



Imaginary construction and lessons in living forward

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly argued that Kierkegaard's famous observation that life can be understood backward, but must be lived forward excludes the possibility of intellectual preparation to life. This article suggests the view that, while it is not the case that Kierkegaard has an elaborate vision of thinking about the possibilities of life one faces, he engages the notion of imaginary construction [*experimentere*] to propose existential prototypes for mental exploration that prepare us for life lived forward. It is concluded that the person capable of imaginary construction has to be able to be firmly in control of the possibilities she faces. In Kierkegaard's view, such a control requires the grasp of the opposite temporal directions – to be both looking at one's past and future. Kierkegaard's employment of such a double temporal vision of existence is modelled on Janus Bifrons, the two-faced god who is effectively able to simultaneously look both backward into the past and forward into the future.

KEYWORDS

Kierkegaard; existence; *experimentere*; experiment; imagination; Janus Bifrons; time

1. Introduction

In 1843 Kierkegaard famously remarked in his journals that 'It is quite true what philosophy claims that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other principle, that it must be *lived* forward' (KJN, 167 / SKS 18, 194; JJ 167).¹ Being one of the most often cited observations made by Kierkegaard, it is frequently commented upon in negative terms.² That is to say, it is taken to mean that existence and reflection are incompatible; essentially, one has to make a choice between living and understanding. This interpretation is, seemingly, supported by Kierkegaard himself, who immediately adds in a suggestive explanation: 'Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with temporal life never being able to be properly understood' (KJN 167/SKS 18:194, JJ:167). Following that reasoning it is natural to assume that life must be lived without any recourse to comprehension and understanding in Kierkegaard. Yet, one could argue that the word 'properly' from the quotation makes room for an interpretation according to which, within Kierkegaard's universe, it is possible to speak of a form of intellectual preparation for (a wholesome) living.

I propose the view that the antagonistic tension between life and understanding can be interpreted at least in two ways. First, the implied distinction is to be seen as a strong one, i.e. one either lives, or understands. Second, the separation is to be seen as a weak one, i.e. as meaning to say that there is something in life that cannot be understood, yet that does not mean that it is incomprehensible at all.

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¹This quotation has a number of iterations in Kierkegaard's works (EPW 78/SKS 1: 33; KJN 2: 91/SKS 18:99, FF:122). See more on its origin in Stewart, 'Daub: Kierkegaard's Paradoxical Appropriation of a Hegelian Sentry', 72–74.

²See for instance: Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works*, 28 and Kekes, *The Enlargement of Life: Moral Imagination at Work*, 37–54. On a more nuanced approach see Hanson, *Kierkegaard and the Life of Faith*, 13–14, and Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative*, 163–65.

While the strong distinction would seem to consider any intellectual attempt at comprehending one's existence as essentially futile, the weak one would not.

In what follows I propose that, although, following Kierkegaard, understanding is not the right attitude towards life 'lived forward', this does not mean that intellectually there is no constructive work to be done in this regard. I argue that intellectual preparation for one's existence is not ineffective for Kierkegaard. Indeed, I claim that for Kierkegaard this intellectual preparation is not only possible, but also desirable, which is attested by an elaborate vision of such a preparation in Kierkegaard's works. By showing evidence in relevant texts, I argue that the lack of experience in existential matters for Kierkegaard is replaced by his notion of experiment as an existential construction. In other words, I suggest that the notion of experiment is key to understand how, in Kierkegaard's view, one can prepare oneself for the eventualities of life. The intellectual work necessary for this construction is achieved not by the faculty of understanding, but by the faculty of imagination.

Finally, I suggest that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms can be viewed as examples of such existential construction. In order to highlight this function of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms I contrast this interpretation of pseudonyms with other hermeneutic possibilities, such as seeing them as pen names, literary characters, and conceptual personae. I argue that neither of the last three possibilities provide a consistent explanation of Kierkegaard's authorship strategy. Each has shortcomings of its own. The interpretation of pseudonyms as idealized existential personae, on the other hand, is the only that encompasses all the pseudonyms and provides a coherent view of Kierkegaard's strategy as an author.

I conclude by discussing Kierkegaard's understanding of his own position as an author in light of these existential constructions and I argue that the best image to explain Kierkegaard's vision of the role of a poet is that of Janus Bifrons, the two-faced Roman God, who possesses the ability to see in both directions. It is that ability that is required for Kierkegaard in order to fulfil what he sees as his mission as an author.

2. Imagination as a category

Perhaps the most conceptually charged description of imagination within Kierkegaard's corpus is found in *Sickness unto Death*. There Anti-Climacus claims that: 'Imagination is infinitizing reflection, and therefore the elder Fichte quite correctly assumed that even in relation to knowledge the categories derive from the imagination' (SUD 31/SKS 11:147). So imagination is a specific form of reflection directed towards infinity rather than finitude. In this sense imagination is unique, hence it is not merely another form of reflection. It is a reflection that is prior to other faculties: 'It [imagination – V. B.] is not a capacity, as are the others – if one wishes to speak in those terms, it is the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]' (SUD 30-31/SKS 11:147). Furthermore, its uniqueness is made evident by the fact that it conditions the other faculties: 'When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, and willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that reflects himself – that is, upon imagination' (SUD 31/SKS 11:147). This does not mean that the more imagination one has, the more knowledge, emotions, or willing one possesses, but rather that the more imagination one has, the more capacity for the other faculties one can develop and gain. It is both a precondition and an enhancer of the fields of play of the other faculties. In this sense it is both a capacity for all capacities and a more profound form of reflection.

