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Demonic despair under the guise of the good? Kierkegaard and Anscombe vs. Velleman

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to clarify Kierkegaard's concept of demonic despair (and demonic evil) and to show its relevance for discussions of the guise of the good thesis (i.e. that in ϕ -ing intentionally, we take ϕ -ing to be good). Contemporary discussions of diabolic evil often emphasise the phenomena of despair and acedia as apparent counter-examples to the guise of the good. I contend that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair is relevant to these discussions, because it reconciles demonic (extreme) despair and acedia with the guise of the good. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard provides an influential, systematic account of despair that relates evil, despair, and acedia to each other. Michelle Kosch argues that this account goes beyond Kierkegaard's German predecessors by introducing a concept of diabolic evil and despair. By contrast, the present paper argues that Kierkegaard takes diabolic evil to be impossible, although he offers a rich analysis of the demonic that resembles diabolic agency. Still, Kierkegaard's analysis rests on ontological assumptions about the nature of the good that belong to a Platonic-Christian tradition that is controversial today.

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Introduction: the guise of the good and evil

The guise of the good (*sub specie boni*) thesis says that that in ϕ -ing intentionally, we take ϕ -ing to be good.¹ It represents the classical view, developed by Plato, Aristotle, and Kant (as well as Anscombe, Anthony Kenny, Ronald de Sousa, and Sergio Tenenbaum). It was long considered the key-stone connecting theories of intentional action with theories of value,

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¹Tenenbaum (forthcoming). There are alternative definitions, one of which will be discussed in Section 5.

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normativity, and rationality.² In the last decades, however, it has come under attack within moral psychology and action theory. David Velleman and others argue that diabolic evil is indeed possible, seeing despair as an almost paradigmatic case of diabolic evil (Velleman 2015, ch. 4; cf. Stocker 1979, 744; Setiya 2007, 36–38).

The concept of diabolic evil is somewhat controversial, since it contradicts the guise of the good thesis. Even if diabolic evil is conceptually possible, there need not exist any empirical cases of it.³ Although there are several apparent counter-examples to the guise of the good (including acedia and despair), there hardly seem to exist any clear cases that unequivocally demonstrates the existence of diabolic evil.⁴

Diabolic evil seems to require that one do evil in an entirely *unselfish and disinterested* manner, since selfish actions aim at (perceived) personal goods. At least, this is what several philosophers have convincingly argued, independently of each other.⁵ Diabolic evil requires that in ϕ -ing intentionally, we only take ϕ -ing to be evil. Still, a choice of (diabolic) evil for its own sake need not prevent diabolic evil from resulting in personal benefit as an unintentional byproduct of this choice. It may be possible to choose evil unselfishly, just as it is possible to be moral unselfishly. However, such unselfish choices often result in personal benefit as an unintended byproduct, but this is something that only occurs *after* virtue or vice has already been chosen selflessly (Davenport 2007, ch. 10).

Kierkegaard's celebrated, systematic analysis of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* is relevant here since it sheds light not just on despair in general but also on demonic evil and the guise of the good in particular.⁶ Michelle Kosch argues that Kierkegaard goes beyond Kantianism and German Idealism by developing a moral psychology that undermines the guise of the good thesis: 'Kierkegaard devoted a large part of his effort as an author to an extensive typology of moral character, and he

²Tenenbaum (forthcoming) referencing Joseph Raz.

³Velleman and Tenenbaum seem to agree on this. Velleman is making a conceptual claim about agency rather than an empirical claim about our psychology. See Velleman (2015, 94 n35); Tenenbaum (2007, 230).

⁴Tenenbaum argues plausibly 'against the idea that there are any compelling examples of diabolic evil. See Tenenbaum (2018, 13).

⁵Caswell (2007); Davenport (2007, ch. 10); Muchnik (2009, 116); Svendsen (2010, 87ff.). These approaches may presuppose a somewhat impartial interpretation of morality. However, Sussman's (2015) alternative interpretation of diabolic evil takes it to consist in whims and caprice that breaks with our striving for good. However, such acts may be neither intentional nor reflexive nor deliberative. As such, they need not contradict the guise of the good, since this thesis only concerns intentional action. Moreover, it is difficult to see how whims could be particularly diabolic.

⁶This analysis influenced not just continental philosophy from Heidegger to Sartre and Habermas but it is also relevant to contemporary discussions in Anglophone philosophy after MacIntyre and Frankfurt. See Davenport (2012); Grøn (1997); Rudd (2012); Theunissen (2005).

did not overlook the various ways, not only of self-consciously abstaining from pursuing the good, but also of *self-consciously pursuing the bad for its own sake*.⁷ However, it seems that diabolic evil (and diabolic despair) differ from demonic evil (or demonic despair) in Kierkegaard. In the literature on evil, 'diabolic' and 'demonic' are often used interchanging. In order to avoid confusion, I reserve the concept 'demonic' for Kierkegaard's use of it, and 'diabolic' for evil that is done merely because it is evil. The questions then are (1) whether these two concepts are identical or not, and (2) if we need a concept of diabolic evil in order to account for extreme cases of despair and evil.

