



## Kierkegaard and Asceticism

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**Abstract:** In *The Religion of Existence*, Noreen Khawaja suggests that Kierkegaard is an ascetic thinker. By this, she means that he regards religious striving as (1) requiring ceaseless renewal and (2) being an end in itself rather than a means to some further end. I raise challenges to both claims in Khawaja's proposal. I argue that the first claim stands in tension with Kierkegaard's contention that his infinitely demanding account of religious existence is meant merely as a corrective. The second claim, I maintain, does not fit well with his assertion that eternal salvation is at stake in religious striving.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard, Søren; asceticism; existentialism; religion; correctives; rhetoric; Pelagianism; afterlife; eternity.

In *The Religion of Existence*, Noreen Khawaja dramatically retells the story of existentialism.<sup>1</sup> She reframes the central existentialist ideal of authenticity by disclosing its deep parallels to the pietistic Lutheran notion of individual conversion. She then cements this link by explaining with care and incisiveness how both the ideal of authenticity and the notion of pietistic conversion have their roots in the history of Western asceticism (*RE* 68). The scope and depth of Khawaja's recounting of the existentialist tradition is breathtaking, and it rightly deserves praise.

In these comments, I wish to critique one part of Khawaja's narrative, the part having to do with the role she assigns to Søren Kierkegaard. Khawaja depicts Kierkegaard as a pivotal figure, someone who is justly regarded as the "father of existentialism" (*RE* 110). She credits him for among other things being the

chief architect responsible for connecting the process of conversion and the struggle for authenticity (*RE* 110). Although Khawaja works out the details in a novel way, this claim will not come as a surprise to Kierkegaard scholars. What nonetheless is shocking is Khawaja's further suggestion that Kierkegaard sees the process of conversion—or, in his terms, becoming a Christian—as an ascetic practice. Understanding this provocative proposal requires recognizing that "asceticism" is a technical term for Khawaja. Ascetic practices, as she sees them, are not just those that revolve around self-denial or self-mortification. Rather, Khawaja identifies as "ascetic" any activity that meets the following two conditions: (1) it requires ceaseless renewal and so cannot be completed once and for all; (2) it is an end in itself and not a means to some further end (*RE* 62).

The question I wish to discuss is whether becoming a Christian, as Kierkegaard describes the project, counts as an ascetic practice in Khawaja's sense. There is *prima facie* evidence for an affirmative answer. Support for the first condition is easy to come by. In numerous

<sup>1</sup> Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016. [Henceforth cited as *RE*]

passages, Kierkegaard or one of his pseudonyms asserts that the task of becoming a Christian is never over; one must take it up afresh each day.<sup>2</sup> In addition, subjectivity, repetition, and reduplication—concepts Kierkegaard uses for the process of applying Christian ideals to one's everyday personal life—are often presented as infinitely demanding and all-encompassing (*CUP* 33, 92, 408). Readers are told that they must permeate their whole being with subjectivity to such a degree that every moment spent on something else is a moment wasted.<sup>3</sup>

Support for Khawaja's second condition of asceticism is also not lacking. Climacus tells his readers, when it comes to subjectivity, results are nothing but junk (*CUP* 73, 242). What matters is the striving itself, not the outcomes achieved by it (*CUP* 135). One hears a similar message in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Here Kierkegaard argues that "purity of heart" consists of willing the good for its own sake and not for the sake of obtaining some reward or avoiding some punishment. Approaching the Christian struggle with an instrumental mindset evinces a kind of "double-mindedness" that humans ought to avoid.<sup>4</sup> Finally, a central part of becoming a Christian according to Kierkegaard is "dying to the world."<sup>5</sup> In part this means

that people must set aside any desire to accrue worldly benefits or evade worldly costs as a result of their religious striving.

The cumulative evidence, which Khawaja documents with great care, suggests that there is much to be said for her idea that Kierkegaard is an ascetic thinker. Nevertheless, I believe this idea can be challenged on a number of fronts. To those challenges, I now turn.

### Kierkegaard's Correctives

One place to start with is the observation that Khawaja does not rest her case merely on direct textual evidence. She is what one might call a "depth reader" of Kierkegaard (much as Freud was a "depth psychologist"). Not content to study the surface of his writings, she looks beneath and between the lines. It is thus fair to ask whether in "looking beyond the literal" (*RE* 20) Khawaja looks as far and as deep as she should. In other words, as she "seeks out and draws attention to what the text does not confess" (*RE* 20), does she get Kierkegaard's hidden message right?