On the most basic level imagination is a capacity that produces images, yet these images always have an idealized or perfected character. As Anti-Climacus explains by way of example:

We shall now imagine a youth. With his imagination he perceives some image of perfection (ideal). ... To this image ... the youth is now drawn by his imagination or his imagination draws this image to him. He becomes infatuated with this image, or this image becomes his love, his inspiration, for him his more perfect (more ideal) self. (PC 186-187/SKS 12:186)

So the image, produced by imagination, becomes a fixed point of reference that the individual is drawn to as an ideal. This ideal is seen as a possibility.

Therefore, imagination as an infinitizing reflection explores and creates possibilities. Imagination reflects on what might happen rather than what has happened. Crucially for Anti-Climacus, however, possibility is neither in dialectical opposition to actuality, as it is for Aristotle, nor it produces necessity in unity with actuality, as it is for Hegel. For Anti-Climacus, actuality is the unity of possibility and necessity (SUD 36/SKS 11:152). Imagination, then, is the explorer of possibilities; it is not something that deals with the non-actual, but is a constitutive element of the formation of the actual. Following that line of thought, reflecting on what is possible is tantamount to making it possible. Crucially, for Anti-Climacus the realization that everything is possible is the ultimate reflection of the infinite: ‘What is decisive is that with God everything is possible’ (SUD 38/SKS 11:153). The reflection of this fact is constitutive of the actual in which one finds oneself.

This point is additionally emphasized by the direct relationship between imagination and the formation of the self: ‘Inasmuch as the self as a synthesis of finitude and infinitude is established, is κατὰ δύναμιν [potential], in order to become itself it reflects itself in the medium of imagination, and thereby the infinite possibility becomes manifest’ (SUD 35/SKS 11:151). The basic structure of the self for Anti-Climacus is that it is a self-consciousness, that is, it relates to itself as a reflection: ‘A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. ... If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self’ (SUD 13/SKS 11:129).³ And here imagination plays a crucial role. It does not simply establish the capacity of other faculties of the self, but conditions the very constitution of the self:

The self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self’s possibility. The imagination is the possibility of any and all reflection, and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the intensity of the self. (SUD 31/SKS 11:147)⁴

Therefore, for Anti-Climacus imagination is the faculty that sets up the very possibilities of the self. Or, to put in more simple terms, when one is confronted with life to be lived, imagination is the faculty that allows one to explore the possibilities that one faces.

3. Imaginary construction as a substitute for experience

For Kierkegaard this exploration of the possibilities one faces functions as a form of elaborate mental experimentation. One of persistent terms in Kierkegaard’s work is the notion of *experimentere*. It can be found in the subtitle of *Repetition*, as well as scattered throughout his authorship.⁵ The Hong edition consistently, but, rather liberally, translates this term as ‘to construct imaginatively’, trying to denote the specific meaning which Kierkegaard ascribes to this particular notion.⁶

There are at least two peculiar aspects to the way Kierkegaard employs this term. First, this is not an everyday term at the time in the Danish language. It is a neologism, which indicates that Kierkegaard was looking for a term to describe a unique phenomenon, which, he thought, had not been conceptualized at the time. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, he uses this word as a transitive verb. The infinitive *experimentere* in Kierkegaard’s usage is used not *with* or *on* something, but becomes *experimenter* something. For example, in an article in *Fædrelandet* in 1845 he says:

An imaginative constructor [*Experimentator*] says: In order to become properly aware of what is decisive in the religious existence-categories, since religiousness is very often confused with all sorts of things and with apathy, I shall imaginatively construct [*experimentere*] a character who lives in a final and extreme approximation of madness but tends toward the religious (COR 39/SKS 14:79).

³See more on the composition of selfhood in SUD in Davenport, ‘Selfhood and “Spirit”’, 230–50.

⁴See also Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 59–65; Stokes, *Kierkegaard’s Mirrors*, 73–94.

⁵See also: Boven, ‘Kierkegaard’s Concepts: Psychological Experiment’, 159–65.

⁶See Hong and Hong, ‘Historical Introduction’, xxi–xxvi.

This indicates that the object of the experiment is a desired outcome of the experiment rather than a means to it. To *experimentere* a character means to construct with the help of imagination, as the Hongks render correctly, but also to try out, to test a hypothesis, to demonstrate – the meaning behind the term of which the translation seems to struggle to grasp.

By emphasizing the experimentation of a character, rather than experimentation with or on character, Kierkegaard intends to signal that in this case the character in question does not exist prior to experimentation – it becomes constructed during the course of the experiment. It is not the material of the experiment, but, as we have noted, the outcome of it.

What is the goal of such an experimenting? Perhaps the answer to this question is in the idea of an exploration of the existential possibilities that lay ahead of the individual. If one cannot experience the forward, I argue that one can surely experiment it. The analogy between the notion of ‘experiment’, employed in this way, and the way the term ‘experience’ is used, is evident and apt here. The things that we experience we appropriate, i.e. they become part of what we are. Things we experiment *with* usually are not; rather, they are something that we engage, use and then let go. By modifying experiment into a transitive term Kierkegaard emphasizes the similarity of this type of experimentation to experience: to experiment a character is also to be on a path of appropriating it, making it a part of one’s self. Or, in other words, to live it through by means of imagining it.

