

## Articles

### **Kierkegaard's ironic ladder to authentic faith\***

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There is a long-standing debate among scholars about the reason for Kierkegaard's appeal to indirect communication. Some interpreters hold that Kierkegaard resorts to the tactic of indirect communication because for him faith is something that cannot be expressed in words and hence cannot be communicated directly, i.e., for semantic reasons. Others claim that "the problem of indirect communication is not a semantic problem at all, but has its origin within the pragmatic aspect of language."<sup>1</sup> They argue, borrowing Austinian terminology, that Kierkegaard used various "perlocutionary acts" to "provoke" his readers into making "a decision." But the distinction between the semantic problem of attempting to express the inexpressible and the pragmatic or performative aim of this attempt is artificial with regard to Kierkegaard's ultimate goal to entice his readers to embrace the authentic faith. Without this pragmatic aim in view, Kierkegaard would not have grappled with the semantic problem at all, remaining silent or making due with the solitary monologues of his diaries. For Kierkegaard, the 'what' (semantics) and the 'what for' (pragmatics) are dialectically related, eliminating such a dichotomy.

A note written four years before Kierkegaard's death gives us a clue to the practical objective of his philosophizing: "my task has continually been to provide the existential-corrective by poetically presenting the ideals and inciting people."<sup>2</sup> Two basic features can be said to characterize his thought: the existential aim of changing the reader's life by poetic-literary means; and the indirect tactics (notably irony) used to entice the reader into pursuing authenticity. Neither has received much critical attention.

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To argue for authentic faith is self-defeating in that it presupposes the authority of rationality, which Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity relegates to a state of "teleological suspension." How then can patterns of authentic faith be indicated without appeal to objective criteria? Part of the answer lies in Kierkegaard's tactic of indirect communication and the pragmatic use of varied literary styles. Literary technique is *both* a solution to the problems inherent in writing about authentic faith and a means of enticing the reader.

## 1.

Kierkegaard hoped to be a "corrective" influence on contemporary life. What was there to correct? "Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion."<sup>3</sup> Decisive action requires passion, which is lost when the individual sinks into the bottomless pit of analysis, resulting in passivity. To counterbalance the "over-reflexiveness" that hinders the emergence of authenticity, Kierkegaard hopes to awake his readers from existential slumber by infusing them with passion. His formula is simple: passion + sincerity of intention = authenticity.<sup>4</sup>

By "reflection" Kierkegaard refers mainly to the human intellect, which he saw as primarily directed toward packaging everything into sterile abstractions which could not be experienced "completely and personally." "And thus as one longs for the clink of real money, after the cracle of bank-notes, one longs nowadays for a little originality."<sup>5</sup> Here we find another meaning of authenticity, namely, return to our genuine origins, feelings and beliefs. This accords well with Kierkegaard's view of authentic Christian faith as starting and ending with the Cross. Given his belief that our intellect rationalizes away all avenues to authenticity, that "for the individual as for the generation no task is more difficult than to escape from the temptations of reflection,"<sup>6</sup> he sets out to provide a counter-temptation, a passion for authentic actions. As opposed to the earlier choice between the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence, the genuine either/or is a truly existential choice: to become a self-less "nothing at all," within the abstract "public" and a "deathly silence," or to become an authentic individual by committing the "leap of enthusiasm," the "leap into the arms of God." While Kierkegaard's antidote may bring with it "atrocious sins" and "enthusiasm may end in disaster... levelling is *eo ipso* the destruction of the individual."<sup>7</sup>

Kierkegaard clearly prefers the dangers of an authentic pathos of faith to the ethos resulting in annihilation of selfhood. One reason is that "there are still people who passionately want to be what they ought to be."<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard wants to strengthen and spread this inclination by harnessing the ubiquitous forces directed towards the destruction of individuality. Here we see the dialectic of enticement at work. By introducing reflection into the aesthetic sphere of existence, for example, he tries to save “the aesthetic public” from sinking into it unreservedly. By describing the aesthetic experience poetically (using aesthetics against itself as, for instance, in the “Diary of the Seducer”) Kierkegaard forces the reader to reflect on the emptiness of this way of life and the despair it unavoidably results in. Thus Kierkegaard employs the prevailing modes of life to impel his readers to eventually adopt their antitheses: authentic faith and genuine selfhood. Hence he pictures himself as a spy, “a plain-clothes policeman”<sup>9</sup> who steals fashionable ideals from the “the present age,” bringing them to his isolated place “before God” for use against “the public.”

