

C. Concepts and Contributions

Kierkegaard's Views on Normative Ethics, Moral Agency, and Metaethics

ROE FREMSTEDAL

Kierkegaard was concerned with ethics and its relation to religion throughout his authorship. Volume I of *Either/Or* portrays different aesthetes who are not fundamentally committed to morality. Volume II contains two letters where the ethicist Judge William responds to aesthete A by arguing that it is in A's own interest to recognize the validity of morality, since the central (and shared) notions of love, selfhood, and freedom are better preserved ethically than aesthetically (SKS 3, 13–314 / EO2, 3–334). Roughly, the idea is that without ethical commitment, love is episodic, lacking continuity and importance, while selfhood is unbalanced and freedom is negative, empty, and arbitrary. Famously, Judge William concludes that the real alternative to choosing the ethical is despair.¹

Fear and Trembling contrasts the ethical with the religious faith of Abraham, who tried to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The book presents a dilemma where Abraham is either a murderer or a paradigmatic religious believer. *The Concept of Anxiety* then introduces a distinction between two types of ethics, the first and second ethics (SKS 4, 323–31 / CA, 16–24). The first ethics is a philosophical ethics that is reminiscent of the ethical in *Either/Or*, Part II, and *Fear and Trembling*. The second ethics, by contrast, is a Christian ethics based on the existence of sin and divine grace. The first ethics wants to realize moral ideals in reality and assumes that the necessary conditions are given. The second ethics, however, presupposes the reality of sin and “begins with the actual [*Virkelige*] in order to raise it up into ideality” by relying on divine grace (SKS 4, 326 / CA, 19). *The Concept of Anxiety* indicates that the pre-Christian problem of moral guilt motivates the transition to Christianity, something that is also suggested by *Fear and Trembling* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. More specifically, the problem of guilt within the first ethics is re-described in terms of sin by Christian ethics.²

The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* associates essential consciousness of guilt with the collapse of the ethical stage and the rise of natural religion (immanent religiousness). The *Postscript* maintains that we have a natural (pre-Christian) interest in eternal happiness, and focuses on how we can receive it by becoming Christians (SKS 7, 25, 560 / CUP1, 15f., 617). Eternal happiness is said to be our final end, something that is also claimed by *Fear and Trembling*, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, and *Christian Discourses*.³

Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits argues that it is only by willing the good unconditionally that we can achieve consistency or unity as agents or selves (SKS 8, 139f. / UD, 24). Immorality is said to involve despair or double-mindedness, in the sense of having two wills that are inconsistent with each other. *The Sickness unto Death* then offers a systematic analysis of despair and its importance for human agency and selfhood that points to Christianity as a solution (cf. SKS 11, 193ff. / SUD, 79ff.). Somewhat similarly, *Works of Love* contrasts despair with Christian hope and neighbor love (SKS 9, 248ff. / WL, 248ff.). This suggests that the fundamental divide is not so much between the aesthetic and ethical stages as between human despair and Christian hope, faith, and love. Kierkegaard does not deny the possibility and validity of non-Christian ethics as much as he claims that it ultimately collapses on its own terms and makes Christian ethics necessary.

7.1 Normative Ethics: Virtue Ethics, Deontology, and Beyond

Kierkegaard does not seem to develop an ethical theory that is hierarchical, complete, and modeled on theories in modern scholarship. Rather, he is concerned with ethics in much the same way that classical virtue ethics was concerned with ethics. He gives a conceptual exploration of virtue and happiness that expresses and seeks wisdom (cf. Roberts 2008).

Kierkegaard sees different actions and choices as grounded in one's overall character or fundamental attitude toward life. At this point, his approach resembles virtue ethics or character-based ethics that focuses on life as a whole, rather than modern ethics that focuses on specific actions, choices, and situations or different rules and procedures.⁴

Kierkegaard gives a teleological interpretation of human actions and agency where the highest good represents our fundamental goal or *telos*.⁵ The highest good represents our final end and seems to be something that gives meaning to life that should be sought for its own sake. However, Kierkegaard denies that moral virtue leads to happiness in this world,⁶ identifying the highest good with eternal happiness in the afterlife. Like Augustine, Kierkegaard thus points to the need for divine grace and assistance if we are to realize our final end (and to overcome sin). Indeed, many of the virtues and emotions that Kierkegaard analyzes (notably hope, faith, and neighbor love) are specifically Christian virtues and emotions that belong to a larger Augustinian-Lutheran tradition.⁷