Experimentation’s analogy with experience is not absolute. Something that one experiences is appropriated in the form of knowledge. In this sense experience always transforms and shapes the individual, but is always discovered *a posteriori*, after the fact. In this sense life is understood backward – by looking back and realizing what had happened and how one finds oneself in the situation in which one is. Experience is something that is accumulated and appropriated over time. In the case of mental experimentation, however, there is no such appropriation. For Kierkegaard experimenting is more of a precondition for the fullness and richness (Anti-Climacus says, intensity) of experience. *Experimentere* does not make experience possible – an experience is a necessary byproduct of existence – but it can enhance the experience gained by imagining the existential circumstances in which one will find oneself if one makes particular existential choices.

Kierkegaard’s distinction between the backward and the forward temporal orientation in life is apt here. If the experience proper is something that is observed backward, then the experiment is something that is observed forward. The backward and forward here are the functions of time, which, then, means that the agent of the experience and the experiment, the self, as a reflection – as a relation that relates to itself, where this ‘itself’ is the synthesis of the possible and the necessary and of the infinite and the finite – is to be interpreted in temporal categories, too.

Kierkegaard has an elaborate conception of time which surely deserves separate attention and additional research.⁷ For our purposes, however, it will suffice to draw up a rough sketch. For Kierkegaard temporality has two dimensions: time and eternity. Vigilius Haufniensis characterizes time as ‘infinite succession’, which implies, echoing Hegel, that ‘it is also defined as the present, the past, and the future’ (CA 85/SKS 4:388). However, importantly, Haufniensis is adamant that, contra Hegel, the present, the past, and the future are not structural elements of a larger whole: ‘This distinction, however, is incorrect if it is considered to be implicit in time itself, because the distinction appears only through the relation of time to eternity and through the reflection of eternity to time’ (CA 85/SKS 4:388). This suggests that the past and the present can be interpreted as structural elements of time only if the past can be interpreted as a point from which to grasp the other two,

⁷A modest beginning is Bedell, ‘Kierkegaard’s Conception of Time’. More recent attempts to discuss Kierkegaard’s understanding of time are Stokes, ‘Fearful asymmetry’, which emphasizes precisely the two asymmetric dimensions of time for Kierkegaard, that are united by eschatological vision in *The Concept of Anxiety*. For our present purposes the most relevant discussion of Kierkegaard’s understanding of time and its relation to imagination is proposed by Brinkerhoff Young, ‘Kierkegaard on Time and the Limitations of Imaginative Planning’, which proposes that for Kierkegaard one of the limitations of imagination is its inability to account for eventual temporal changes. Brinkerhoff Young calls this a ‘timelessness’ claim and discusses this primarily as a matter of psychology. Although I agree with Brinkerhoff Young in essence, I think that imagination is limited in more than incapacity to foresee temporal changes. For Kierkegaard or, more precisely, Anti-Climacus, imagination produces altogether static or, as it is called, ideal limit-cases. I discuss this further on in greater detail.

namely, the present and the future. But according to Haufniensis, that, strictly speaking, is impossible: ‘Precisely because every moment, as well as the sum of the moments, is a process (a passing by), no moment is a present, and accordingly there is in time neither present, nor past, nor future’ (CA 85/SKS 4:388-389). One way to stop the succession is described by Hegel in *Philosophy of Nature*⁸ and it is what Haufniensis terms to ‘spatialize time’ (CA 85/SKS 4:389). The way to do it is to pick out any given moment (that has inevitably passed) as a function of the present. Such a reframing fixes a part of time as a reference point and in this way creates ‘before’ and ‘after’, the past and the future. Crucially for Haufniensis, such a procedure miscategorizes the moment: ‘The moment is not properly an atom of time but an atom of eternity’ (CA 88/SKS 4:391). To equate the moment with the present is to misinterpret the moment in the same way as it is to interpret the self as merely the synthesis of the finite and the infinite, without making the recourse to the fact that self is also a self-relation of that synthesis. Crucially, the correct starting point for understanding the moment for Haufniensis is not the present, but eternity. To interpret the moment as merely a function of the present is to misunderstand its nature.

Moreover, just as is the case with the self in *Sickness unto Death*, where various forms of misunderstanding of the relationality of the self are at stake for Anti-Climacus, which he calls mis-relations, so is the case with Haufniensis who is dedicated to the exploration of the aspects of the misunderstandings of time. For Haufniensis the Greeks completely misunderstood the moment as something that is discovered in the past: ‘Greek culture did not comprehend the moment, and even if it had comprehended the atom of eternity, it did not comprehend that it was the moment, did not define it with a forward direction but with a backward direction’ (CA 88/SKS 4:391). Therefore, it seems that although the Greek culture understood the need to seek the structural elements of time, it did not, in Haufniensis’s eyes, capture fully that the building block of time is the moment. The moment is not to be sought in the past, in the form of recollection. The moment is to be sought in the future, in the form of repetition. The basic structure of these two movements is described by Constantin Constantius in *Repetition*: ‘Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward’ (R 131/SKS 4:9). The moment, that has been lived, is not to be experienced again by recollection. The only way to experience it again is by living it again. Here is the fundamental difference between what Haufniensis terms movement backwards and movement forwards. The backward movement (understanding and recollection) is a mental exercise, while the forward movement (repetition and living) is existential.