Kierkegaard believed that his call to authenticity might succeed because two major powers of his age had lost their authority. On the religious plane, Christian faith had been reduced to the comfortable code of shallow bourgeois ethics. Intellectually, the Hegelian system had become an empty abstraction losing its power to inspire. In the twilight of the prevalent ethos, we have to rely on ourselves alone. Kierkegaard wants to speed up the process, taking advantage of available philosophic resources by subjectifying the Hegelian notion of objectivity; working the aesthetic to death; by adopting ethical generalizations and personifying them to despair. These “correctives” use contemporary contents to the point where they cancel themselves out.

## 2.

What accounts for Kierkegaard’s publishing his aesthetic works under pseudonyms and what is the relation between this kind of indirect communication and enticement? Firstly, the use of pseudonyms has to do with Kierkegaard’s own dialectic of authenticity. A fundamentally religious personality, he too was often distracted by different developments in his life. His personal solution to his identity-problem was to recover an abandoned religious self. As creator of various pseudonymous “authors,” each representing a different view of life as purely as possible, Kierkegaard maintains poetic distance from his creations. He is neither an aesthete nor a moralist; nor does he genuinely embrace religious faith: he is all of these, and hence, none. He does not identify authentically with any of the imaginary writers’ statements. To crystallize his existential chaos into an authentic wholeness he has to detach himself mentally from the aesthetic experiences of his life and the ethical aspirations that have

taken him so far. To “become” an authentic “Christian” Kierkegaard must intensify his religious sentiments. The existential path to authentic selfhood requires overcoming the elements in one’s life and character that hinder this process. His detachment from aesthetic pathos, from ethical/reflective ethos, and from inauthentic Christianity helps him control these dimensions for the sake of his own spirituality. You become what you are by not being what you are not. By not identifying himself with the aesthetic life-view and/or bourgeois ethic (in his pseudonymous writings) Kierkegaard could become an author whose “last group [of writings] is exclusively religious.”<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, this tactic is directed at readers whose “existence presents itself to them as a confusion.”<sup>11</sup> Their confusion is followed by tendency toward reflection responsible for their ensuing paralysis. To shock them Kierkegaard must first attract their attention. Hence, he gives the aesthetic works “the interest of novelty” by using pseudonyms. This succeeded nicely, according to his testimony, in the case of *Either/Or*.<sup>12</sup> Masks attract audiences. We want to know who is behind them, and why. Our curiosity is aroused, and we are enticed into reading the disguised book.

In this respect the technique of indirect communication serves Kierkegaard as an initial stage in the enticement process. But what accounts for the indirectness of the enticing itself?

Assuming then that a person is the victim of an illusion, and that in order to communicate the truth to him the first task... is to remove the illusion. I must begin with direct communication... but an illusion stands in the way... What then does it mean ‘to deceive’? It means that one does not begin *directly* with the matter once wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man’s illusion as good money.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Postscript* he says: “the art of communication... becomes the art of *taking away*, of luring something away from someone.”<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard wishes to dispel the illusion that we are genuine Christians. He wants “to remove” the rational ethos of objectivity and reflective mode of life and lure us into the pathos of authenticity. To ready us for authenticity the illusion that we are already authentic must first be “taken away.” This cannot be done directly because it will engender resistance. Kierkegaard’s aesthetic works are acceptable to his contemporaries, who live and think in “aesthetic categories” yet delude themselves that they live in a Christian age. Kierkegaard speaks in the aesthetic language of his time to lure his readers to a different existential sphere. He confesses: “The deception consists in the fact that one talks thus merely to get to the religious theme.”<sup>15</sup>

But there are still more fundamental reasons for Kierkegaard’s method

of indirect communication. Use of such a range of literary forms and such an eclectic technique suggests that there is no objective, rational way in which Kierkegaard's views about authenticity can be presented. Since authentic commitment has no concrete cognitive content, recourse to the indirect arousal of a certain emotional pathos is necessary. Kierkegaard's style intrigues and fascinates, creating a psychological atmosphere suitable for changing the reader. Given his existential claim about "truth as subjectivity," about authenticity as appropriation of the pathos of sincere commitment, Kierkegaard, whose goal is to change the reader, not just enlighten him, employs the method of indirect communication. Enlightenment is the aim of direct communication, free of personal passion and paradoxes, which tries to provide 'objective' information, much of it irrelevant to our existential concerns. Its recipients are therefore "paragraph-eaters" who have "forgotten what inwardness is." "Suppose," Kierkegaard says, "a man wished to communicate the conviction that it is not the truth but the way that is the truth, i.e., that the truth exists only in the process of becoming ... and hence that there is no result." Then "the difference between subjective and objective thinking must express itself also in the form of communication suitable to each." But "direct communication presupposes certainty" and "certainty is impossible" for one in the process of becoming authentic.<sup>16</sup>