My answers to these questions are both negative. I contend that the concept of the demonic in Kierkegaard is relevant to contemporary concerns precisely because it makes it possible to account for extreme despair and evil without accepting diabolic evil. My main objective is to argue (pace Kosch) that Kierkegaard adheres to the guise of the good thesis, although demonic despair involves defiance, malice, and rage that clearly resembles diabolic evil.⁸ I contend that Kierkegaard's account of demonic despair represents a plausible account of substantial issues in moral psychology and action theory.⁹ More specifically, Kierkegaard accounts for virtually the same phenomenon as Velleman does (i.e. extreme evil and despair exemplified by Milton's Satan) without giving up the guise of the good. The influential account of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* represents a thorough, systematic analysis of despair that is relevant to contemporary debates in moral psychology, particularly for debates on the guise of the good, despair, demoralisation, and practical identity.¹⁰

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes ethico-religious evil in terms of despair, and offers a typology of different forms of despair. One of these forms, the demonic, represents an extreme form of evil that clearly goes beyond evil in a broad or weak sense. Kierkegaard's account of evil is traditional insofar as he relies on a broad notion of

⁷Kosch (2006a, 280), my italics. See also Kosch (2006b, chs. 5–6). Kosch also references Velleman in this connection. However, most other Kierkegaard commentators tacitly presuppose the guise of the good thesis (see below for some references).

⁸Kierkegaard's notes on Leibniz from 1842 to 1843 clearly shows familiarity with, but no criticism of, the guise of the good. In his *Theodicy*, which Kierkegaard read and took notes from, Leibniz writes that 'the will is never prompted to action save by the representation of the good'. Leibniz also writes that 'the will consists in the inclination to do something in proportion to the good it contains' (*Theodicy* 1 §§22, 45). To will something is therefore to regard it as being good, Leibniz claims. See Løkke and Waaler (2009, 65).

⁹I am indebted to a reviewer for comments at this point.

¹⁰See Rudd (2012) and Davenport (2012) on Kierkegaardian despair and practical identity.

moral evil as a type of character flaw, or even as a type of perverted or corrupted character (similar to radical evil and original sin). On this account, any character that falls short of moral perfection implies a weak type of evil or immortality. Evil in this weak sense is a presupposition for demonic evil but not the other way around. The problem with focusing on this weak notion of evil is that we can easily overlook the extreme, narrow notion of evil that picks out the most morally despicable cases. An example of this would be Kant, who is often accused of having a notion of evil that fails to pick out despicable cases of evil. The problem with focusing on the narrow notion of evil, on the other hand, is that evil then seems too extreme and too rare to concern us seriously. It is all too easy to distance oneself from extreme evil and to see it as irrelevant for the understanding of oneself and one's potential. It seems then that we need both notions of evil and that we should try to understand how they relate to each other. However, it should be noted that Kierkegaard seems to identify despair with evil and with sin.¹¹ Demonic despair represents an extreme form of evil and sinfulness that goes far beyond ordinary forms of evil and despair.

The next part of this article (Section 2) introduces the contemporary debate on the guise of the good thesis by focusing on the different interpretations of Milton's Satan in Anscombe and Velleman. Section 3 presents Velleman's account of diabolic evil and despair. It emphasises how the experience of loss is central both to Velleman's account of evil as well as to the competing accounts of Kierkegaard and Tenenbaum. In this connection, the relation between despair and acedia is discussed briefly, since despair and acedia are both central to discussions of the guise of the good (and both are relevant for understanding the experience of loss that is central to diabolic and demonic evil). I suggest that Tenenbaum's account of acedia partially overlaps with demonic despair in Kierkegaard, although competing accounts of acedia differ strongly from demonic despair. In Section 4, I present Kierkegaard's account of demonic despair as a plausible alternative to Velleman's account of diabolic despair. Section 5 gives three arguments why Kierkegaard adheres to the guise of the good, while Section 6 concludes that demonic despair supports the guise of the good.

¹¹The identification of sin and despair is explicit in Part II of *The Sickness unto Death*, which has the title 'Despair is Sin'. However, the identification with evil is mostly implicit. For Kierkegaard's account of evil, see Kosch (2006b, chs. 5–6) and Fremstedal (2014, ch. 2).

Milton's Satan – Anscombe vs. Velleman

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's Satan famously says 'Evil be thou my Good' (Milton 2005, Book IV; line 110). To Satan, objective evil appears subjectively good and desirable, as something that should be pursued for its own sake. However, there is disagreement over whether Satan acts *sub specie boni* or not. In a much-quoted passage, Elizabeth Anscombe offers the following interpretation:

[O]ne can go on to say 'And what's the good of its being bad?' to which the answer might be condemnation of good as impotent, slavish, and inglorious. Then the good of making evil my good is my intact liberty in the unsubmissiveness of my will.¹²

This is a possible explanation of Satan's attraction to evil, in which Satan acts under the guise of the good. On Anscombe's reading,

1. Satan values glory and the liberty of his unsubmissive will;
2. he finds the (objective or divine) good 'impotent, slavish and inglorious';
3. he condemns the (objective or divine) good, since it is incompatible with his (subjective) values.

Satan values his individual power of choice and sees it as incompatible with what is objectively or divinely good. He therefore rebels against goodness and insists on his intact freedom to do so. Thus, he is defiant, just like Kierkegaard's demonic agent. Indeed, Satan and the demonic seem to represent the very same phenomenon.¹³

In an influential passage, David Velleman objects to Anscombe's interpretation:

[Satan] cannot reasonably be interpreted as adopting new estimates of what's valuable – that is, as resolving to cease judge evil to be evil in what he now desires, if he ever comes to think of what he desires as really good, he will no longer be at all satanic; he'll be just another well-intended fool. The ruler of

¹²Anscombe (1963, 75)'s interpretation here is in line with Miltonists such as Tanner (1992, 123–139). Tanner (1992, 123) writes: '[F]or Milton's human sinners, evil always remain evil – that which they loathe; for Milton's demonic sinners [and Satan], evil becomes defined as good – that which they love, or at least attempt to love.'