Experimentation as an imaginary construction is a mental exercise that is directed forward rather than backward. Therefore, such an experimentation has its limitations. It is an idealized version of a specific existential position, an attempt to see through the whole ‘logic’ of that particular position:

The imaginative constructor himself says that the point of view of the imaginatively constructed character [*experimenterede*] is a deviation but adds that he is doing the whole imaginary construction [*Experiment*] in order to study normality by means of the passion of deviation. (COR 39/SKS 14:79)

The constructed character is imagined as a counterpoint and an illustration; both in order to see where this construction will take the individual. At the same time, it has to be rigid in its attempt and not to overstep the inner boundaries of the experiment. The extremity cannot become the determining factor of the experiment, as this simply will create a distinct, new existential position:

He himself declares that it is a very strenuous task to hold the imaginatively constructed character [*Experimenterede*] at this extremity while he himself supervises imaginatively constructively. The difficulty is to keep the imaginatively constructed character at the terminal point where it never becomes madness but is constantly on the brink. (COR 39/SKS 14:79)

⁸Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, §259.

Such an experimenting exercise has its drawbacks. The fact that its result is an idealized version of a character, that it has to stay within the inner boundaries of an imagined existential possibility, means that the character experimented or imaginatively constructed will lack temporality and actuality. In other words, it is a sterile version of an existent, a lab specimen, a purified case. It does not encounter the contradictions that are present when actuality is present, adds Anti-Climacus in another of his work, *Practice in Christianity*.

So the imagination is related to this image of perfection, and even if it were the image of the perfect one, whose perfection was to have endured not only terrible sufferings but also that which is diametrically opposite to perfection (ideality), daily indignities and mistreatment and annoyances throughout a long life, it looks very easy the way the imagination depicts this image; one sees only the perfection, sees even the struggling perfection only as finished. (PC 187/SKS 12:186-187)

And to see such an image as finished would be a crucial mistake. Such a version of existential position will lack what is encountered only in actual existence, in life lived, namely, suffering:

This perfection is ... tried day after day in the actual suffering of this actuality. But this latter the imagination cannot depict—indeed, it cannot even be depicted, it can only be—and therefore the image of perfection that the imagination depicts always looks so easy, so persuasive. (PC 187/SKS 12:187)

Suffering, as the crucial aspect of actual existence, seems to be the obstacle – imagination fails at suffering, it cannot reproduce it: ‘The imagination cannot depict suffering except in a perfected (idealized), that is, in a mitigated, toned-down, foreshortened depiction’ (PC 187/SKS 12:187).

There is also a specific lack of temporality in an imagined character: ‘It lacks the actuality of time and of temporality and of earthly life’ (PC 187/SKS 12:187). As a consequence, the imaginary constructed character is static and does not evolve. As an idealized version of an existential possibility it stands as an example, as a fixed reference point, rather than a model that changes and is being transformed. This could be seen as a sort of a-temporal or supra-temporal entity that both stands outside the lived, historical time and provides it with a reference point. Perhaps this Climacus alludes to when he notes in *The Postscript*:

This is the consequence of the appearance of the god [*Guden*] in time, which prevents the individual from relating himself backward to the eternal, since he now moves forward in order to become eternal in time through the relation to the god in time. (CUP 583-584/SKS 7:531)

As we have noted, imagination produces what is possible rather than the actual: ‘So the imagination is related to this image of perfection. ... In one sense the imagination’s image or the image that the imagination depicts or maintains is still nonactuality’ (PC 187/SKS 12:187). For these reasons an experimented character has to be viewed with caution. It is artificial or, rather, fictional and does not represent actual life. If one disregards this aspect of imaginary construction, the imagined character might become misleading in its capacity. Therefore, Kierkegaard says, it needs an accompaniment, a kind of assistance or guidance next to it. He elucidates that point in his unpublished *The Book on Adler*.

Spiritually understood, the imaginatively constructed character is what one in a civic sense calls a very dangerous character, and such people are customarily not allowed to walk alone; a couple of officers are usually present—for the sake of public security. Thus, for the reassurance of public security, in that work there is also present an imaginary constructor (he calls himself a street inspector), who very calmly shows how the whole thing hangs together, who theoretically educes a life-view that he completes by rounding out, while he points in elucidating terms to the imaginatively constructed character in order to indicate how he makes the movements according to the pulling of the strings. (BA 16/SKS 15:102)

This passage makes it clear that an imaginary construction is not only in need of an orientation to accompany it, something outside of it that frames it and provides it with a sense of purpose. It is evident that for Kierkegaard an imaginary construction also serves didactic purposes. Thus, certain qualifications are needed for a proper application of imaginary construction for these purposes. First, of course, the imaginary constructor has to be capable to imagine a certain existential position, or a

life-view. Second, she has to have a type of maturity and steadfastness not to be overtaken by her creation. Third, she has to sufficiently master imaginary constructing so that by taking it to the extreme, the constructor is able to expose the inner contradictions of the imaginary construction.

The work of imaginary construction belongs under esthetics⁹ and is performed by poetic means in Kierkegaard: 'Esthetically the individual is led away from actuality and translated into the medium of imagination' (TA 20/SKS 8:23). Indeed, this is for Kierkegaard the primary task of poetry, or literary work: to create, present, and explore existential possibilities with the help of imagination in order to prepare oneself for what lies ahead. Kierkegaard sees this understanding of art in contrast to the notion of art in German Romanticism, which he takes to place too much undue importance on artistic effort itself and make it into an existential principle rather than a step on the way to the comprehension of existence.¹⁰ By contrast, literary production is a point of transit for Kierkegaard and cannot be a genuine substitute for living:

Where poetry to all intents and purposes stops, this author begins. For poetry does not essentially reconcile with *actuality*; by means of the imagination it reconciles with the ideality of the imagination, but this reconciliation in the actual individual is precisely the new split with actuality. (TA 14-15/SKS 8:18)

To employ imagination with the help of esthetic production or experience is a way of exploring one's own existential possibilities. To attempt to live in imagination is a folly and a delusion.