The pathos of authentic faith cannot be communicated or aroused by philosophical language that aspires to create an objectively transparent atmosphere. Moreover, this language, at least according to the prevailing Hegelian view, is intended to allow construction of a total system that makes the individual abstract, estranging him from his selfhood. Hence, any attempt to achieve subjectivity with such a language is bound to fail:

the subjectivity ... existing [*existerende*] in isolation wants to communicate himself, something he cannot possibly do directly, since it is a contradiction. One may very well want to communicate himself, like the person in love, but always indirectly.<sup>17</sup>

You cannot convince somebody to love you, but you can entice him into it. You cannot convince somebody that you love him by using rational and direct arguments. Rather, you must show it indirectly, through committed, passionate actions. Kierkegaard's writings are just such acts of enticement, attempting to solve the semantic problem as well as attain the pragmatic objective.

Kierkegaard is deeply convinced that the authentic pathos, devoid of rational content, cannot be spoken about propositionally. There is certain similarity here between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, who said that anything we cannot speak about "we must pass over in silence." Wittgen-

stein believed that everything of importance (especially the ethical) was inexpressible; the *Tractatus*, serving as “the ladder,” was an impossible attempt to express it. Kierkegaard too thinks that if one cannot speak about the most significant ideals directly they must be manifested indirectly by building ‘ladders’ to authentic faith. This affinity between the thinkers is expressed in Wittgenstein’s claim that “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.”<sup>18</sup>

Kierkegaard believes that it is possible to indicate the patterns of authenticity indirectly by portraying them poetically, revealing them in outstanding and fictional individuals, describing them as existential possibilities to be chosen freely by his readers. They can be spoken of without making them into direct propositional objects. Thus Kierkegaard creates imaginary characters and writers who speak to each other without coming to any definite conclusions. If no conclusions are reached in a book which dramatically engages their attention, readers are reduced into considering the issue from their own perspectives. The imaginary characters express their respective life-views, and the reader is incited to take sides, to adopt one of the possibilities – the religious – by which passionate commitment allows genuine selfhood to be attained.

Kierkegaard was not denying the traditional definition of truth as correspondence between thought and reality. To argue that subjectivity is truth would be self-defeating. Kierkegaard tries to shift the attention of philosophers and their readers from objective knowledge to subjective, existential concerns: identity and authenticity. He seeks truths with which he can identify, truths he can appropriate to become what he is. Since authenticity is a function of passion, to be authentic Kierkegaard requires an object that arouses the greatest possible passion. For him, this object is the Christian God. Since “*the objective accent falls on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on HOW it is said*”; since being true to oneself lies in the “how” of the subject’s relationship, the fullest authenticity attainable by human beings is in the relationship where the subjective element – the passion with which one holds to an object – is most intense. “But the passion of the infinite is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth.”<sup>19</sup> This truth is not cognitive but conative. It has to do with actions, emotions, passions, feelings, in short with the pathos of inwardness and authenticity. So “truth is subjectivity” means truth as authenticity rather than truth as an objective value of the propositional content of sentences about reality. Kierkegaard is aware that authenticity cannot be forced on anyone. The device of pseudonym, humor, literary figures, and, above all, irony subtly block off the escape routes we might choose to avoid the arduous journey to authenticity.

## 3.

Irony in pointing to that which cannot be said, is especially helpful in showing us the way for our Selves. It is not surprising that from the outset Kierkegaard saw the potential of the ironic stance. His aesthetic works are particularly ironic, as their content is incommensurable with his motives for writing them. Already in his Master's thesis he concludes: "As philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic life is possible without irony."<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard portrays Socrates as an ironic subject confronting the prevalent ethos. Socrates seeks to shift the center of gravity from objective morality of custom (the Hegelian *Moralität*) to subjective morality (*Sittlichkeit*) based upon individual free conscience. In so doing, he clears the way to the authentic self, the self relatively independent of social and political institutions. This Socratic model shows Kierkegaard how neatly irony can be integrated into his general strategy: it uses conventional, that is, objective and traditional language, while aiming to "dissolve the existent [the established = *Bestaaendel*]."<sup>21</sup>

Kierkegaard was attracted to Socrates, especially due to his perception of their shared destiny – life in an age of religious decline, where the pathos of subjective inwardness was lost to the superficial objective ethos, itself on the verge of decline:

With every turning point in history there are two movements to be observed. On the one hand, the new shall come forth; on the other, the old must be displaced ... and here we meet the ironic subject ... That which shall come is hidden from him, concealed behind his back, but the actuality he hostilely opposes is the one he shall destroy.<sup>22</sup>

The ironic subject has no choice but to speak the language of the declining ethos of his age while seeking a new ethos, as yet unborn. In so doing, he entices us to forgo our present inauthentic selves.