¹³Tanner (1992, 130, 146) writes: 'For the Miltonist, Kierkegaard's description of the demonic could hardly fit *Paradise Lost* more neatly [...] despite all that has been written about Milton's Satan, significant new insight into his malaise are available from Kierkegaard, whose analysis of 'demonic despair' in *The Sickness unto Death* [...] often seems as if it were penned specifically with the existential position of Milton's Satan in mind.'

Hell doesn't desire what he wrongly thinks is worthy of approval; he desires what he rightly thinks isn't. (Velleman 2015, 95)

According to Velleman, Satan desires evil because it is evil, not because it appears good. However, there are several problems here. First, referring to Satan is not very helpful, since we neither have a very clear account of him nor of diabolic evil nor of their relevance for human agency.¹⁴ It is not perfectly clear whether Satan does evil (only because it is evil) in an entirely disinterested manner or whether he merely has a perverted notion of good and self-interest.¹⁵ Velleman seems to think that Satan needs to be wholly perverted and therefore clear-minded – not mistaken – about what he is doing (Tenenbaum 2007, 252). Sergio Tenenbaum comments:

[I]t is not clear that Satan pursues what is bad *simpliciter*, rather tha[n] what is *morally* bad or some other specific form of badness. After all, Satan does not seem to find anything attractive in foul tasting food, badly played music, or being engaged in boring activities, even though all these things are also bad. If a perverse agent is attracted by *badness as such*, why wouldn't she be attracted (at least to some extent) to all instances of badness?¹⁶

Second, it is perfectly possible to recognise something as evil in one respect and good in another. Kant's 'radical evil,' for instance, can appear attractive, not by virtue of being morally evil, but by virtue of serving self-interest (or sensuousness). The guise of the good does not rule out intentional evil if evil is seen as being good in some respect; it is compatible with a weak form of perversion, in which evil is only 'an essential component of what attracts' (Tenenbaum 2018, 13). Satan can indeed rebel against divine goodness if there are other values or goods he prefers instead. More specifically, he values glory and liberty instead of God's slavish values. Satan shows his "'intact liberty'" only by pursuing some form of badness' that deviates from the good commanded by God (Tenenbaum 2018, 12; cf. 2007, 253f.).

The guise of the good thesis has the advantage of making evil partially intelligible. It makes it possible to see that moral evil is motivated by some non-moral value-commitment (e.g. self-interest). Insofar as we can find these non-moral values attractive or appealing, we may have sympathy for the devil, since 'we can see, or be caught in the illusion, that Satan's ends are desirable.' (Tenenbaum 2007, 256) Still, we may ask (as Velleman

¹⁴Tenenbaum (2007, 256) says that our intuitions about Satan are not to be relied on as an oracle. However, it seems plausible that Satan is morally perverse and that his cognition is somewhat limited.

¹⁵Tanner (1992) argues at length that Milton's Satan acts *sub specie boni*.

¹⁶Tenenbaum (forthcoming, 14). I have corrected one typo and the pagination may differ from the final printed version, which is still not available.

does) whether Satan, or someone else, is just another well-intended fool. If evil mainly involves a theoretic error, or a cognitive mistake, it is indeed difficult to see how evil can be imputable (or even intelligible). On this type of (Socratic) approach, evil does indeed seem foolish.

By contrast, a broadly Augustinian account takes evil to involve a practical or *evaluative mistake* instead. More specifically, an evil agent chooses a lesser good (e.g. self-interest) over a higher good (e.g. morality). This evaluative mistake results either from *akrasia* (Tenenbaum 2007, ch. 7), or from deliberate prioritisation of lesser goods above higher goods. These evaluative mistakes differ from just being a well-intended fool, although they are notoriously difficult to account for. Augustine and Kant, for instance, though the fall into evil was mysterious, something Kierkegaard alleviates somewhat by introducing a psychological account of anxiety as that sheds some limited light on the fall.¹⁷ However, Augustin, Kant, and Kierkegaard all take such evaluative mistakes to involve a form of self-deception that confuses a lesser value with a higher value. Still, this self-deception is assumed to result from corrupted volition rather than merely a cognitive mistake.¹⁸ As we will see in the next section, Velleman sketches an alternative account of evil in which the agent pursues evil for its own sake in a clear-minded manner.

Loss, despair and acedia – Velleman, Tenenbaum, and Kierkegaard

In a somewhat Kierkegaardian spirit, Velleman writes:

Suppose that I have suffered a profound disappointment that has cast me into a mood of bitterness and despair. In this mood, the very thought of ameliorating my condition, or the conditions of the world, strikes me as a sick delusion. All attempts at constructive action seems absurd. No more earnest efforts for me, I say to myself, no more worthy endeavors: to hell with it all. (Velleman 2015, 98)

It is difficult to see how one could become disappointed unless one became disappointed over losing something good or valuable. Therefore, Velleman's agent does not seem diabolic initially; something that suggests that diabolic agency is not a default position. This suspicion is confirmed by Velleman's later comment (on the very same page) that

¹⁷By relying on a descriptive, phenomenological account, *The Concept of Anxiety* argues that the fall into evil is preceded by the experience of anxiety, an experience closely linked with moral freedom itself. Cf. Quinn (1990), Kosch (2006b, 210) and Grøn (2008).