To summarize, Kierkegaard, being skeptical about a possibility to know one's life in advance, suggests engagement in the activity of imagining existential possibilities. The work of imagination is done by creating an image in one's mind by way of mental experiment. Having done that, an individual can think through the consequences of an existential possibility in question stemming from the imaginary experiment. Although it creates a vivid image of what awaits an individual in the future, such an experimentation has its shortcomings. It lacks actuality and temporality and, therefore, it cannot be a genuine substitute for existence as it presents merely a limited version of it.

4. Pseudonymous authorship

The problem of the status and the function of pseudonymous authors in Kierkegaard's authorship remains unsolved.¹¹ During his lifetime, Kierkegaard authored and published no less than twenty separate books, of which at least ten were signed by pseudonyms. Their status, but also their interrelations, and their relation to the 'actual' author have been a contentious issue in Kierkegaardian research since the very time the books had been written.¹² In what follows I will consider some hermeneutic possibilities of the issue of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard and will show that the most consistent interpretation is to treat them as experiments in the sense of imaginary constructions. After this analysis, I will argue that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms should be seen as imaginary constructions that are meant to serve as exemplars of existential possibilities.

One distinct way of looking at the problem of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard is to perceive them as mere pen names. This is surely not a new suggestion and has been applied before, both during Kierkegaard's lifetime and after his passing.¹³ There are numerous reasons why authors choose not to use their real name on the cover of their books: sometimes to achieve greater artistic liberty, sometimes to avoid political persecution, sometimes merely for marketing purposes.

⁹See more on the problem of esthetics Pattison, 'Kierkegaard: Aesthetics and "the Aesthetic"', 140–51.

¹⁰See: Gouwens, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*.

¹¹Nun and Stewart, 'Preface', xi–xvi; Westfall, *The Kierkegaardian Author*; Westfall, 'Pseudonymity', 153–8; Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver*.

¹²Mooney, 'Pseudonyms and "style"', 191–209.

¹³Immediately after Kierkegaard's death in December, 1955 Hans Brøchner published an article on Kierkegaard where he does not treat pseudonymous as representing different views from Kierkegaard's own. Such an interpretation carries on. One typical example is when Emmanuel Levinas criticizes Soren Kierkegaard for the 'evocation of Abraham' (see Levinas, *Proper Names*, 76–77), seemingly unaware of or completely ignoring the fact that this idea was proposed by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*.

Whatever the motivation, it seems that the desired outcome in cases like these is a simple name substitution. The only change that occurs is the change of the name – the status of the text, its hermeneutic options are neither expanded, nor narrowed. The author, his worldview, his aesthetic preferences are not affected by the substitution of the name in a case like that. One does not separate Mark Twain and Samuel Langhorne Clemens in special or meaningful way, except for these being two different names. Likewise, one certainly does not make a distinction between the views of Voltaire and François-Marie Arouet. In fact, in the case of pen names, these pen names and the real names of the authors are as much as interchangeable. It is difficult to imagine a context in which one would separate Voltaire and François-Marie Arouet. In fact, if anything, the opposite is true: Voltaire *is* François-Marie Arouet.

The interpretation of pseudonyms as mere pen names works with some of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. It is perfectly possible to see Anti-Climacus as just another name for Kierkegaard. The arguments in favour of such an interpretation could be both the highly religious content of *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity* (in contrast to much more secular *Philosophical Fragments* or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* by Johannes Climacus), but also factual evidence: Kierkegaard actually considered putting his own name as the author of this particular book and changed his mind in the last minute.¹⁴ One could propose the same interpretation for Vigilius Haufniensis and *The Concept of Anxiety*. At least, it is not difficult to imagine that the actual Kierkegaard would agree with the content of this book and could subscribe to the positions taken up by Haufniensis. However, this rule of name substitution becomes much more problematic when one considers *Either/Or*. It is so as the book that is presented as essentially author-less and contains at least two (figures called 'A' and 'B'), perhaps four (if one counts Johannes the Seducer and Pastor from Jutland), or even five (if one additionally considers Victor Eremita) separate names. Whatever the number of pseudonyms is in the book, it is clear that the polyphony of voices and disagreements – both implicit and explicit – among them makes it difficult to interpret them as mere pen names. For if the goal of a pen name is merely to conceal the real name of the author, it remains unclear which of these five names conceals the real author.

Additionally, even starker difficulty comes to the picture when we consider the complexity of interactions of the pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's *Nachlass*. The figure named 'B' in *Either/Or* clearly disagrees with 'A' in the same work; this means that they both cannot be mere pen names for Kierkegaard, as it is hard to imagine that Kierkegaard would hold mutually exclusive views. The same difficulty is merely accentuated when one zooms out from *Either/Or* to the whole authorship. If Anti-Climacus is a pen name for Kierkegaard, then clearly Johannes Climacus cannot be one, at least in the sense of taking him to mean what Kierkegaard means. It is perfectly conceivable that one of the two is a pen name for Kierkegaard, but surely it cannot be both.

In addition, the interpretation of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms as mere pen names is complicated by the distance which Kierkegaard creates between himself and at least some of the pseudonyms. For example, in his journals he presents himself and Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, as separate persons:

But the misunderstanding is so great that neither Johannes de Silentio nor I can get involved with him. If Johannes de Silentio gets involved with him, it would have to be in jest, but I do not feel I ought to give my consent to that. (JP 6:305/ Pap. X6 B 82).