However, Kierkegaard distances himself from Augustinianism and classical virtue ethics by claiming that eudaimonism involves impure motivation, since it is motivated by happiness instead of moral goodness or duty.⁸ At this point, he seems to follow Kant in holding that morality (or moral virtue) should have strict priority over prudence (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, 315f.; Fremstedal 2014). Like Kant, he holds the view that it is our intentions or wills, not the consequences of our actions, that are morally good or evil.⁹ Closely related to this view is the distinction between legality and morality, between doing the right thing (externally) and doing it for the right reason. Like deontologists, Kierkegaard seems to hold legality to be insufficient (if necessary) for morality, since good motivation

is necessary. Also like Kant, Kierkegaard seems to deny that we possess knowledge of our own motives and intentions, since only God knows heart and minds (cf. *SKS* 20, 325, NB4:78 / *KJN* 4, 326).

Kierkegaard maintains that we should do good because it is good in itself, not because it is a means to happiness. Yet, he believes that doing so will lead to our final end. This suggests that happiness should be the consequence of moral virtue, but not its motive. Although virtue represents the motive (determining ground), happiness represents the end of morality. The point seems to be that we should do good because it is good in itself *and* because it leads to our final end. Being motivated by our final good seems unproblematic as long as we give priority to morality over happiness in cases where morality is at stake (Fremstedal 2014, chs. 5–6).

Kierkegaard may thus be seen as developing a synthesis of Christian virtue ethics and Kantian deontology.¹⁰ However, there are elements in Kierkegaard that resemble Hegelian ethics (itself a synthesis of Aristotelianism and Kantianism). *Either/Or*, Part II, and *Works of Love* in particular give an account of love and human agency as fundamentally intersubjective that is reminiscent of Hegel's (and Fichte's) ethics of recognition. Like Hegel, these writings portray our self-consciousness and self-relation as interdependent with our relation to others. However, while Hegel conceives of (true) recognition as reciprocal, Kierkegaard presents the relation between self and other as asymmetrical by focusing on the subjective perspective of the moral agent. *Works of Love* presents the other as transcending my representation of him, stressing the unconditional and one-sided duty to love the other independently of who he or she is or what he or she does (cf. Grøn 1997, chs. 5–6).

7.2 Moral Agency and Moral Psychology: Selfhood and Despair

Kierkegaard's account of human agency and selfhood represents one of his most influential and important contributions to modern European philosophy. This section focuses on the central role that moral agency and moral psychology play in this account,¹¹ an account that Kierkegaard develops systematically in *The Sickness unto Death*, although important elements are also present in earlier works such as *Either/Or*.¹²

Kierkegaard generally interprets human agency or human nature as involving a synthesis of freedom and necessity, possibility and necessity, infinitude and finitude, eternity and temporality, soul and body. The first pole of the human synthesis generally represents our possibilities and freedom, whereas the latter represents facticity or the limits of freedom, as represented by the situation in which we find ourselves. What makes Kierkegaard's account so interesting then is not merely his highly modern analysis of facticity, but rather the interplay between what is given and chosen in this account. Anthony Rudd writes:

It was Kierkegaard more than any other author who helped me to understand the relation between the sense that we are responsible for shaping and authoring our lives, and the sense that there is something distinct and definite about ourselves that has to be accepted as simply given. For Kierkegaard, we do not need to choose between these views, but should see the tension between them positively, as a *creative* tension—one which is actually constitutive of the self. (Rudd 2012, 3)

However, Kierkegaard does not identify human agency or selfhood with our freedom or soul as such. Nor does he identify it with the synthesis of soul and body (as substance dualists do), although he does identify this synthesis structure with the human being:

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and finite, of the temporal and eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. (SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13)

Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) continues by describing selfhood (or spirit) as a reflexive self-relation that involves, but transcends, this synthesis structure (Davenport 2013). Selfhood thus conceived cannot simply be identified with a human nature (or a synthesis of different poles) that is given, but involves relating to this nature (or synthesis) in a reflective manner by forming second-order volition. Selfhood thus requires that we actively relate to our nature (and its different poles), either by identifying with it or by distancing ourselves from it and trying to reform it. This means that the self is neither something given, nor something that creates itself. Rather, it is “something that exists in and though the shaping of itself and in constantly negotiating the limits of what it can and cannot alter” (Rudd 2012, 43).