It is worth calling to mind one of Kierkegaard's more peculiar rhetorical strategies, namely his use of correctives. Jamie Ferreira has highlighted these in her commentaries.<sup>6</sup> In a set of striking journal entries ranging from 1849 to 1854, Kierkegaard confesses that not all of what he says about Christianity should be taken at face value (*JP1* 331-3). To some degree, his demanding account of becoming a Christian is a purposeful exaggeration meant to counteract or correct a problematic tendency that he perceives in his age. In particular, he raises the bar for authentic Christian existence in order to push back against the propensity of his fellow Danish Lutherans to overemphasize divine grace at the cost of downplaying the importance of striving to fulfill God's law. From this it follows that Kierkegaard does not actually stand behind the infinitely high standard of ceaseless striving that he sets for becoming a Christian (*JP1* 332). This is just an artificially inflated ideal that he puts forward in order to unsettle his readers, to make them uneasy with how

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments Vol. 1*, Vol. 12.1 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992, pp. 121-2, 163-5. [Henceforth cited as *CUP*]

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, Vol. 20 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1991, p. 225. [Henceforth cited as *PC*]

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Vol. 15 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2009, pp. 37-60 [henceforth cited as *DVS*]; see also *CUP* 428, and Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Vol. 1: A-E*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1967, p. 259. [Henceforth cited as *JP1*]

<sup>5</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, Vol. 21 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1990, pp. 82-4; *JP1* 339-40, and Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Vol. 2: F-K*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong,

Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1970, pp. 325-6. [Henceforth cited as *JP2*]

<sup>6</sup> M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2001, pp. 11-2, 19-21.

lenient they often are toward themselves.<sup>7</sup>

One benefit of taking seriously Kierkegaard's corrective strategy is that it makes his view of Christianity less impractical. One can interpret him as making the quite reasonable point that Christianity is not a project to undertake just for an hour on Sunday mornings (*CUP* 467). But one does not have to read him as insisting that one is not a true Christian unless one passionately recommits oneself to the paradigm set by Jesus' life every second of every waking hour, which is what a literal reading of some lines in *Practice in Christianity* suggests (*PC* 225).

Incorporating the idea that Kierkegaard's demanding account of Christianity is a corrective also allows one to accommodate passages where he acknowledges the importance of rest—passages that Khawaja must take pains to explain away.<sup>8</sup> One does not have to downplay the section from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for instance, in which Climacus states that relaxing for a day at the amusement park is permissible (*CUP* 493).<sup>9</sup> Nor does one have to brush aside the paragraph from *Two Ages* where Kierkegaard praises one of Thomasine Gyllembourg's novels for providing "a place of rest" in troubled times.<sup>10</sup>

### Kierkegaard's Anti-Pelagianism

At the outset, I noted how Khawaja's interpretation of Kierkegaard has two components. As an ascetic thinker, he holds that (1) spiritual labor requires constant renewal and (2) this ceaseless labor is not a means to some other end but rather an end in itself. Thus far, I have been emphasizing the first condition. Yet suppose one agrees with Khawaja here. Suppose one accepts along with

her that Kierkegaard really advocates ceaseless striving as an essential part of becoming a Christian. It is still possible to challenge the second aspect of her view, namely that ceaseless striving is not a means to some further end but an end in itself for Kierkegaard.

One way to raise a difficulty for Khawaja is to draw on the work of Amy Laura Hall. She argues that it is important for commentators not to soften the blow that Kierkegaard wishes to strike.<sup>11</sup> They must not give in to the temptation to water down what he says about Christianity. To understand Kierkegaard's project, Hall maintains, it is necessary to see him as describing a spiritual practice that is "outrageously strenuous and intentionally discouraging" (*TL* 12).