The same principle applies to his relation to Vigilius Haufniensis. Elaborating his position toward *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard presents himself as an external figure in relation to this text:

The sketch I dashed off of an observer in *The Concept of Anxiety* will probably upset some people. However, it does belong there and is a kind of watermark in the work. In general I always stand in a poetic relationship to my works, which is why I am a pseudonym. (KJN 2:196/SKS 18:213, JJ 227)

¹⁴For the summary of the publication history of *The Sickness unto Death* see Hong and Hong, 'Historical Introduction', ix–xxiii.

In fact, later in life, reflecting on his authorship, he sees the demarcation line he had set between himself and the pseudonyms not merely as a matter of fact, but also as an achievement. For instance, speaking about his relationship to *Anti-Climacus*, Kierkegaard elucidates:

If I were to congratulate myself on any one thing, it would be the deliberateness with which I—while the poetic characters, the pseudonyms, were doing their utmost to present the ideal or the idealities—the deliberateness with which I, throughout a whole authorship, soberly and unreservedly have taken care and have employed safeguards in every way (also by being willing to sacrifice myself), lest confusion arise and I be mistaken for the ideal. (JP 6:305/Pap. X6 B 82)

In light of the above, one has to conclude that seeing Kierkegaard's pseudonyms as mere pen names rather creates problems than explain his authorship. Treating Kierkegaard's pseudonyms does not account for a relatively large number of the pseudonyms, leaves unexplained sometimes antagonistic relations among them and also has to disregard Kierkegaard's own express statements not to treat his pseudonyms as mere pen names.

Seeing the pseudonyms as a sort of literary characters is another way of approaching the problem of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard. In such an interpretation one is invited to see the whole of Kierkegaard's authorship as one consistent creation, where parts, namely, separate Kierkegaard's texts, are only elements in this bigger creation. Their function, then, is not to stand on their own, but to be interpreted in light of this bigger whole. In other words, Kierkegaard's authorship is a kind of novel, where pseudonyms are not the authors of, but the characters in the novel.¹⁵ Their interactions are part of the plot of the novel, while the multitude of the characters at play merely adds to the scope and complexity of the plot.

Some of Kierkegaard's works seem quite ready to be understood as testing the idea of the post-modern novel. One such example is 'In Vino Veritas' in *The Stages on Life's Way*, which can be read as a chapter in such a novel: there is action, characters, and plot. *Either/Or* is another example of such a novel: one meets two characters, grappling with their own problems and having sinister (Johannes the Seducer toward Cordelia) or benevolent (Assessor Wilhelm toward 'A') plans, involving other characters. Then Johannes Climacus's chapter 'A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature' in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* can be read as a synthesizing chapter where Climacus creates a shared space for all the characters that had appeared up to then.

It seems, Kierkegaard himself supported such an interpretation. As we have seen, he refers to them as 'poetic characters' in his journals, and also, at least later in life, he insisted that his authorship was developed according to a predetermined plan, a unified strategy. However, such an interpretation is not without limitations. As in the pen name approach to pseudonyms, this theory seems capable to explain only part of Kierkegaard's oeuvre. Although, it is not easy, but, perhaps, possible to envision how to negotiate all the characters from Kierkegaard's works into one shared universe, when they interact or refer to each other, the difficulty becomes infinitely greater when such an interaction or reference is absent. For example, it is not clear what role in this 'novel' is supposed to be played by Vigilius Haufniensis and his *The Concept of Anxiety*. It is by all accounts a stand-alone text that does not refer to any other text by Kierkegaard. Similarly, it is not clear what to do with *Prefaces* by Nicolaus Notabene and *Repetition* by Constantin Constantius. These works do not contain any explicit references to others by Kierkegaard. Surely, if there is a unified plan, in which all elements are joined according to some principle or idea, a reader should be able to find it.

This interpretation of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard is further complicated by the part of his works that are signed by him. If pseudonyms are created for the sake of some general all-encompassing plan, then this surely must include Kierkegaard's signed works too. This claim is strongly supported by Kierkegaard's publishing strategy, where publication of signed works was very often matched by and adjusted to the publication of pseudonymous works, and vice versa. Such a

¹⁵The theory of the novel that could be applied in this case is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a polyphonic novel which he proposed in his analysis of Dostoyevsky's poetics (Bakhtin 1984). For how this applies to Kierkegaard's authorship, see Shchytsova, 'Mikhail Bakhtin'.

parallelism in publication, then, begs the question if Søren Kierkegaard himself as an author should be seen as simply yet another pseudonym. In fact, Johannes Climacus, while reviewing pseudonymous works at the time, suggests exactly that by enlisting Magister Kierkegaard, the author of *The Concept of Irony*, as one of the ‘contemporary Danish authors’ and, in this way, he places this text among the pseudonymous rather than signed works. Notably, Climacus does not refer to any of the upbuilding discourses that Kierkegaard had published up to then and in this way he excludes them from consideration. Thus, it seems that joining all the multitude of voices into one coherent whole and uncovering the ultimate plan of the whole authorship is impossible. Perhaps, there is no ‘novel’ after all, no unified shared plot that Kierkegaard’s readers have to uncover after all.