Becoming a self requires harmonizing or integrating the different poles of the human synthesis, poles that are not only heterogeneous but stand in a highly tense relation to each other. Without such integration, one of the poles of the synthesis will be exaggerated at the expense of the other. We will thus exaggerate either our freedom or our limitations. At this point *The Sickness unto Death* distinguishes between two main forms of (inauthentic) despair.¹³ The so-called despair of possibility wants possibility without necessity, freedom without limitations (SKS 11, 151–3 / SUD, 35–7). However, this means that it lacks constraints within which it can be positively free. The despair of possibility tries to create itself independently of the situation in which it finds itself and its limitations. *The Sickness unto Death* argues that this implies not wanting to be positively free, not wanting to be the concrete being one already is, and that the agent therefore is double-minded or in despair. This makes sense if we keep in mind that our possibilities only reside within the specific individuals we are and in the particular situations in which we find ourselves.

The other main form of (inauthentic) despair, the so-called despair of necessity, lacks possibility or freedom (SKS 11, 153–7 / SUD, 37–42). The despair of necessity involves a form of fatalism that denies that it can transcend limitations or facticity. One example of this would be an alcoholic who denies the possibility of transcending the past by stopping drinking.

Despair thus conceived involves a deficient form of agency that fails to integrate the different elements or poles of the human synthesis.¹⁴ *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* indicates that despair takes the form of being in conflict with oneself by having two wills that are inconsistent with one another: “[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” (SKS 8, 144 / UD, 30). The despair of possibility futilely wants possibility without necessity, whereas the despair of necessity futilely wants necessity without possibility. Kierkegaard then concludes that it is only by willing the good unconditionally that we can will one thing and therefore be in agreement with ourselves and avoid despair (SKS 8, 139f. / UD, 24; cf. Grøn 1997, 261f.). The implication is that the real choice stands between willing the good

unconditionally and willing it to some extent (or on some condition) only. Whereas the ethicist and the religious can be said to strive for the former, the aesthete seems to settle for the latter by relying on sensuousness and inclination.

This analysis of agency indicates that if the self is to function coherently, and to avoid double-mindedness or despair, it needs to shape itself by harmonizing necessity and possibility in accordance with its values, aims, and commitments.¹⁵ At this point, some read Kierkegaard as a subjectivist or an existentialist who thinks that unconditional commitment to any cause will do. However, Kierkegaard actually ties selfhood and human agency to objective moral standards. *Either/Or*, Part II, for instance, presents the existential choice of oneself as amounting to the choice of the ethical (cf. SKS 3, 170ff., 236ff. / EO2, 174ff., 247ff.). Later writings that focus on Christian ethics also see human agency and selfhood as very closely connected to moral agency.

Recent scholarship has tried to reconstruct Kierkegaard's analysis at this point as follows. Becoming a coherent self, or achieving unity of heart, requires shaping oneself by having ground projects or final ends. However, these projects or ends must be cared about for their own sake, and not merely as means to something else. Rudd explains: "I may adopt a project because I feel a need for something to give my life meaning [and coherence], but it will only do so if I come to care about the project for itself" (Rudd 2012, 45). The different projects we take on are then not only things that matter to us, but also things that will partially define who we are.

Becoming a self thus involves taking on significant projects and tasks. In Kierkegaard's authorship it is not least the pseudonym Judge William who stresses that selfhood involves accepting commitments to different relationships and causes. In this context, William stresses that the self is socially mediated: "[T]he self that is the objective ... is a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, the life conditions, this order of things. The self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic [*borgerligt*] self."¹⁶ William then presents the task of becoming oneself as the task of cultivating oneself by functioning in, and contributing to, society.¹⁷

However, apart from the different roles and projects in which I engage, I also need a fundamental underlying commitment that makes it possible for me to pursue, balance, and reconcile different commitments (for example, work, family, and hobbies). Without such an underlying commitment or character, my life would seem to lack coherence or unity, since the different roles and projects in which I engage need not be compatible with one another. At this point, Kierkegaard (and William) seems to insist that one's fundamental commitment needs to be a moral one. You cannot have a fundamental attitude toward life as a whole that is indifferent or amoral (even if reflected aesthetes try exactly such a thing).¹⁸ Nor can you be only partially or occasionally committed to morality if you are to avoid despair. Rather, you need a fundamental commitment to what is objectively morally good.¹⁹