Kierkegaard emphasizes that irony is a "negative" concept; it "established nothing." By negating the current ethos it foretells the birth of its successor. Kierkegaard concludes that "Irony is like the negative way, not the truth but the way."<sup>23</sup> It is the path to subjectivity as the truth of one's inwardness, a transitional phase before the new or renewed objective ethos.

Irony is negative too, in that it affirms the opposite of what is meant or felt: the essence (meaning) is not the appearance (the ironic figure of speech or phrase). It is thus suitable for enticement to authenticity. "The ironic figure of speech cancels itself, however, for the speaker presupposes

his listeners understand him, hence through a negation of the immediate phenomenon the essence remains identical with the phenomenon.”<sup>24</sup> Ironic communication is contingent upon the reader’s understanding that he faces irony. It is especially useful for those who feel the urge for a genuine self, and stand beyond the “Present Age.”

This brings us to Kierkegaard’s notion of irony from the perspective of the individual who adopts irony as an existential attitude to life:

no authentic human life is possible without irony. When irony has first been mastered it ... limits, defines, and imparts stability, character, and consistency... He who does not understand irony and has no ear for its whisperings lacks *eo ipso*... the absolute beginning of the personal life.<sup>25</sup>

By mastered irony Kierkegaard means irony used as an instrument and not as an end in itself. If we are unable to direct it to advancing our goals, it drives us to reflective regression *ad infinitum* until it paralyzes our will to live. This was true in Socrates’ case. He lacked the stabilizing content of a passionate faith, and “therefore Socrates’ influence was simply to awaken ... not redeeming except in an inauthentic sense.”<sup>26</sup> But if one uses irony in a controlled constructive manner, it becomes a guide to one’s genuine self. This is the “Truth of Irony” Kierkegaard speaks of at the end of his dissertation.

Mastered irony makes it possible to assess one’s values as if they were someone else’s. Moreover, if one succeeds in detaching one’s self from the “levelling” processes of the “Present Age,” irony comforts, showing that one still has a subjective self to be assessed. This may encourage an attempt to make it into a genuine self by free and fearless commitment to authentic acts of faith. Kierkegaard defines irony as “the fusion of a passionately ethical view, which inwardly lays infinite stress upon the self – and of education which outwardly (among others) abstracts infinitely from the personal I.”<sup>27</sup>

This definition goes hand in hand with Kierkegaard’s notion of authenticity as a passionate and sincere commitment or act. Sincerity is an ethical category, though maximal passion is to be found in religious faith. The concept of authenticity does not belong exclusively to the religious realm. The concern of any individual with the character of his own self is obviously a matter of ethics. While the genuineness of the self is grounded in passionate faith, Kierkegaard’ preoccupation with authenticity shows him to be a religious moralist.

#### 4.

Kierkegaard’s ironic ladder leading his readers to authenticity has three rungs – the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious – the first two of which

produce despair. The reader's motivation to go on living inauthentic modes of life is weakened by ironic descriptions of various life-styles, showing their disastrous psychological consequences and paving the way for the existential change in the reader's way of life and in his self. Kierkegaard describes these rungs as spheres of existence or "Stages on Life's Way," each containing its own system of values. The choice must be made without any guiding meta-principle but by an a-rational leap of free choice which cannot be further defended. Kierkegaard strives to adopt religious faith, though he views this concrete appropriation not as absolute truth but simply as his *own* passionate commitment.

His existential version of dialectic is individual, passionate and discontinuous, proceeding by sudden leaps and crises. In one's life the conflicting courses of action coexist side by side without synthesis. Antithesis is present in any sphere of existence to which one commits oneself. Indeed, Kierkegaard says the aesthetic is "transfigured and preserved" in the ethical, and presumably could say the same of the ethical and the religious. Unlike Hegel's dialectic, here there is no necessary transition from one sphere to another, no logical 'mediation' between them, and no rational resolution of their opposition. The individual repeatedly faces alternative courses of action and choices must be made.