The approach to pseudonymity in contrast to this interpretation would be to read all the pseudonyms as separate, self-standing positions. One interpretation in this vein could be to interpret the pseudonyms or even every separate text, or in some cases even separate parts of separate texts, as representing distinct philosophical positions that may or may not interact with other positions in other Kierkegaard’s texts. In their *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose that ‘Philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.’¹⁶ In order to distinguish purely philosophical work from any other intellectual work and also to distinguish the philosophical endeavour from actual existing individual, Deleuze and Guattari propose an idea of ‘conceptual persona’. In their words, it is the conceptual *persona* of Descartes who is the author of the concept of *cogito*, rather than Descartes the existing individual. In most general terms, conceptual personae are authors of concepts. Conceptual persona can be a type of character (for example, an idiot, a teacher), but also a proper name (E.g. Plato’s Socrates, *Zarathustra* in Nietzsche).

Seeing Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms as existential personae certainly works in the case of *The Concept of Anxiety* or *Philosophical Fragments*. These, more philosophical works, are devoted to the exposition and the discussion of a concept and in this sense easily match Deleuze and Guattari’s description. However, this approach encounters multitude of problems with *Either – Or* and *Stages on Life’s Way*. Perhaps the fundamental problem with seeing Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms as conceptual *personae* is that there are quite a few pseudonyms in Kierkegaard’s texts that clearly are not interested in concepts. Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, as much as he is versed in philosophy, is clearly not after forming or uncovering a concept in particular. The character ‘A’ in *Either – Or I* does not seem to be trying to solve any particular conceptual problem either. Nor is Assessor Wilhelm in *Either – Or II*.

As has been indicated above, for Kierkegaard, the one who imaginatively constructs a life-view is a specific type of existence. It is a poet who by means of esthetics and imagination experiments a character. However, in contrast to the conceptual personae of Deleuze and Guattari, Kierkegaard’s imaginary constructor is not concerned with inventing concepts. His main goal is, as stated, to experiment a character, that is, to imagine an existential position and to think through all the implications that that particular position entails. Indeed, while a conceptual persona is interested in concepts, Kierkegaard’s imaginary constructor is interested in existence. That is why it would be more correct to see Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms as *existential prototypes* rather than conceptual personae. If conceptual *personae* fabricate concepts, existential prototypes provide models for existential possibilities or, in Kierkegaard’s words, life-views. A poet is the author of the prototypes by virtue of being in a unique position to produce them.

The idea of *existential prototypes* allows to understand the overall plan of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship by providing a panorama of experiments of existential positions. Such a view seems to do away with all the previous problems. The sheer number of pseudonyms and characters then does not pose a problem, as they serve simply as expositions of various life-views. Their interaction is not problematic either, as they are put in opposition with each other in order to illuminate their limitations or strengths by way of contrast.

¹⁶Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 2.

The lack of development or change in the characters again is justified, as we have seen, because they serve as limit cases rather than imitation of life. And finally, even the role of signed works becomes clearer – it seems that all pseudonymous works are meant to be accompanied by a signed work from the Christian perspective. Even if one does not read them, he or she is reminded that the pseudonymous work does not stand autonomously, on its own, and is always checked by the signed work.

To summarize, realizing the role of imagination in preparation for life for Kierkegaard, one can construct an interpretative framework for the whole of pseudonymous authorship. The pseudonyms then should be seen as expositions of existential possibilities in order to be able to see their limitations. In contrast to Deleuze's and Guattari's conceptual *personae*, I propose to interpret Kierkegaard's pseudonyms as existential *types*.

5. The imaginary constructor

From what has been said, it is evident that for Kierkegaard imaginary construction of life-views is closely related to the esthetic endeavour that he calls a poetic existence. As we have noted, Kierkegaard envisages a didactic function of art and delineates a clear demarcation line between art and existence. The esthetic production is the medium through which imagined possibilities can be expressed. But that implies that an artist has a special capability: 'The poet relates himself only to the imagination; he depicts the good, the beautiful, the noble, the true, the exalted, the unselfish, the magnanimous, etc. in a mood at the distance of imagination from actuality' (M 225/SKS 13:281). Being able to imagine particular existential qualifications as a pure possibility is what constitutes artist's work and creates his unique vision. Being able to relate exclusively to imagination, without the constraints of actuality, results in artistic production.

This, to a certain extent, applies to every person in general and is not exclusively an artist's privilege. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus makes clear that as far as the individual is capable of using imagination, he or she can and should employ it in a similar fashion to the way imagination is employed in art: 'Every human being possesses to a higher degree a capability called the power of imagination, a power that is the first condition for what becomes a person' (PC 186/SKS 12:186). And in that sense imagination can be employed by anyone. There are grounds to think that the less experience one has, the more one should rest on imagination: 'Imagination is strongest in youth and then decreases with years' (PC 186/SKS 12:186).

A typical individual also has another difference from the poet. In addition to the purely imaginary construction, individual can also feed on the past in terms of history relayed:

With his imagination he perceives some image of perfection (ideal). It could be one handed down by history, thus from a time past; therefore, it has been actual, has had the actuality of being. Or it is formed by the imagination itself, so it has no relation to or determination by time and place but has only thought-actuality. (PC 186-187/SKS 12:186)

In this case imagination risks the danger of overflowing and captivating the individual. The image the imagination presents to the person without requisite experience is a danger, explains Anti-Climacus:

To this image (which, since for the youth it exists only in the imagination, that is, in the imagination's infinite distance from actuality, is the image of complete perfection, not the image of struggling and suffering perfection) the youth is now drawn by his imagination, or his imagination draws this image to him. He becomes infatuated with this image or this image becomes his love, his inspiration, for him his more perfect (more ideal) self. (PC 187/SKS 12:186)