This indicates that we need to evaluate ourselves in moral terms. But it does not necessarily mean that we succeed in realizing moral ideals. At this point, we need to distinguish between the first and second ethics. Whereas the first ethics is highly optimistic about our ability to realize moral ideals, the second ethics presupposes the reality of sin and divine grace (SKS 4, 326 / CA, 19). *The Concept of Anxiety* argues that the first ethics collapses on its own terms as a result of human sin and guilt. This central claim is supported by a famous psychological account of freedom claiming that the possibility of freedom leads to anxiety, and that anxiousness about sin results in sin.²⁰

7.3 The Source of Moral Obligations: Moral Constructivism, Realism, and Theological Voluntarism

Robert Stern writes:

It has become commonplace to read Kierkegaard as ... inheriting the Kantian idea of the self-legislating subject, but as following it through to its logical conclusion, so that the apparent emptiness and arbitrariness in this subject's position becomes fully clear. This then leads to Alasdair MacIntyre's famous account of Kierkegaard in *A Short History of Ethics and After Virtue*, as facing a situation of radical (because groundless) choice. (Stern 2012, 16f.)

This widespread reading associates Kierkegaard with post-Kantian autonomy and existentialism. However, it has little support in Kierkegaard's texts, apart from the thesis "Subjectivity is truth,"²¹ and the various aesthetes that appear to support subjectivism. Indeed, Kierkegaard offers an explicit critique of Kantian autonomy (and an implicit critique of Sartrean radical choice). In this critique, Kierkegaard takes autonomy to involve moral *constructivism* in the sense that moral obligations are our construction or creation; they are not based on independent entities such as Platonic ideas. Autonomy involves binding ourselves under a law we have given ourselves (SKS 23, 45, NB15:66 / KJN 7, 42; SKS 8, 389f. / UD, 294f.). Yet when lawgiver and subject are identical, this means that we can both bind and unbind ourselves at will. This raises the question of whether we were ever really bound in the first place, whether self-legislation really amounts to legislation at all (Stern 2012, 13f., 213f.). We could always revoke and change self-imposed obligations. The subject could influence the lawgiver to reduce the moral demand or lazily to construe new tasks instead of realizing given tasks. The upshot is that if moral obligations are just contingent constructs of humans who are fallible, imperfect, or even sinful, this leads to unstable obligations and lawlessness not only as a possibility, but even as a likely result. Unless grounded in some antecedent value or norm, autonomy threatens to collapse into a motiveless and arbitrary choice.²²

Kierkegaard thus agrees with theological voluntarists and moral realists who worry that human autonomy collapses into an arbitrary self-launching that gives a convincing account neither of normativity nor of moral agency (Kosch 2006, chs. 5–6; Stern 2012, ch. 7). Part I of *The Sickness unto Death* argues, for instance, that the phenomenon of defiance, or desperately wanting to be oneself, indicates that the self does not create or constitute itself normatively (SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14). Defiance seems to presuppose norms that are given by someone other than myself that I will not live up to, since I will not give up my own ends or projects.²³

At this point, Kierkegaard's critique of autonomy anticipates debates about the source of moral obligations from Elizabeth Anscombe to contemporary moral realism and theological voluntarism (and divine command theories of moral obligations; Stern 2012, ch. 7; Fremstedal 2014, ch. 10). Like Anscombe, Kierkegaard objects to giving absolutely overriding authority to something that is merely a human construct or creation, since human autonomy cannot bestow value on things that do not already have it.²⁴

Kierkegaard thus criticizes the view that morality is but a contingent creation of particular individuals. However, many moral constructivists (for example, some Kantians) maintain that we construct valid obligations by virtue of being rational and by following valid procedure. Constructivism need not be based on what individuals actually or

arbitrarily do (as Kierkegaard suggests), since it could be based on what rational beings would do, or what they could agree to, under ideal circumstances. It seems that Kierkegaard's argument has less force against the latter position than against extreme constructivists, who see morality as a mere contingent construct of particular individuals. Kierkegaard's argument seems more convincing as an argument against subjectivist, relativist, and anti-realist moral constructivism (including radical choice in existentialism), than against moderate forms of constructivism that accept weak moral realism (that is, that moral claims are literally true or false—cognitivism—and that some moral claims are literally true). Still, Kierkegaard may object that it is far from clear how idealized human choice or autonomy can bestow value on things that do not already have it, especially when actual human autonomy fails to bestow value.²⁵

