation" whereby He recognizes His own "nothingness" before—that is, *absolute* dependence upon—God. Kierkegaard asks in an early signed writing,

> Whom should the struggler desire to resemble other than God? But if he himself is something or wants to be something, this something is sufficient to hinder the resemblance. Only when he himself becomes nothing, only then can God illuminate him so that he resembles God. However great he is, he cannot manifest God's likeness; God can imprint himself in him only when he himself has become nothing.[31]

Thus Kierkegaard suggests an interesting interpretation of what it means for one to bear the image of God: one has the ability to become transparent and thereby allow God to "illuminate him," whereby the image of God is revealed. One's *telos* is to align one's own will with God's will to such an extent that one "rests transparently" in God—a state that Anti-Climacus identifies as faith:

> the formula for the state in which there is no despair at all: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula . . . is the definition of faith.[32]

In faith, an individual becomes the person God intends her to be: a transparent vessel that freely and purely displays His will. Man achieves his *telos* by coming to know God and to rest in His power, whereby he attains "the highest" condition of "be[ing] able to be an

[31]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 399.

[32]Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 131.

instrument in the hands of Governance [*Styrelse*]."[33] But to achieve this *telos* is to become a new creation: "Wherever God is in truth, there he is always creating. . . . [I]n becoming known by a person he wants to create in him a new human being."[34]

This supreme act of worship marks an essential distinction between religious existence, on the one hand, and aesthetic and ethical existence, on the other. Both the aesthete and the ethical individuals attempt to create themselves—albeit in radically different ways. But the religious individual *receives herself* as a gift from God.[35] By freely willing to manifest God's will absolutely, she becomes the self God intends her to be, but since this self in its content manifests God's will rather than her own will, it is a self that—by the individual's own consent—is determined by God: it is received rather than self-determined.[36] But it is in becoming this self that one achieves one's greatest fulfillment and joy, for this is the purpose for which one is lovingly created. Becoming oneself in this way, Kierkegaard thinks, is the only form of existence in which the self is finally and completely free of all the myriad forms of despair.

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[33]Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 86. See also 279.

[34]Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 325.

[35]As Mackey puts it, the religious individual "is aware that the self which is reduced to impotence in the presence of God is also upheld by the divine power. In his weakness he is sustained by a power not his own . . . . [He] *receives* himself as a gift from God" (*Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 97).

[36]This, perhaps more than anything else, highlights the irony in Kierkegaard's popularly being identified as an existentialist.

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