This danger, however, can be overcome by reflection:

Every life-view knows the way out and is cognizable by the way out that it knows: the poet knows imagination's way out; ... the religious person knows religion's way out. The life-view is the way out, and the story is the way. (TA 15/SKS 8:18)

That which has led him into the contemplation of life's, also gets him or her get out of it. As Anti-Climacus says in *The Sickness unto Death*: 'When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, and willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that reflects himself – that is, upon imagination' (SUD 31/SKS 11:147). It is important to note, though, that reflection is not understanding. The difference between the two should be understood in terms of dynamism and directions. Reflection is an activity of the self and is to be seen in connection with becoming.¹⁷ Understanding is the state the self has come to and is to be seen in connection with being.¹⁸ Thus, the former is a process, the latter is a condition.

However, the most important criterion for the imaginary constructor is an ability to do both: to be able to look backward and forward at the same time. Janus Bifrons serves as the clearest example of this paradoxical requirement for Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard mentions often this Roman deity with two faces – one facing backward, the other forward. Sometimes the mention is explicit and has a direct reference to Janus, for example, in the notebook entry in 1837: 'It must not be said that a standpoint contains something true and something false, for every standpoint is just as true as it is false; it contains both itself and its antithesis, is a two-faced Janus' (KJN 4:130/SKS 19:131, NOT 4:6). Sometimes a passage does not mention Janus by name, but still clearly refers to him, as, for example, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where Johannes Climacus discusses the relation between the infinite and the finite:

What lies at the root of both the comic and the pathos-filled is the misrelation, the contradiction between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the becoming. A pathos that excludes the comic is therefore a misunderstanding, is not pathos at all. The subjectively existing thinker is therefore just as bifrontal as the existence-situation itself. (CUP 89/SKS 7:88)

Experimentator, the imaginary constructor, is a subjectively existing thinker. That is his crucial difference from his construction. In other words, *experimentator* exists, finds himself in actuality, while the imaginary character always is and remains fictional. And there is no doubt that Kierkegaard saw himself as *experimentator* and indeed he modelled himself after Janus in his ability to look backward and forward simultaneously. In a rather early diary entry, he says directly: 'I am a Janus bifrons: with one face I laugh, with the other I weep' (KJN 2:86/SKS 18:94, FF:93). And even the doubts that one can find elsewhere about his own capabilities to be a Janus is merely a testament to the fact that behind the author there is an individual:

I understood it to mean—as was also very precisely, precisely stated—retrospectively, in reference to what happened before, i.e. when I look back, I can see that I had been accompanied by Governance. But forward? No, no, not even with respect to the next minute dare I say that I have been granted the extraordinary—I have no immediate relation to God. (KJN 9:210/SKS 25:208, NB 2788)

Because even a two-faced individual needs a fixed point in order to be able to look in both directions, and that point can be provided only by God. Perhaps this is the key to the enigmatic formula of Anti-Climacus: 'The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it' (SUD 14/SKS 11:130).

So, in summary, why did not Kierkegaard put his own name on *The Concept of Anxiety*? Why did he change his own name to Anti-Climacus on the cover of *Sickness unto Death* at the last minute? Perhaps because the reasons behind these actions are in the fact that the real constructor, the actual Søren Kierkegaard knows the category of actual existence that qualifies the difference between him and his construction. And, therefore, the imaginary creations that the constructor puts out, always have to be marked as such – as imagined and, thus, limited possibilities of actual existence. By

¹⁷Anti-Climacus consistently speaks of reflection as something to be engaged in. See SUD 25-26/SKS 11:141-142; SUD31/SKS 11:147.

¹⁸Understanding, in contrast to reflection, for Anti-Climacus is something that is acquired and preserved. See SUD85/SKS 11:198; SUD 126/SKS 11:237.

indicating that the positions outlined in pseudonymous works are not *his*, i.e. Kierkegaard's positions, by distancing himself from the works, he in this way stresses that what we are dealing with is merely a possibility, an imaginary construction, no more and no less.

6. Conclusion

Kierkegaard's dictum that life can only be understood backward, but must be lived forward, does not have to be interpreted as stating a radical incompatibility between understanding and living. It leaves open a possibility for intellectual preparation for living. Textual evidence and related concepts in Kierkegaard's oeuvre suggest that such an intellectual preparation is not only possible, but desirable. One of such concepts, imagination, is interpreted as a reflection of existential possibilities, that, by analogy to the actual experience, allows to think through specific possibilities an individual faces. Another of such related concepts, *experimentere*, is employed by Kierkegaard to designate precisely this type of intellectual work with the help of imagination.

The whole of his pseudonymous authorship can be interpreted as such an exploration by way of creating various existential prototypes with the help of imagination. Although these existential prototypes can never serve as substitutes for the actual existence and, therefore, are of limited validity, they can, in Kierkegaard's eyes, serve as the elements that stretch our capacity to experience the actual, in other words, to exist as individuals. In this sense, they are necessary building blocks in one's individual existence.

Finally, the complex task of the creator of these existential prototypes indicates that he has to possess the capacity to imagine different existential possibilities without getting caught up in any of them. Kierkegaard sees it as an aesthetic endeavour that has to be subjugated to existential and, eventually, religious goals. For Kierkegaard such a figure is called a religious poet, while the symbol of a paradoxical capacities such a figure requires is embodied by Janus Bifrons, the two-faced god that can at the same time look back into the past and forward into the future.

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