Kierkegaard's argument points to the need for moral standards that are *external* to our will (Kosch 2006). Many commentators take Kierkegaard to be a theological voluntarist in the Lutheran-nominalist tradition, and some also read him as a moral realist in the Platonic-Christian tradition.²⁶ However, it is mainly strong forms of these doctrines that are fundamentally incompatible.²⁷ This means that it is possible for Kierkegaard to combine some form of theological voluntarism with either strong or weak moral realism. Although his position is not perfectly clear, it nevertheless seems probable that he accepts weak moral realism and some version of theological voluntarism (cf. Lübcke 1991; Hartley 1987; Fremstedal 2014, ch. 10).

Kierkegaard is sometimes thought to have contributed to the development of theological voluntarism and divine command theories of moral obligations by presenting the demands of neighbor love in a particularly uncompromising manner.²⁸ Those who defend a divine command reading of Kierkegaard argue that divine commands make intelligible a morality that expects more of us than we are capable of on our own, an ethics that goes beyond the ethical stage (and its appeal to human willpower) by accepting the moral gap between our moral obligations and our natural capabilities (as finite and sinful beings). On this reading, Kierkegaard makes sense of the moral gap by holding that (at least some) moral obligations are imposed by God, whose capacity to judge, assist, and forgive us differs from that of other kinds of obligating sources (Stern 2012, 204–16).

Proponents of divine command theories argue that divine commands are sufficient for moral obligations on Kierkegaard's account, since seemingly immoral acts would be obligatory for us if commanded by God.²⁹ *Fear and Trembling* suggests that Abraham must sacrifice Isaac since God commands it.³⁰ *Works of Love* proposes that we should obey God in love, even if he requires something that seems harmful or overly demanding to us.³¹ Even the duty of neighbor love seems to rely on divine commands in *Works of Love* (Quinn 1996; Evans 2006).

However, even if some passages suggest that divine commands can impose moral obligation, this need not rule out that (at least some) obligations have a different basis. *Works of Love* can be read as saying that the ultimate basis of moral obligations lies not in divine commands as such, but in the structure of the created world and God's relation to it (Ferreira 2001, 41; Manis 2009b). This type of reading accepts moral realism, but adds that moral obligations are based on the fact that we are created from nothing by God and that the neighbor is a fellow and equal creation of God who bears his image.³² This suggests that Kierkegaard relies on a theology of creation in which moral obligations depend on the fact that we belong to God as his creation. The central idea here is that we are worthy of love by bearing God's image.³³ Still, human beings are alienated from divine creation and goodness

by sinfulness, and it is this fact that makes divine grace, revelation, and divine commands so important. Divine commands can be necessary if we are to know and uphold our duty after the fall, even though the duty to love the neighbor precedes God's command (Manis 2006, 2009a, b).

This approach allows for divine commands to play an important role within Kierkegaard's ethics, but it does not amount to a full-fledged divine command theory of moral obligation in which divine commands are necessary and sufficient for imposing moral obligations. Although there is some uncertainty and disagreement about Kierkegaard's exact position, it nevertheless seems that his second ethics can be classified as a form of theological voluntarism, insofar as (important) parts of morality depend on God's will. Kierkegaard seems to develop an intermediate position between theological voluntarism and moral realism, where some parts of morality depend on God's will, while others do not. A recent work that supports this view is Stern (2012). Stern's interpretation overlaps with the account sketched here, insofar as it allows that what is right or good is independent of God's command (that is, strong moral realism). However, Stern's interpretation moves closer to divine command theories by maintaining that moral actions only become obligatory as a result of God's command.³⁴ God commands actions because they are right (in themselves) or because he is good, but their obligatoriness depends on divine commands. God thus puts us under obligation, but he does not operate outside a prior order of values or norms, even though that order may not be wholly within our grasp as finite and sinful beings. This intermediary approach has the advantage of avoiding some of the problems associated with strong or full-fledged theological voluntarism.³⁵

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to give an overview that indicates some of Kierkegaard's contributions to ethics by emphasizing his critique of autonomy, his account of selfhood and despair, and his affinity with virtue ethics and deontology. Kierkegaard's work is perhaps particularly relevant for discussions of moral agency, moral psychology, and the sources of moral obligations (cf. Rudd 2012; Davenport 2012; Furtak 2005; Evans 2006). Kierkegaard's writings are interesting not only because of their arguments and dialectics, but also because they offer vivid literary descriptions and examples as well as creative use of psychology and phenomenology. However, it seems clear that more research is needed, both historically and systematically, on theological voluntarism and moral realism as well as moral particularism and universalism in Kierkegaard. Also, there is a need to clarify whether the different poles of the human synthesis are best understood in terms of a hierarchy or an equilibrium, and whether Kierkegaard can justify the central claim that the highest good represents our final end.