Here we face a serious problem in interpreting Kierkegaard's doctrine of possible life-views. At first the existential *spheres* are presented as equally valid possibilities, and Kierkegaard cannot directly show which is preferable. Later, however, he presents them as *stages* in an actual progression from aesthetic to ethical and finally to ultimate religious commitment.<sup>28</sup> If this were only a matter of solving the semantic problem, as some argue, why bother to present the stages in such a pragmatic (viz. enticing) order? Why did not Kierkegaard start with the ethico-religious sphere? And more importantly, in what sense are the early stages inadequate?

Scholars have provided only partial answers, vaguely speaking, for instance, of "a mounting hierarchy of existential fullness" and "the development of the individual self."<sup>29</sup> But the movement towards authenticity has little to do with a concept of development or the inexact notion of self-realization. Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity does not derive its inspiration from the biological metaphor of human life progressively actualizing the potential present in its seed. On Kierkegaard's image of man, the potential self consists of an aggregate of drives and desires for different sphere of life, including the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The development metaphor is inappropriate because these spheres can unfold simultaneously within the individual. Kierkegaard stresses that we "receive" or accept ourselves by becoming what we

genuinely are, namely individuals prepared for the pathos of authentic faith. This is not pre-determined becoming (as in the biological model) but is achieved by free acts of will. Thus one may deny or repress one's inclination to transcendence and be alienated from one's genuine self. Moreover, we become what we are mainly by rejecting what we are not (e.g., aesthetically preoccupied Don Juans). This involves an active struggle with other elements in our selves. Consequently, the development of the self takes the form of self-overcoming and struggle rather than of progressive, uninterrupted growth. In any case, Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity is not about the realization or fulfilment of one's self as such but about its re-enactment and re-formation. The self must be re-created because "the chief thing in life" is to "win yourself, acquire your own self."<sup>30</sup> Thus the self is not a monolithic entity to be further developed.

Moreover, authenticity has nothing to do with quantities and sequences in time but with quality and origin of action. An act either is or is not authentic. One cannot demarcate degrees of authenticity and progressive levels of its alleged realization. Hence there are no "stages" of authenticity in Kierkegaard's writings and this notion is applicable only to the rhetoric of enticement.

True, there is one important sense (beyond that of rhetoric) in which the idea of stages appears relevant to Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity:

Johannes Climacus being purely subjective ... shows that there is a 'how' which has this quality, that if *it* is truly given, then the 'what' is also given; and that it is the 'how' of 'faith'. Here quite certainly, we have inwardness at its maximum.<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard postulates that if passion is "truly given" it will result in authentic action. Maximum authenticity will be found in the realm of faith, where the 'how' and the 'what' overlie each other. But when Kierkegaard speaks about "inwardness at its maximum" does this mean that there are lesser degrees of authenticity?

Not necessarily, as is evident in the eloquent maxim presented under Kierkegaard's own name in the *Edifying Discourses*: "*PURITY OF HEART IS TO WILL ONE THING.*"<sup>32</sup> That is, authenticity = sincerity of intention ("purity of heart") + passion ("to will") directed to "one" object. This object is "Good" or "God," but especially, one's self. Authenticity consists in acts of willing passionately and sincerely to *become* an authentic individual. This becoming authentic can be mainly attained spontaneously by "the instant of choice."<sup>33</sup>

The existential spheres also contain stages in the sense of degrees of passion found at each. Passion and commitment can be marked by different levels of intensity. Aesthetic objects annul passion, destroying

authenticity. The ethical object, though preserving sincerity of intention (sincerity being in itself an ethical category), cannot, due to its reflective and abstract nature engender the intense passion required of authentic acts. It is only in the religious sphere that the “what” does not destroy the “how.” Appearing as infinite being, it incites the most intense passion, and vice versa: a certain manner of willing and intending (infinite, i.e., absolute, unconditional passion) gives the “what” of faith. But these internal levels of intensity of passion do not correspond to stages in the progression of authenticity, since authenticity is attained in the sphere of faith alone.

The internal levels are, however, significant for the indirect tactic of enticement. Kierkegaard needs to dissolve the prevalent modes of living, i.e., aestheticism and Romanticism, for his age, lacks passion, “has no values” and the individual self is about to be lost. Kierkegaard, used aesthetic-Romantic categories in order to inject a passion of commitment into the prevailing apathy. Moreover, he cannot help having aesthetic tendencies himself. He must start from the aesthetic modes of living to overcome them in his own person as well as in his age. Given these historical, tactical and pragmatic considerations, Kierkegaard begins with the aesthetic sphere, then moves to the ethical. In his age of “Christendom” without “Christians” there are many more honest than authentically faithful individuals.