¹⁸Cf. Fremstedal (2014, ch. 2). See also Section 5.

the diabolic agent is 'determined never to do a good or desirable or positive thing again.' (Velleman 2015, 98) Despair is preceded by a loss of a perceived good (something Kierkegaard also claims),¹⁹ which somehow contributes to a transition from acting under the guise of the good to acting diabolically. For Velleman, this loss of good leads to total hopelessness, which sees goodness as generally impossible. As we will see, Kierkegaard has a very similar but more elaborate analysis that differs from Velleman by accepting the guise of the good. Whereas Velleman thinks profound loss or disappointment precedes diabolic despair, Kierkegaard thinks that it precedes demonic despair.

The profound disappointment, or loss of value, is crucial not only to Velleman's account of despair but also to the account of acedia in Tenenbaum (and Kierkegaard).²⁰ Acedia is relevant not only for understanding the experience of loss but also for the guise of the good. Like despair, acedia has been central to discussions of the guise of the good, since it is often taken to represent a *prima facie* counter-example to the guise of the good. In a classical paper, Michael Stocker stresses that acedia seems to undermine the guise of the good, since it involves seeing 'all the good to be won' yet lacking 'the will, interest, desire or strength' to do anything about it.²¹ Acedia therefore involves the lack of motivation to act, although one's evaluation of value is intact. Instead of pursuing good or evil, one lacks motivation and does not care.

In a book that responds to Stocker and Velleman, Tenenbaum objects that it is possible to account for acedia without accepting diabolic evil. He writes:

[T]he agent in a state of *accidie* takes certain evaluative perspectives to be conditioned by certain states of affairs that do not obtain. In extreme cases, *all* evaluative perspectives are taken by the person suffering from *accidie* to be conditioned and to be such that the particular condition does not obtain. (Tenenbaum 2007, 293)

On this (competing) account, acedia involves appreciating certain values (e.g. personal freedom), while seeing them as impossible to realise, since they are conditioned by states of affairs that do not obtain. For instance, an Aristotelian may think that full happiness is impossible to realise, since the necessary external goods are lacking and moral virtue is

¹⁹Grøn (1997, 153) strongly emphasises this experience of loss in his influential phenomenological reconstruction of Kierkegaard's concept of despair.

²⁰Cf. Tenenbaum (2007, ch. 8). For Kierkegaard, see below.

²¹Stocker (1979, 744) also mentions despair in this context, as does Setiya (2007, 36–38).

undermined by bad luck.²² This fits perfect with the idea, from Kierkegaard and Velleman (Tenenbaum discusses the latter), that serious disappointments or loss can lead either to acedia or to despair. Acedia then involves the experience of being stuck or trapped in an absurd situation that does not allow for the realisation of value. The world seems inhospitable, since it does not allow the realisation of values or goods.

Clearly, acedia is incompatible with substantial knowledge, belief, or hope that values can be realised. The agent suffering from acedia therefore finds it regrettable that ‘the condition [of value] does not obtain: that she is the kind of person she is, that things came down this way, and so on.’ (Tenenbaum 2007, 295) But how do acedia and despair relate to each other? Both Kierkegaard and his commentators seem to identify acedia with a particular form of despair (Theunissen 1996, 44ff.; Cappelørn 2008; McDonald 2009, 76, 81n86), something neither Tenenbaum nor Velleman seems to do. However, there are different interpretations of acedia. On the interpretation of Tenenbaum, acedia seems to represent a particular form of Kierkegaard’s authentic or conscious despair. More specifically, extreme cases of acedia, in which all values are seen as unrealisable, overlaps with total, conscious despair that has values but see these as unrealisable (i.e. defiance). As such, acedia partially overlaps with Kierkegaard’s demonic despair, although the latter goes beyond acedia by introducing several extra conditions, as we will see below (in Section 4).

Still, this interpretation of acedia is controversial. It is also possible to view acedia as a lack of care that prevents the pursuit of good *and* evil, although it may still involve some belief in good. This second interpretation takes acedia to lack ‘will, interest, desire or strength’ to pursue good or evil (Stocker 1979, 744). As such, it does not represent Kierkegaardian defiance but instead the despair of weakness. This is a form of conscious despair that is diametrically opposed to demonic despair, since it is dominated by passivity instead of activity. The despair of weakness does not want to be itself, whereas demonic despair represents an extreme form of defiance that desperately wants to be itself at any price.²³

²²See Annas (1993, 376ff.) regarding constitutive moral luck in Aristotle.

²³For the despair of weakness, see SKS 11, 164ff. / SUD, 49ff. For demonic despair, see SKS 11, 181–187, esp. 184–187 / SUD, 67–74, esp. 71–74. I attribute the writings of Anti-Climacus to Kierkegaard, since Kierkegaard endorses Anti-Climacus’ views and ideals, although he does not claim to live up to them. Cf. SKS 22, 130, NB 11:209 / KJN 2007, 6, 127ff.; Theunissen 2005, 122n. Still, not much hangs on this here.

Demonic despair in *The Sickness unto Death*

In *The Sickness unto Death*, demonic despair is first based on the attempt to *create oneself*, something that contradicts facticity.²⁴ This attempt to exaggerate individual freedom and possibilities understates actual limitations and depreciates the real possibilities of the situation. Freedom and possibilities becomes abstract, negative and fantastic, since they are disconnected from the given situation. As a result, the demonic is not positively free to do anything specific nor able to choose non-arbitrarily between different possibilities.²⁵ Still, self-creation is considered good and hindrances evil.