Cross-references

See also CHAPTER 1, "A SHIMMERING SOCRATES: PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY IN KIERKEGAARD'S PLATONIC AUTHORSHIP"; CHAPTER 2, "KIERKEGAARD'S USE OF GERMAN PHILOSOPHY: LEIBNIZ TO FICHTE"; CHAPTER 5, "KIERKEGAARD AND EXISTENTIALISM: FROM ANXIETY TO AUTONOMY"; CHAPTER 30, "KIERKEGAARD'S

CONCEPTION OF PSYCHOLOGY: HOW TO UNDERSTAND IT AND WHY IT STILL MATTERS"; CHAPTER 31, "KIERKEGAARD AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY"

Notes

- 1 Cf. Rudd 2005, ch. 3; Irwin 2011, ch. 77; Furtak 2005, chs. 6–8.
- 2 Lübcke 2006, 411f. Evans 2006, 110f., 146ff. argues that the second ethics answers to problems implicit in the first ethics, while going beyond the first ethics by completing, clarifying, specifying, and correcting it.
- 3 SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54; SKS 7, 354ff. / CUP1, 389ff.; SKS 8, 303ff. / UD, 208ff.; SKS 10, 230ff. / CD, 222ff. Note that the Danish term "*Evig Salighed*" is translated as both "eternal happiness" and "salvation" by the Hongs. Cf. SKS 5, 250ff. / EUD, 253ff.
- 4 Cf. Roberts 1998; Fremstedal 2014, chs. 2–3. Rudd 2012, ch. 3 defends a Kierkegaardian notion of character against skepticism about character. Regarding Kierkegaard and virtue ethics, see Roberts 1998; Rudd 2005, 78–80, 99–105. Regarding Kierkegaard and deontology, see Knappe 2004, chs. 3–5; Lübcke 1991, 99f.
- 5 SKS 5, 250ff. / EUD, 253ff.; SKS 7, 354ff. / CUP1, 389ff.; SKS 8, 303ff. / UD, 208ff.; SKS 10, 230ff. / CD, 222ff. Cf. SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54.
- 6 SKS 4, 123, 156 / FT, 27, 63; SKS 7, 126 / CUP1, 134.
- 7 Roberts 1998, 2008; Evans and Roberts 2013; Davenport 2001. This point is easily overlooked since contemporary virtue ethics is largely Aristotelian. Still, Kierkegaard's references to Socrates suggest that he had great respect for the ethical tradition stemming from Socrates.
- 8 SKS 4, 324 / CA, 16f.; SKS 7, 367, 385–7, 546 / CUP1, 403, 423–6, 602; SKS 8, 138–84 / UD, 24–79; SKS 9, 60 / WL, 53.
- 9 Primary and secondary sources suggest that Kierkegaard had little knowledge of, or interest in, consequentialism and utilitarianism, associating these types of ethical views with reflected aesthetes rather than morality proper. Kierkegaard seems to see the consequences of moral actions as contingent and arbitrary, denying that consequences can be foreseen, controlled, and known by us.
- 10 Kierkegaard's rich analyses of emotions and passion are reminiscent of virtue ethics rather than Kantianism. Kierkegaard takes emotions and passion to be cognitive phenomena that can (and ought to be) cultivated. See Furtak 2005; Roberts 1998; Evans and Roberts 2013.
- 11 Scholarship has traditionally interpreted Kierkegaard's account in terms of personal identity, selfhood, human nature, and anthropology, although recent literature often uses the terms human agency and moral agency. Cf. Rudd 2012; Grøn 1997; Theunissen 1991.
- 12 For the relation and continuity between different works such as *Either/Or* and *The Sickness unto Death*, see Theunissen 1982, 21–51; Kosch 2006, 142, 152ff.; Rudd 2012, 40, 70.
- 13 Anti-Climacus deals with these two main types under the heading "Despair considered without regard to its being conscious or not, consequently only with regard to the constituents of the synthesis" (SKS 11, 145 / SUD, 29). While non-conscious despair is called "inauthentic despair," conscious despair is called "authentic despair."
- 14 German and Danish scholarship has argued that Kierkegaard develops a *via negativa* approach in which selfhood and agency are understood negatively through their failure, through despair. This approach is currently referred to as being "negativistic." Cf. Theunissen 1991; Grøn 1997.
- 15 It should be noted that different scholars disagree about whether the different poles of the human synthesis (freedom and necessity, possibility and necessity, etc.) should be kept in balance or whether they should form a hierarchy. Should freedom and possibility be balanced by necessity and limitations, or should one side with freedom and possibility without losing sight of necessity and limitations? This can be considered as both an exegetical question and a substantive