Kierkegaard’s tactical stages of enticement are also related to his own experiences, though the exact chronological correlation is unimportant. Here his ambiguous use of the notion of ‘sphere’ as opposed to ‘stages’ becomes part of a personal dialectic. The young Kierkegaard faced simultaneous spheres of existence. As he began to actualize these existential spheres of possibility, he realized that there was an unifying dialectical movement prompting him to “leap” from one sphere to another. Thus while originally there were only “spheres” (a term frequently used in his earlier works) retrospectively they became “stages” – in both his life and his writings.

The aesthete does not strive to form his own self but rather to create circumstances under which the pleasure he derives from external objects is maximized. He is thus not choosing his self but using aesthetic elements by which, as the “Judge” claims, “he is immediately what he is<sup>34</sup>”: natural facticity alone. In this sphere there is no trace of self-creation and sensory input plays a major, or even exclusive role. Characterized as it is by the absence of a genuine choice that can change and form the self, the aesthetic sphere allows no authenticity.

The constant dodging of any sincere commitment to any object that might satisfy the aesthetic urge also inhibit authenticity. Boredom grows

due to the unceasing repetition of the same or similar stimuli. Kierkegaard translates the first chapters of *Genesis* ironically in describing this “root of all evil” for the aesthete. As a remedy for boredom, he suggests “The Rotation Method.” This essay is one of the best examples of his irony reducing the aesthetic mode to absurdity by showing how constant changes and artificial intensification of the aesthetic stimuli actually perpetuate one’s indeterminacy. Absolute non-commitment to anything, not even to one’s self, results in the self’s complete dissolution. No genuine choice is made because nothing significant happens. One’s inherent need for transcendence and meaning is repressed. The outcome is a pervasive feeling of estrangement, melancholy and despair. Though the self is lost, the psychological effects that accompany this loss remain. Here we have irony at its best, since Kierkegaard portrays the aesthetic sphere romantically, as if from within, but points to the hell beneath the surface of the aesthete’s paradise.

If the reader, dissatisfied with the aesthetic mode of existence, turns to the ethical sphere, he soon finds he is no better off as far as authenticity is concerned. Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere is based on his understanding of Kant’s moral philosophy, to the effect that duty swallows up love. Any superiority of the ethical over the aesthetic with regard to authenticity – for here we find sincerity of intention, free resolution of one’s will, and commitment to one object – is only apparent. Because of its abstractness, universalism, and formalism, ethics depersonalizes the self, suppressing spontaneous, passionate self-expression. The demand for absolute conformity precludes formation of the unique individual. Another reason for the breakdown of the ethical sphere is that “ethics points to ideality as a task and assumes that man is in possession of the conditions requisite for performing it. Thereby ethics develops a contradiction, precisely for the fact that it makes the difficulty and impossibility clear.”<sup>35</sup> Since the force of a passionate commitment cannot be harnessed to enable one to live up to high ethical standards and because of their very ideality, the ethically-oriented person recognizes his failure, “goes bankrupt” and feels guilty. He blames himself and tries harder, but to no avail. Despair makes him feel like a sinner, he assumes the notion of “original sin.” With the notion of sin “there has come to the fore a category that lies entirely outside its province [ethics].”<sup>36</sup> The individual is now ready to adopt the religious way, to try to balance what he ought to be with what he is, reconciling his conflicting aspirations. He becomes motivated to assume the quest for authenticity. Hence Kierkegaard’s claim that “the ethical sphere is a transitional sphere,” “the religious” realm becoming “that of fulfilment.”<sup>37</sup>

Ethics requires the passion of faith. The ethical claim to universality is

invalid as there are extreme existential situations that go far beyond the scope of ethics. Abraham's scandalous (at least to the ethical mind) attempt to sacrifice his son is such a critical case. Kierkegaard's poetic description of this exception undermines the general demand for universality in ethics. Blindly following an ethical code is incompatible with success in the quest for authenticity. Kierkegaard concludes his enticement by describing authentic faith, where passion enables us to commit ourselves to the formation of our true selves.