It might seem as though Khawaja has a friend in Hall, since both read Kierkegaard as demanding a life of ceaseless and hopeless struggle. There is a crucial difference between their views, however. Unlike Khawaja, Hall holds that infinite striving is not an end in itself for Kierkegaard. It has a purpose or *telos* that lies beyond it. The point of pursuing the outrageously strenuous standard that Kierkegaard sets for becoming a Christian is to impress upon readers their inadequacies as human beings. And the point of making clear to readers how infinitely short they fall of the Christian ideal is to provide encouragement to turn to God and rely on his grace (*TL* 12). In sum, for Hall's Kierkegaard, pace Camus, the struggle itself to the heights is not enough to fill one's heart.<sup>12</sup> It is only enough to force one to recognize how much God is needed for redemption and how much gratitude is owed to him for intervening on one's behalf.<sup>13</sup>

To raise the same objection in another way, the problem with depicting Kierkegaard as an ascetic thinker is that it makes him sound too Pelagian. Ascetic thinkers, according to Khawaja, view infinite striving

<sup>7</sup> Antony Aumann, "Self-Love and Neighbor-Love in Kierkegaard's Ethics," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2013*, eds. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge, Boston, MA: DeGruyter 2013, pp. 211–3.

<sup>8</sup> At one point, Khawaja proposes that the word "rest" is always surrounded by scare quotes for Kierkegaard, regardless of whether he actually inserts them into the text (*RE* 89).

<sup>9</sup> See C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2009, p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*, Vol. 14 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1978, pp. 21–2.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Laura Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002. [Henceforth cited as *TL*]

<sup>12</sup> I allude here to the famous ending to Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, transl. Justin O'Brien, New York, NY: Vintage Books 1991, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, Vol. 5 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2015, pp. 297–326 [henceforth cited as *EUD*]; *Christian Discourses*, Vol. 17 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1997, p. 188; see also *RE* 66.

as an end in itself (*RE* 61-2). They maintain that "labor itself is re-demptive" (*RE* 70) or that one's struggles can themselves be "the bearer of spiritual value" (*RE* 68). Such a view is not Pelagian in the strict sense that it entails that one can make oneself morally perfect and so earn one's way to heaven. But it is Pelagian in the more subtle sense that it makes what is of spiritual significance something one can acquire through one's own efforts.

Kierkegaard consistently rejects the idea that what matters spiritually speaking is within one's own power to attain. The core message of *Philosophical Fragments*, for instance, is that salvation does not come from within but from without.<sup>14</sup> The *Postscript* contains a similar claim. Although Johannes Climacus is famous for declaring, "subjectivity is truth," he adds a few pages later that the more profound expression is "subjectivity is untruth" (*CUP* 207-8). He also offers readers an extended meditation on how one is capable of nothing without God (*CUP* 461-78), an Augustinian theme that reappears throughout Kierkegaard's authorship (*EUP* 321-6, *JP2* 171). Finally, in *Sickness Unto Death*, one reads that the attempt to rely on oneself in the spiritual domain is a form of despair.<sup>15</sup>

### Kierkegaard and the Afterlife

Khawaja is not ignorant of these texts, nor of the anti-Pelagian backdrop against which Kierkegaard operates. She handles them by asserting that, as with his comments about rest, his remarks about human sinfulness are not to be taken at face value. They are either metaphors for deeper, existential lessons, or rhetorical posturing designed to drive readers toward accepting those lessons (*RE* 204-7). The details of Khawaja's view are intriguing and provocative, but I confess that at times I find them obscure. So, rather than attempting to surmise what she might have in mind, I will raise one final concern about her proposal that Kierkegaard is an ascetic thinker.

In a number of texts, Kierkegaard proclaims,

<sup>14</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, or a Fragment of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1985, pp. 13-22.

<sup>15</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Vol. 19 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1980, pp. 13-4, 68-9.

"earthly existence is a time of test" (*JP1* 457).<sup>16</sup> He thinks that God introduces difficulties into people's lives and demands incredible things of them in order to determine their precise level of devotion. Are they willing to follow him "at any price" (*DVS* 87, 140) and "on any terms" (*PC* 115)? Or only if it is easy and beneficial to them (*CUP* 428, *JP2* 140)?