- philosophical question. Much hangs on how one interprets the different poles of the human synthesis. Is the idea to realize freedom in reality, to actualize ethical and religious ideals in reality? If so, then it would seem to make sense to prioritize these ideals and to try to reform finitude in light of them. Cf. Hannay 2006, 73; Rudd 2012, ch. 2; Fremstedal 2014, chs. 2–3.
- 16 SKS 3, 250 / EO2, 262. The Danish term “*borgelig*” here also has the meaning “bourgeois.” William is perhaps too bourgeois and too specific about how we should live our lives, seeing marriage as a duty.
- 17 SKS 3, 249f., 261 / EO2, 262f., 274f. Rudd argues that social practices and institutions always come with standards of assessment that are objective, non-instrumental, non-arbitrary, and moral. One cannot sustain non-instrumental personal relationships, nor have significant projects, without recognizing authoritative moral norms and ideals. See Rudd 2005, 94f., 115; cf. Davenport 2001, 297f. and 2012, 121ff.; Furtak 2005, 76.
- 18 Note that the different aesthetes do not identify with social roles and commitments. The aesthetes refrain from promises and obligations, and warn against friendship, marriage, and the acceptance of official positions (SKS 2, 284–7, 356 / EO1, 295–8, 367). It is suggested that one must avoid commitment and serious involvement with others if one is to live aesthetically; otherwise one will be trapped into social morality. The upshot is that one must avoid relationships or break them off by a sheer act of will (SKS 2, 286 / EO1, 297).
- 19 Rudd 2012, 44–9. Rudd argues that selfhood requires a capacity for volitional evaluation of desires, dispositions, and cares. However, we cannot evaluate ourselves without trying to get closer to being right. We are evaluative beings who cannot suppose that our evaluative judgments are incapable of being *objectively* correct or better. Our agency therefore presupposes that we can examine our higher-order desires, cares, and commitments in light of the idea of something objectively good (or better). Rudd concludes that we need the idea of *the Good* (at least as a regulative ideal) in order to shape and improve ourselves. We could not examine and shape our identity as part of a rational process if we were unable to make ourselves better or worse, judged by standards that are independent of human volition. Without this possibility, the non-rationality of our cares and commitments would cascade down the levels, and we would have no basis for thinking of ourselves as more than instrumentally rational agents. Rudd (2012, 91–5, 112–16, 141). Much like Rudd, Davenport (2001, 297–9 and 2012, 98f., 122ff.) argues that moral standards provide a firm point outside of our first-order states that is much needed, since without such an objective basis, we have no stable ground for working on ourselves; any attempt to better oneself will then be at the mercy of the contingencies of time.
- 20 SKS 4, 377f., 410f. / CA, 73–5, 108f. There is a tension in Kierkegaard’s writings when it comes to what it means to become a moral agent and to act morally. Kierkegaard often interprets morality as something that involves following principles and ideas that are general or universal. *Either/Or*, Part II, and *Fear and Trembling* even identify the ethical with the universal, something that is reminiscent of Kantian-Hegelian ethics (Knappe 2004, 77–86; Irwin 2011, vol. 3, 304–9). Judge William emphasizes that the individual should become the universal man by doing his duty. Individuality should not be abolished, but should be taken over and reformed so that it is compatible with universality (SKS 3, 248–51, 276f., 285 / EO2, 261–4, 292f., 302). This suggests that morality involves impartial and universal standards. However, Kierkegaard’s religious ethics is often interpreted as a form of moral particularism that allows for individual obligations and callings in the sense of obligations and callings that are unique to the individual (cf. Evans 2006, 15, 24; Manis 2006, 148–58). Consider the following passage: “[A]t every person’s birth there comes into existence an eternal purpose for that person, for that person in particular. Faithfulness to oneself with respect to this is the highest a person can do, and as that most profound poet [Shakespeare] has said, ‘Worse than self-love is self-contempt.’ But in that case there is one guilt, one offense: unfaithfulness to oneself or *disowning of one’s own better nature*” (SKS 8, 198 / UD, 93).
- 21 SKS 7, 186 / CUP1, 203. Note that subjectivity is also said to be untruth. See SKS 7, 189 / CUP1, 207.