Second, the demonic is consciously aware that he *despairs* over the realisation of freedom, since the condition for its realisation does not obtain, something that involves profound disappointment and loss (SKS 1997–2013, 11, 182ff. / SUD 1983, 69f.) or *acedia*, as defined by Tenenbaum (2007). However, this experience of loss and disappointment can be both general and specific. One can despair over passivity (passion or suffering) and the lack of freedom in general, and one can despair over particular events or problems that undermine one's values and identity. Even though there are general problems that underlie this form of despair, the person in despair may focus on particular problems that seem to destroy life in general. Thus, the latter is taken not as isolated episodes but as something that leads to despair over life as a *whole*.

Third, the demonic tries but fails to ignore suffering and despair (#2). As a result, he actively *gives up all hope*, courage, and faith that suffering and despair can be overcome. He thinks that it is too late for him to overcome suffering and despair. He therefore (a) defiantly *rejects all help* to overcome suffering and despair and (b) takes pride in suffering, despair, and victimhood, by identifying with it (i.e. by letting higher-order motives reinforce and sustain despair, suffering, and victimhood). He focuses all his attention on despair and is highly conscious of it (SKS 11, 184f. / SUD, 71f.; cf. SKS 4, 446 / CA 1980, 146).

Finally, he does not share his problems with others but keeps them to himself. Demonic despair therefore involves *Indesluttethed* (SKS 11, 186 /

²⁴SKS 11, 182f. / SUD, 67–69. The concept of facticity involves always already being situated in a specific situation. Human agents are always already particular embodied human beings, with specific histories, who are born into, and more or less entangled in, particular traditions and particular communities. Facticity then refers to the very limits – and possibility – of human freedom, as represented by embodiment and an inescapable socio-historical context. Cf. Rudd (2012, Part 1); Davenport (2012); Fremstedal (2014, ch. 3).

²⁵This appears to involve a sophisticated wantonness, which views all lower-order motives as equally valid and invalid. Cf. Rudd (2012, 80ff.) and Davenport (2012, 123).

SUD, 73), a Danish word that is translated as *Verschllossenheit*, uncommunicativeness, self-enclosure, inclosing reserve and reticence.

The first point coincides with Milton's Satan who tries to define his own values by arbitrary fiat and to be self-sufficient (cf. Tanner 1992, 133). (It also overlaps with Romantic irony and extreme forms of existential authenticity that involve self-creation.²⁶) The second point is confluent with the profound disappointment that Velleman thinks precedes despair and the loss that Tenenbaum thinks constitutes extreme acedia. The third point involves a complete loss of general hope in the future that seems implicit in the analyses of Velleman and Tenenbaum (although it is neither clear that acedia implies (a) defiant rejection of all help nor (b) that one takes pride in suffering, suffering, despair, and victimhood). The two last points (##3–4) also come close to Velleman's vivid description of despair:

In this mood, the very thought of ameliorating my condition, or the conditions of the world, strikes me as a sick delusion. All attempts at constructive action seems absurd. No more earnest efforts for me, I say to myself, no more worthy endeavors: to hell with it all. (Velleman 2015, 98)

However, despair is not just (#2) a psychological phenomenon for Kierkegaard, or something we experience or suffer (such as a state or feeling of hopelessness). It also involves (#3) an act whereby we actively despair by giving up hope and courage. Despair both involves suffering a loss, or to despair over something that happens, and to attribute infinite weight to the loss, or event, one despairs over by seeing it as destroying life in general.²⁷

At first glance, it may seem that Kosch is right in claiming that demonic despair involves pursuing evil for its own sake. Both the concept 'demonic' and Kierkegaard's description may suggest this, although I think it is somewhat misleading. In any case, Kierkegaard's description certainly does not imply that the demonic has committed any diabolic deed (and neither does Velleman's desperate agent who hides behind the curtains). It is simply not clear that the four points above involve diabolic evil, unless the two last points (##3–4) somehow lead to a fifth point that involves doing evil merely because it is evil. Kierkegaard himself seems to deny this: '[D]espite all his defiance, [a person] does not have the power to tear

²⁶See McDonald (2009, 71) who focuses on demonic boredom, but also connects it to melancholia, irony, and anxiety.

²⁷See Grøn (1997, 153) on the interplay between passivity and activity in despair. Kierkegaard supports his analysis with a descriptive and analytic exposition of different forms of consciousness reminiscent of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Different forms of consciousness are criticised on their own terms by identifying a conflict between the self-understanding at work and what it shows and achieves (Grøn 1997, 33f., 133, 138f.).

himself away completely from the good, because it is the stronger, he also does not even have the power to will it completely.’ (SKS 8, 146 / UD 2009, 33) It therefore seems that Kierkegaard accepts the guise of the good, while accounting for virtually the same phenomenon as Velleman does.

Three arguments against the diabolic reading of Kierkegaard

In this section, I will argue that the psychological, theological, and ethical views of Kierkegaard presuppose the guise of the good thesis. More specifically, he is committed to a psychological eudaimonism, a soteriological universalism, and a constitutivism about goodness that all presuppose the guise of the good.

Psychological eudaimonism presupposes the guise of the good, by assuming that we always act with the good of happiness in mind.²⁸ Human beings generally desire to be happy or to live well, although they interpret happiness differently. The different characters and pseudonyms found in Kierkegaard’s authorship all seem concerned with the pursuit of happiness and goodness in some form or another.²⁹ Aesthetes, for instance, typically pursue happiness in the form of pleasure or by prioritising the strongest given desires. The ethicist (Judge William), by contrast, emphasises moral constraints on happiness and self-interest. Still, he repudiates diabolic evil, although he confuses it with Kant’s ‘radical evil’.³⁰ Instead of allowing diabolic evil, Kierkegaard generally contrasts morality with self-interest (or sensuousness). The implication is that the fundamental moral choice is between moral and prudential goods. Evil agents prioritise self-interest (sensuousness) above morality, whereas moral agents have exactly opposite priorities (Fremstedal 2014, ch. 2). In both cases, agents act *sub specie boni* by pursuing good.