## 5.

That it is impossible to point to concrete individuals as authentic figures does not stem solely from the fact that authenticity "begins precisely" where the ethos of objectivity and rationality "leaves off,"<sup>38</sup> taking with it all the public criteria of judgement. It also has to do with the fact that authenticity intrinsically revolves around the innermost self and the subjective "inwardness" of passion. Outwardly, the authentic hero could appear to be an ordinary, conventional person, a "tax-collector." But not inwardly. Abraham's self, tested and forged by the dreadful encounter with the Absolute, acquires a qualitatively new nature. Johannes *de silentio* characterizes faith as "the paradox that inwardness is higher than outwardness," while in the ethical sphere, the moral agent's duty is to realize himself "in an outward way."<sup>39</sup> Unlike the ethos of objectivity and publicity which should be manifested transparently, the pathos of authenticity is hidden and only rarely externalized, in momentous acts of "truthfulness."

Even one's own authenticity is difficult to judge. Abraham, the paradigmatic knight of faith, renouncing the Universal, the language of reflective thought, cannot become intelligible even to himself. His immediate and private relation to God makes it impossible for him to speak to Isaac or to anyone else. Kierkegaard interprets the Biblical story as Abraham's attempt to test his religious commitment by an extraordinary act of faith. Only such an act can attest to the authenticity of the believer. In discussing authenticity in the sense of *auctoritas* (possessing inherent authority), Kierkegaard asks: "how can an Apostle prove that he has authority?" He answers: "An Apostle has no other proof than his own statement, and at the most his willingness to suffer anything for the sake of that statement." The Apostle, like St. Paul, is no "Genius" but "a simple man." He cannot prove that he has "divine authority" but it is his responsibility to see that "he produces that impression" for its pragmatic effect. One cannot prove one is authentic but can feel the need for authenticity. Authentic living

may be such that it conveys its “authority” (its authenticity) by its sheer force. Unlike genius, it is not “marked out by natural gifts” but is formed endlessly by ceaseless effort and self-overcomings.<sup>40</sup>

For Kierkegaard passion and uncertainty are interrelated; the greater the uncertainty, the more passion it demands. Abraham has to risk the possibility that it was not God who summoned him to sacrifice Isaac but Satan, and unconscious urge or a delusion. Abraham’s decision to sacrifice Isaac might be his succumbing to a terrible temptation (“*Anfechtung*”<sup>41</sup>).

Readiness to be authentic, therefore, should involve our willingness to occasionally perform the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” like Abraham, who “overstepped the ethical entirely.”<sup>42</sup> It is possible to argue against Kierkegaard that if the crucial factor in authenticity is the “how” of passion, it follows that it is better to become a zealous Nazi than a lukewarm Christian. Is Abraham the highly esteemed “Knight of faith” or just a zealous murderer? Such questions were actually directed to Kierkegaard by unsympathetic critics. To answer them, the following defense of his view is in order.

As we saw, Kierkegaard holds that authenticity is a correlation between the “what” and the “how” of commitment. He seems to think that no ideology directed to a finite and limited object, such as even the ‘thousand-year *Reich*’, can incite the “endless passion” required for authenticity. Authenticity emerges only through the complete “suspension” of reason and logic. But for this we need such an object, such as the Christian faith, which demands that we do indeed suspend our ethos.

However, at least psychologically, it is plausible that even a finite object, such as love for a woman, can incite me to such a degree of passion that I will sacrifice everything to preserve my absolute commitment to her. There seems to be no inherent obstacle to passionate commitment to a contingent and finite object, whom I may love authentically just as I may believe in the Absolute. Why then does Kierkegaard hold that only the Absolute God can overwhelm me so passionately as to make my faith in him the genuine expression of authentic commitment?

One possible answer, which may be regarded as scandalous by believers in any traditional transcendent God, is that this kind of faith paradoxically requires one’s most sustained creativity. To create God requires the greatest possible passion. I do not speak of ontological creation, but of the intentional constitution of a relationship to an object that, thereby becomes the Absolute. In his story of Abraham, Kierkegaard implies that the requires experience which makes the “knight of faith” subjectively affirm the command and regard it as coming from God grants this God the status of being an absolute entity *for* Abraham. In becoming

an absolute for me, the absolute is completely dependent upon my subjective interpretation of it as the Absolute. Here we reach the heart of the paradox: despite Abraham's awareness that the absolute exists in virtue of his own decision making Him so, he acts as if this absolute has objective authority to be absolute! God is intentionally created in our hearts, though we obey Him as ontologically aloof in heaven.