- 22 Stern 2012; Fremstedal 2014, ch. 10. Kierkegaard seems to understand moral obligations as objective, overriding, and partially universal. See Evans 2006, 15.
- 23 Kosch argues that defiance indicates that the self is neither normatively self-sufficient nor its own ontological basis (the latter seems to entail the former): “There does need to be *something* independent of the self and its activity from which norms can come, and this something must also be a plausible source of value, but something can fill those conditions without being the causal source of the agent’s existence ... the theological voluntarist model is not the only one to fit the constraints, even though it is clearly the one that Kierkegaard has in mind. This account of the structure of the self, by making the self dependent and oriented towards an outside source of norms, makes structurally possible a genuine alternative: turning away from that source and turning towards it” (Kosch 2006, 209).
- 24 Anscombe 1958 argues that the concept of legislation requires superior power in the legislator and that it is not possible to have such a conception of ethics unless you believe in God as a law-giver.
- 25 Rudd 2012, 149. This is not to say that Kierkegaard dismisses autonomy altogether. He suggests that we are finite, dependent creatures that can possess relative (limited) freedom and autonomy. He writes: “[I]n the world of spirit, precisely this, to become one’s own master, is the highest—and in love to help someone toward that, to become himself, free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone—that is the greatest beneficence” (SKS 9, 272 / WL, 274). Cf. Grøn 1997, 275; Evans 2006, 26, 151.
- 26 For voluntarism, see Kosch 2006, chs. 5–6; Irwin 2011, ch. 77; Evans 2006. For realism, see Rudd 2012, chs. 4–6; Davenport 2008, 232f. and 2012, 121ff.; Manis 2006, 218; Stern 2012, 221f. Note that Kierkegaard seems to identify the divine with the good. See SKS 4, 160 / FT, 68; SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476; SKS 7, 133, 143 / CUP1, 142, 153f.; SKS 8, 364, 151–3 / UD, 268, 39–41; Rudd 2012, 45f., 143; Evans 2006, 88, 105, 183.
- 27 While strong theological voluntarism (and divine command theories) sees morality as fundamentally dependent on God’s will, strong moral realism sees moral truths as facts existing independently of God’s will (for example, Platonic ideas). However, weak forms of theological voluntarism can allow for moral truths or facts that are independent of God’s will (that is, strong moral realism), while maintaining that moral actions only become obligatory as a result of God’s command. Furthermore, strong forms of theological voluntarism can hold some moral claims to be true and others to be false (weak moral realism), while maintaining that it is God’s will that makes them true or false. Cf. Stern 2012, ch. 7; Fremstedal 2014, ch. 10.
- 28 Quinn (1996, 2006), Evans (2006), and Stern (2012, ch. 7) claim that Kierkegaard has a divine command theory of moral obligations, something that is denied by Ferreira (2001, 40–42, 243f.), Roberts (2008), and Manis (2009a).
- 29 Or if God counterfactually commands something, then it would be obligatory. Manis 2009a, 290, 300.
- 30 Quinn (2006, 60ff.) takes Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac to mean that morality depends on God’s will. See Davenport 2008, 206ff. for a discussion
- 31 SKS 9, 28 / WL, 20. However, this passage is compatible with God promulgating obligations that hold independently of his commands (Manis 2006, 127).
- 32 Manis 2006, 137–41, cf. SKS 9, 66f., 94, 118, 219ff. / WL, 60, 88f., 216ff. For strong moral realism, see Manis 2006, 218.
- 33 Manis 2006, chs. 3–4 and 2009. By contrast, Evans (2006) maintains that we have only pre-moral obligations without divine commands.
- 34 See also Evans and Roberts 2013, 220f.
- 35 Stern (2012, 221f.) refers to recent discussions of the Euthyphro dilemma showing that the dilemma has limited effectiveness, since it only really has bite against radical, full voluntarist versions of divine command theories.

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