Of course, if life is a test, it behooves one to ask about the point of that test. What are the stakes? What comes of passing or failing life's test? Kierkegaard's answer appears to be the traditional one: eternal happiness is at stake. In a journal entry, he writes:

Christianity would furnish this weight, this regulating weight, by making it every individual's life-meaning that whether he becomes eternally saved is decided for him in this life. Consequently Christianity puts eternity at stake. Into the middle of all these finite goals, which merely confuse when they are supposed to be everything, Christianity introduced weight, and this weight was intended to regulate temporal life. [*JP1* 438, see also *RE* 93]

What emerges here is a picture of Christianity that does not fit well with Khawaja's reading. Kierkegaard appears to be saying that religious striving is not an end in itself. At least it is not just that. The struggle to become a Christian is rather the means by which one attains eternal salvation (*CUP* 16).

"Eternal salvation" is a tricky concept in Kierkegaard's writings. In what one now sees forms part of a larger pattern, Khawaja argues that the phrase is not to be taken literally. Instead, it has a metaphorical meaning. "Eternal salvation" refers to a kind of joy that is present or at least available at every moment of this-worldly life (*RE* 220-1). Moreover, this joy is not separate from the task of becoming a Christian but is rather constitutive of that task. In other words, it is part and parcel of the experience of Christian striving. Thus, when Kierkegaard states that eternal salvation is at stake in the Christian struggle, what he means is that the struggle is both unceasing and intrinsically valuable. This, of course, is just another way of putting Khawaja's core thesis that Kierkegaard is an ascetic thinker.

Is Khawaja's interpretation of "eternal salvation" correct? Yes. But it is incomplete. In their recent discussion of "salvation" (*Frelse*) and "eternal happiness" (*evige Salighed*) in Kierkegaard's thought, Roe Fremstedal and Timothy Jackson concur that these words refer to a kind of bliss that is possible to enjoy at every moment

<sup>16</sup> See also *JP1* 465 and *PC* 183.

in this life.<sup>17</sup> But they add that these words also have a more traditional meaning for Kierkegaard. They pick out the customary idea of everlasting joy in the afterlife. So it is that Kierkegaard can say that the person who only hopes for this life is not yet a Christian (*CUP* 389n, *DVS* 228). Belief in postmortem existence also stands behind the lines Kierkegaard plans for his tombstone, as Tamara Marks has pointed out:

In a yet a little while  
I shall have won;  
Then the whole fight  
Will at once be done.  
Then I may rest  
In bowers of roses  
And unceasingly, unceasingly  
Speak with my Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Most importantly, the traditional Christian dogma of the afterlife is necessary for making sense of Kierkegaard's claim in the journal entry quoted above about how the decisions one makes in this temporal life have eternal consequences. But if bliss in the afterlife is what is at stake in Christian striving, then Christian striving is not merely valuable for its own sake. It is also valuable as a means for the acquisition of some further good.

<sup>17</sup> Roe Fremstedal and Timothy P. Jackson, "Salvation/Eternal Happiness," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Salvation to Writing, Volume 15, Tome VI*, eds. Jon Stewart, Steven M. Emmanuel, and William McDonald, Aldershot, GB: Ashgate 2015, pp. 1-8.

<sup>18</sup> Tamara Monet Marks, "Kierkegaard's Understanding of the Afterlife," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 274-98, here p. 274.

### The Contradictory Nature of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Views

With these comments, I do not mean to suggest that I regard Khawaja's reading of Kierkegaard as mistaken. Much of what she says rings true to my ears. My aim has just been to bring to light that tensions exist within Kierkegaard's authorship regarding the central issues she probes. There are some passages where he endorses the kind of ceaseless striving and perpetual renewal of effort that she describes, and then there are others where he suggests that he does not stand behind this infinitely demanding ideal. There are some places where he asserts that the spiritual striving required by Christianity must be done for its own sake and not for the sake of any instrumental payoffs, exactly as Khawaja claims. Then there are other places where he seems to embrace a pragmatic approach that aligns with the tradition of Pascal, according to which Christianity is to be pursued precisely because of the payoffs it promises adherents.

To make Kierkegaard fit into her story about the history of existentialism, Khawaja emphasizes one side of each of these pairs of passages and deemphasizes the other. She takes some of them to be definitive of his view and others to be mere metaphors or rhetorical tropes. This approach may be justified given how illuminating her overall story is. Moreover, some such decisions by an author may be a necessary part of any commentary that seeks to provide a coherent picture of Kierkegaard's thought. Still, I cannot help but worry that Khawaja's pursuit of a coherent grand narrative comes at the cost of partially obscuring the kind of thinker Kierkegaard actually was.