Moreover, Kierkegaard’s egalitarian soteriology rests on the assumption that divine salvation is universally available (although it is possible to resist divine grace).³¹ However, it is assumed that salvation would not even be

²⁸Kierkegaard’s relation to the eudaimonistic tradition is complex. He sketches a critique of ethical eudaimonism, but seems to accept psychological eudaimonism. In this context, ethical eudaimonism is the view that morality is justified prudentially, because moral virtue leads to personal happiness. See Fremstedal (forthcoming); cf. Webb (2017) and Mendham (2007). See also SKS 7, 313, 367, 387 / CUP1 1992, 342f., 403, 426. For psychological eudaimonism, see Hare (2002, 75, 87). For a somewhat different account, see Davenport (2007, ch. 6).

²⁹For Kierkegaard’s view of happiness, see Olivares-Bøgeskov (2014).

³⁰SKS 3, 170f., 173 / EO2 1990, 174f., 178. For the ethicist’s view of happiness, see SKS 3, 119, 205, 207 / EO2, 118f., 213, 216.

³¹For Kierkegaard’s universalist soteriology, see Jackson (1998, 238). Even alternative (semi-pelagian) readings of Kierkegaard’s soteriology seem to accept the guise of the good.

possible unless there is some (objective) good left in the person who is saved, as *The Concept of Anxiety* makes clear (SKS 4, 424 / CA, 122). From this, it follows that no human being is entirely evil or totally depraved. *The Sickness unto Death* even makes it clear that the demonic is close to Christian salvation, indicating that he is not entirely evil (at least not objectively so – cf. SKS 11, 185f. / SUD, 71f.).

In order to understand Kierkegaard's notion of evil, I suggest distinguishing between subjective and objective versions of the sub specie boni thesis. The *subjective* version of the thesis says that in ϕ -ing intentionally, we take ϕ -ing to be good.³² Alternatively, it says that to desire or pursue something involves taking it to be good. The good is here merely a *perceived* (subjective) good. By contrast, the *objective* (constitutivist) version of the thesis says that human agency presupposes the objective good, even if the agent fail to realise it. In Kierkegaard, the idea seems to be that human selfhood and practical identity presuppose the objective good.³³ The latter implies that any attempt to escape the good is futile, since evil is parasitic on (objective) good. Put differently, ethico-religious goodness, represented by the unconditional ethical task and moral normativity, is constitutive of our selfhood and practical identity. Whereas Kantians see categorical and hypothetical imperatives as constitutive of intentional action and practical identity,³⁴ Kierkegaard sees ethico-religious goodness (and its obligations) as constitutive of selfhood and practical identity. Goodness does not represent a defeatable constitutive aim but rather an inescapable constitutive principle. This strong, objectivist and constitutivist view is developed in 'Purity of Heart,' Part I of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* from 1847.³⁵

According to 'Purity of Heart,' we are only free to choose between being unconditionally good and being good to some extent, or in some respect, only (cf. SKS 8, 139f. / UD, 24f.; Knappe 2004, chs. 3–4). Since it is inescapable, it is only the good, in an ethico-religious sense, that may be willed unconditionally and consistently without any contradiction or inconsistency. Kierkegaard therefore writes: '[T]he person who in truth wills only

³²As defined by Tenenbaum (forthcoming).

³³I agree with Rudd (2012) and Davenport (2012) that Kierkegaardian selfhood involves practical identity that takes a narrative form. Still, it is not clear that selfhood is reducible to a narrative identity. See Stokes (2015, esp. chs. 7–9).

³⁴See Korsgaard (2013). Constitutivism about practical normativity tries to derive practical normativity from agency itself. Such constitutivism is found both in Kantianism and German Idealism. See the interpretation of independence in Kosch (2018, esp. 36).

³⁵Kosch appears to overlook this text, although scholars typically see it as directly relevant for understanding despair, volition and selfhood. Cf. Grøn (1997); Rudd (2012); Davenport (2012).

one thing *can will only the good* [...] the good is unconditionally the one and only thing that a person may will and shall will'.³⁶

Willing something else than the good, by contrast, involves double-mindedness. Kierkegaard writes:

The person who wills one thing that is not the good is actually not willing one thing; it is an illusion, a semblance, a deception, a self-deception that he wills only one thing – because in his innermost being he is, he must be, double-minded. This is why the apostle says, 'Purify your hearts, you double-minded' (SKS 8, 139f. / UD, 25)

Kierkegaard generally interprets despair as double-mindedness.³⁷ He writes that '[e]veryone in despair has two wills, one that he futilely wants to follow entirely, and one that he futilely wants to get rid of entirely'.³⁸ Getting rid of the good is futile and self-defeating, since it is inescapable (SKS 8, 123 / UD, 7). Immorality therefore involves double-mindedness that is split between the (moral) good it (futilely) wants to avoid and the non-moral good that it prefers instead. Purity of heart, by contrast, requires unconditional moral dedication. However, human agents need not be aware of this. As a result, evil involves both a tendency to overlook the inescapability of the good and an evaluative mistake that depreciates ethico-religious goodness and over-appreciates non-moral value.