Kierkegaard maximizes the distinction between man and God to make religious faith the most authentic authoritative experience imaginable. The gap between God and man is infinite because it was man who made it so. We ought not to forget that Abraham and Jesus were fathers and originators of a specific faith, and as originality is part of the meaning of authenticity, both may legitimately be considered, as indeed they are, authentic "knights of faith." Whereas the passionate lover only forms the passion in his inwardness and directs it to an already existing individual, the "knight of faith" first creates the object of his faith, then the passion involved in the faithful commitment to it. Thus the intimate correlation between the "how" of faith and its "what" is entirely of his making. It is this formative relation that creates the self's authenticity. To create one's intrinsic self, one must first to overcome one's sensual nature (aesthetics), then universal reason (ethics): only then becoming sole creator of one's self and God. This requires the utmost passion and commitment manifested in the search for personal authenticity.

## Notes

1. Poul Lübcke, "Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication," *History of European Ideas* 12 (1990): 31–40. Good example of the 'semantic problem' approach is Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), and of the 'performative' attitude Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* (Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 55, 59, 317. The latter claims that Kierkegaard's "personal life and writings are a persistent quest for authentic selfhood. Though indirectly, he constantly entreats his readers to undertake a similar journey" (p. 5). However, the enticing process and its relation to the specific object of enticement, i.e., the authentic faith, is not elaborated in this otherwise perceptive account of Kierkegaard's indirect ("pseudonymous") communication.
2. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 16, henceforth *Journals*.
3. *The Present Age and Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. A. Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 33, henceforth PA. The same point is made by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*, Vol. I, trans. David F. and Lillian M. Swenson (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 27, henceforth EO. Cf. his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* trans. David F. Swenson and

- Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 345, henceforth CUP.
4. Cf. Kierkegaard's admonition that his age "being without passion has lost all feeling for enthusiasm and sincerity" (PA, p. 39).
  5. PA, p. 40.
  6. PA, p. 42.
  7. PA, pp. 68, 50, 82, 43, 54.
  8. PA, p. 44.
  9. PA, p. 81.
  10. *The Point of View for my Work as an Author: A Report to History*, trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 13.
  11. CUP, p. 236.
  12. Which "caused almost a riot, so that the book was bought, and is even supposed to be sold out" CUP, p. 254.
  13. PV, p. 40.
  14. CUP, p. 245.
  15. PV, p. 41.
  16. CUP, pp. 72, 68, 68 fn, 236, 245 fn.
  17. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), I, p. 259.
  18. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 151, propositions 6.522 – 7. Cf. Alastair Hannay, op. cit., pp. 146–56 and his "Solitary Souls and Infinite Help: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein," *History of European Ideas* 12 (1990): 41–52. Cf. M. P. Gallagher "Wittgenstein's Admiration for Kierkegaard," *Month* 24 (January 1968): 43–49. It seems likely this observation in Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value* refers to Kierkegaard: "An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though we were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it" (trans. Peter Winch, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 73).
  19. CUP, p. 181.
  20. *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 338 (henceforth CI) p. 349.
  21. CI, p. 276.
  22. CI, pp. 277–278.
  23. CI, pp. 50, 278, 340.
  24. CI, p. 265.
  25. CI, pp. 338–339.
  26. CI, p. 256.
  27. *Journals*, p. 139.
  28. A concise outline is provided in CUP, pp. 261–265; for a more elaborate and poetic presentation, see in *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1940).
  29. See James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 46 and Mark C. Taylor, op. cit., p. 74.
  30. EO, II, (trans. W. Lowrie), p. 167, cf. his *Sickness unto Death*, where this idea is treated at length from a religious point of view.
  31. *Journals*, p. 355; cf. CUP, p. 248.
  32. *A. Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 271; cf. PV, p. 103.

33. EO, II, p. 168. The importance of the instant in Kierkegaard's writings is further evidence against the conception of a linear development of the self in time.
34. EO, II, p. 182. For the Judge's arguments see *ibid*, pp. 170–182, 215–220.
35. *The Concept of Dread*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 15, henceforth CD.
36. *Stages*, p. 430.
37. *Stages*, p. 430; cf. CUP, p. 261.
38. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 64, henceforth FT.
39. FT, p. 79.
40. "Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," pp. 105, 93–94.
41. E.g., FT, p. 79; 124. This notion of negative enticement is analogous to Nietzsche's concept of *Verführung*. See my *Nietzsche's Enticing Psychology of Power* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), Chapter 7 and "Nietzsche on Authenticity" in *Philosophy Today* 34 (1990): 243–258.
42. FT, p. 69.