The upshot is that the relation between good and evil is fundamentally *asymmetric*, since evil depends on good but not vice versa. Kierkegaard therefore concludes that, 'despite all his defiance, [a person] does not have the power to tear himself away completely from the good, because it is the stronger, he also does not even have the power to will it completely.' (SKS 8, 146 / UD, 33) It is then impossible 'that a person could harden himself to willing only evil' (SKS 8, 147f. / UD, 34). Kierkegaard even goes to the extreme of saying that 'all roads *lead* to the good, even the road of error' (SKS 8, 139 / UD, 25). Presumably, evil leads to good by allowing suffering and guilt-consciousness that in turn makes possible faith, sin-consciousness, and divine forgiveness. Even though sin deviates from the good or the eternal, it is still the case that latter 'is the dominant, which does not want to have its time but wants

³⁶SKS 8, 138f. / UD, 24f. However, categorical moral dedication does not rule out other concerns and obligations. Rather, the point is only that the latter are a matter of secondary importance if morality is at stake.

³⁷Rudd (2012) interprets double-mindedness as an incoherent practical identity and purity of heart as a coherent identity. See also Davenport (2012).

³⁸SKS 8, 144 / UD, 30. Self-creation, for instance, is split between possibilities and actuality, freedom and necessity. It wants the former only, but always ends up with the latter as well.

to make time [itself] *its own* and then permits the temporal also to have its time.³⁹ The good is eternal since it is both unchangeable and the root of time itself, including the future (particularly the eschatological future). The temporal, by contrast, represents an ever-changing manifold that does not allow true unity, unless dominated by the eternal in the form of the morally good (SKS 8, 140ff. / UD, 26ff.). True unity therefore requires eternity, Kierkegaard argues in a Platonic manner.

Kierkegaard consistently identifies the divine and the good,⁴⁰ taking divine goodness and unity to be present in everything, while metaphorically describing sin as a divorce from goodness (SKS 8, 123 / UD, 7). This appears to involve a relational understanding of evil, as something that can only be understood as a *reaction* against good. However, it also seems to imply that evil itself has a relational nature, since evil only exists by reacting against good. Kierkegaard therefore seems not only to make an epistemological claim about how we understand evil but also an ontological claim about the nature of evil.

Scholars often (and rightly) associate the central claim about the parasitic nature of evil with Kierkegaard's Platonic-Christian and Kantian background.⁴¹ This background is difficult to reconcile with Kosch's reading of Kierkegaard as a theological voluntarist who dismisses both the guise of the good and moral realism.⁴² There even seems to be a creation theology in 'Purity of Heart' that takes divine creation to be very good, although the fall partially corrupts creation (SKS 8, 123 / UD, 7, cf. SKS 9, 66f., 94, 118, 219ff. / WL 1998, 60, 88f., 115, 216ff.). There is an element of goodness left in human evil that allows guilt-consciousness, faith, and sin-consciousness (although the two latter require divine revelation) (Fremstedal 2014, ch. 2). Still, Kierkegaard is clear that evil is not a mere lack of good, since it involves an active opposition to the good. Under the subheading 'That sin is not a

³⁹SKS 8, 127 / UD, 11. Still, to despair is 'to lose the eternal,' since 'the eternal' represents the present in which the self should take responsibility for its whole life. Unless it takes full responsibility for itself, the self cannot fully endorse itself reflectively or accept itself completely. Without full acceptance, or unconditional willingness to be itself, the self is in despair, since it is split between actuality, which it does not fully accept or endorse, and ideals, which it does identify with. See Pap. 1968–1978 VIII–2 B154:3 / JP 1967–1978 1, 747. Cf. Stokes (2015, 167).

⁴⁰For this identification, see SKS 4, 160 / FT 1983, 68; SKS 6, 439 / SLW 1988, 476; SKS 7, 133, 143 / CUP1, 142, 153f.; SKS 8, 364, 151, 153 / UD, 268, 39, 41; Rudd (2012, 45f.); Evans (2006, 88, 105, 183).

⁴¹Cf. Knappe (2004, chs. 3–4). Kantians, for instance, argue that lying is parasitic on truth-telling. Still, it is possible to give a different justification for such an asymmetry between good and evil. For instance, theories of intersubjective recognition (developed by Fichte, Hegel, Honneth, Velleman, and Skorupski) offer different justifications. Typically, such theories see dominance and slavery as parasitic on mutual recognition. For a Hegelian approach, see Williams (1997).

⁴²Kosch even seems to think that voluntarism gives a more satisfactory account of evil (as imputable and intelligible) than ethical intellectualism and Kantian rationalism, something that is quite controversial. See Irwin (2011, vol. 3, 107, 308) and Kosch (2006b). For alternative interpretations of Kierkegaard, see Evans (2006); Fremstedal (2014); Rudd (2012); Irwin (2011, ch. 77).

negation but a position,' Kierkegaard therefore stresses that sin is something positive established through a choice; it is not mere negation nor weakness, sensuousness, finitude, or ignorance (SKS 11, 209, 212 / SUD, 96, 99f.).

Kierkegaard's constitutivism about the good and practical normativity is relatively unexplored and deserves more discussion before judgement is passed on it. Still, it could prove more controversial than other forms of constitutivism, because it relies on a comprehensive Platonic-Christian framework that many find unacceptable. However, even other forms of constitutivism seem to support the guise of the good (at least in an objective form that may be compatible with a subjective form of diabolic evil).⁴³ In the next, final section of this article, we will see that the analysis of the demonic in *The Sickness unto Death* also seems to support the guise of the good.

Conclusion: against the diabolic reading of Kierkegaard

It seems clear that Kierkegaard accepts the objective version of the guise of the good thesis, but there can still be doubt as to whether he accepts the subjective, mainstream version of it. Perhaps it is psychologically possible for an agent to intend pure evil, even though evil is ontologically dependent on good and the agent fails to realise this. In any case, Kierkegaard generally takes despair to involve self-deception (SKS 11, 209, 212 / SUD, 96, 99f.), and even diabolic evil, as defined (in subjective terms) above, seems compatible with the objective form of the guise of the good.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, the demonic hates existence and takes pride in being a miserable victim. However, does this mean that he has given up on good (as suggested by Kosch and Velleman)? Is he only intending to do evil? He has given up self-creation, although he still finds some value and meaning in protesting and in being a victim beyond hope, since this is the only way to maintain some independency. He (#2) initially saw suffering and despair as something bad, but he later came to (#3b) insist on them by valuing them and identifying with them. This is a desperate, last attempt to avoid surrendering by accepting help from others.

Demonic despair appears to invert the proper relation between good and evil in one central case. More specifically, external help represents objective good, and the demonic objective evil. Yet, external help appears evil to the demonic, whereas absolutised *independence appears*

⁴³For Humean constitutivism, see Leffler (2016, 559ff.) and Katsafanas (2018, 373). For Kantian constitutivism, see Korsgaard (2013). For Fichtean constitutivism, see Kosch (2018). For Nietzschean constitutivism, see Katsafanas (2015).

good. Much like Milton's Satan, on Anscombe's interpretation of him, the demonic values his 'intact liberty in the unsubmitiveness of [his] will.'⁴⁴ The demonic then rebels not against all goodness but against a much more specific form of it, represented by external help either from a human Other or the divine Other (particularly the latter seems absurd to the demonic – cf. SKS 11, 185f. / SUD, 71f.). He is not attracted to badness as such but only to one of its forms. Kierkegaard portrays the demonic as being too proud to accept help and as rebelling against (objective and divine) goodness. This clearly suggest original sin in a broadly Augustinian sense.⁴⁵ Whereas the diabolic agent does evil in a selfless manner, the demonic agent is too concerned with himself to act selflessly. The demonic defiantly wants to be himself as a victim beyond hope. He sees himself as the big typo in God's creation that shows just how bad an author God is (SKS 11, 186f. / SUD, 73f.). The demonic feels offended by existence as a whole, hates it and rebels against it. This rebellion involves demonic rage and malice, but not disinterestedness or unselfishness (as required by diabolic evil). Rather than being diabolic, demonic despair involves wounded pride and perverted self-interest. The demonic takes pride in being the big typo that has a right to rebel against God. He wants to be himself at any price, even though it involves identifying with suffering and victimhood. Still, he values his own freedom and identity so much that it leads to the rebellion against God. Kierkegaard famously describes demonic despair as follows:

Demonic despair is the most intense form of the despair: in despair to will to be oneself. [...] in hatred towards existence, it wills to be itself [...] in accordance with its misery. [...] it will[s] to be itself [...] for spite [...] [Demonic despair] wants to force itself upon [the power that established it, i.e. God], to obtrude defiantly upon it, wants to adhere to it out of malice [...] Rebelling against all existence, it feels that it has obtained evidence against it, against its goodness. The person in despair believes that he himself is the evidence, and that is what he wants to be, and therefore he wants to be himself, himself in his torment, in order to protest against all existence with his torment. [...] [A] consolidation would be his undoing [...] it is as if an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error [...] and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred to him, forbidding him to correct it and in manical defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author. (SKS 11, 186f. / SUD, 73f.)

⁴⁴Anscombe (1963, 75)'s interpretation of Milton is implicitly supported by Tanner (1992), who explicitly attributes this view to Kierkegaard.

⁴⁵See Part Two of *The Sickness unto Death*, for the identification of sin and despair.

If correct, this means that Kierkegaard accepts the guise of the good both objectively and subjectively (although the former is clearer than the latter). More interestingly, it indicates that the guise of the good makes it possible to account not only for acedia but also for extreme forms of despair and evil. Kierkegaard thus seems to account for much the same phenomena that motivate Velleman and Stocker to give up the guise of the good.⁴⁶ Still, this does not show that diabolic evil is impossible outside of a Kierkegaardian framework. However, it does indicate that diabolic evil is difficult to reconcile with psychological eudaimonism, constitutivism about practical normativity, and certain theological views (notably creation theology and Arminian soteriology).⁴⁷

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⁴⁶Cohen (2008, 117–120) mentions a very different, Kantian strategy for defending the guise of the good. Cohen claims that we are embodied agents who are interested in self-preservation, species survival, and community, something that implies a prior commitment to benevolence (not to be found in bare agents who are not embodied). Yet another Kantian strategy claims that the guise of the good is necessary for moral imputation. Pablo Muchnik (2009, 116) summarises: '[T]he diabolic volition represents a self-defeating motivational structure, for it deprives itself of reasons for actions. Even the most brutal acts of cruelty [...] could not entice a devilish being. These acts are not fully gratuitous, completely disinterested, as is required from the diabolical agent. We presume in the perpetrators a pleasure in humiliating, in undermining another human being's capacity for agency [...] in spitefully proving that there is no god and hence everything is permitted [...] None of these motives is 'devilish' in the Kantian sense—their wickedness stems from a (perverse) subjective conception of the good, and falls under the aegis of self-love broadly construed.' See also Caswell (2007); Formosa (2009, Parts 2–3); Rödl (2018).

⁴⁷Thanks to reviewers and Heine A. Holmen as well as audiences in Uppsala and Tromsø for comments on earlier versions of this article.

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