

Becoming human, becoming sober

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Abstract Two themes run through Kierkegaard’s authorship. The first defines existential requirements for “becoming human”—reflective honesty and earnest humor. The second demarcates the religious phenomena of sobriety when human becoming suffers insurmountable collisions. Living with existential pathos teaches the difference between the either/or logic of collisions and the both/and logic of development and transitions. There is a difference between self-transformation and a progressive individual and social development. In the developmental mode self experiences gradual progression or adaptive evolution; in the self-transformative mode self undergoes qualitative upsurges, leaps, gestalt switches, musical key transpositions of becoming in individual and social evolutions. Each individual in every epoch begins at the beginning. The author traces the movements of becoming in their parallel dimensions, drawing a fork through Kierkegaard’s writing. The first leads through the existence spheres of his pseudonymous authorship. The second intensifies the movement on the spot and in the moment.

Keywords Becoming · Humanism · Kierkegaard · Moment · Radical evil · Redemptive critical theory · Sobriety

The moment is when the man is there.¹

¹ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 338).

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I will meditate on two major themes running through Søren Kierkegaard's authorship. With the first theme I turn to human finitude—becoming human in history and temporal existence. Finitude teaches me autodidactically to become earnestly who I am. Becoming in finitude is marked by a *transitive, immanent, ethical-existential intensity of the temporal moment*. With the second theme emerges that order of becoming which rigorously demarcates the religious. My failure to repeat and so sustain the temporal moment of finitude by its own resources alone—heroically—occasions the rise of the religious phenomena. When faith in the first degree—preunderstanding and praxis of human becoming that mark the first theme—recognizes its radical failure to embody the true, the good, and the beautiful, then my lived requirement to become in finitude yields to faith in the second degree—“becoming sober.” Faith in the first degree is generic, without a brand-name, or existential: I learn from finitude how to begin in time and history. I move within the sphere of immanence wherein I interact with others about something in the world. Faith in the second degree inhabits the moment of intensified finitude—the religious—whereby I move in a contrarian fashion of shipwrecking, sobering transcendence. Such Kafkaesque metamorphosis suffers the pathos of sobering consciousness—moving from faith in the first degree to despair about one's heroic will to faith in the second degree, moving from self- and other-hatred to forgiveness, from heroic apotheosis to self rooted in the gift of unconditional love. Moving on the spot transpires in the *intransitive, religious-existential moment of transcendence*.

Singular modes of becoming and their two themes of individual journey find their social parallels. Insofar as reflection on human finitude pertains to phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, and socio-political praxis, the lived requirement of “becoming human” calls for reflective honesty in human interactions. When the wounds of history do not heal in the course of social r/evolution, then even enlightened progress can become disaster. This discovery is in part reflected in what critical theorists call “dialectic of enlightenment.” When theodicy fails to console the victims of history, then triumphant religiosity suffers its twilight of idols and deaths of God. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical theory make us aware of the finite character of our social and heroic projects; redemptive critical theory deflates the imperial ego and all its works. This why and how becoming sober implants one's existence in an intensified moment at the threshold of a religious critique of both secular and religious establishments. This is why postsecular sobriety calls for a redemptive critical theory.² At the shipwreck of the imperial self in both its singular and social incarnations, I can become who I am only in self-transformation.

The two dimensions of human becoming, in their singular and social domains, encounter each other in a counter-point movement. Generic leaps in immanence and historical progress do not follow linear paths of evolution. Yet the autodidactic movements are traceable teleologically through existence spheres. The theodidactic movement calls for self-transformation on the spot. Religiously speaking, there is an asymmetry between singular and social domains, as for Kierkegaard, all categories

² Matušítk (2008a).

of the present age must pass through the category of the singular individual. I follow the two themes—becoming human, becoming sober—in their fugue dimensions, drawing a fork through Kierkegaard’s writings. The first leads through the existence spheres of his pseudonymous authorship. The second intensifies the inward movement on the spot—the halt in the moment.

Becoming human in finite existence and history, *ex materia*, lives from the very possibility of becoming in the moment, *ex nihilo*. The possibility endows every beginning with the gratuitousness of creative and redemptive activity. This is why the human moment arrives in time and history—*ex materia*—and yet not out of time but rather “out of nothing.” Meditating on the difficulty of beginnings, on the possibility that I can begin, every human becoming (whether individual or social) begins anew and so reveals a gift. In the beginning, I find myself neither in motion nor at rest but in spirit’s freedom.³

There are, then, two gifts that propel every becoming: The first gifted possibility underwrites my and our finite human condition. The second gifted possibility rescues individual and collectively lost capacity for freedom. I am always already in need of beginnings, and that means likewise that every established social and ecclesiastical order must learn to live in fear and trembling about its own ends.⁴ The first gift of beginnings retrospectively reveals at the heart of finitude human creatureliness, the second bespeaks hope against hope. In the order of sobering intensity, the movement of becoming leads from aesthetically diffused instants, via ethical attempts at repeated continuity of the moment, to the ethical-religious halt of vanishing time, to the simplicity of the now-time.⁵ The moment is when I am there.⁶ “Becoming in the moment” is dialectical: It appears as a two-step movement in the way that it is intimated in the order of passing time. First I learn to become human and then become sober. Yet the moment grants all possibility to my “being there.” In the order of beginnings, the gift of now is always already there in that there is possibility.

1 Becoming human

One of the recurring mantras intoned by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, is that the present age has forgotten what it means to be human.⁷ Climacus is a humorist attempting to become a Christian in Christendom. We can imagine what Climacus might mean by this if we picture him today going around with the claim that he is just trying to become free in democracy. Climacus wears Kierkegaard’s dramatic mask disturbing Christians who pledge with self-satisfaction their Christian confession, yet who might not have faced the fundamental task of becoming human. Climacus’s Socratic attitude unmask the hubris of wanting to

³ Kierkegaard (CA, 1980, pp. 81–93).

⁴ Kierkegaard (PC, 1991, p. 88).

⁵ I use the word “instant” for the Aristotelian or Euclidean spatial notions of linear time, I reserve the word moment for Kierkegaard’s discovery of human temporality. (cf. Kangas 2007).

⁶ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 338).

⁷ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 129, 242, 249, 302, 385).

become all that one can be yet without becoming human. This is how I could become comic: I could bear titles, embrace identities, profess doctrines, yet all along fail to become myself. I could stuff my head with secular as well as religious truths, while failing to liberate myself. Climacus performs a divine comedy satirizing anyone who can be honored as a citizen, parent, provider, flag-waving patriot, warrior, churchgoer, yet who has never even begun as a finite self. On some 600+ pages of the *Postscript* (CUP 1, 2, 1992), he disabuses me of my illusions of abstract human existence. If I expect to find some prescriptions for my task, the book fails to deliver. The book not only does not offer a positive certainty and objective truth, but also its author disclaims all secular and religious authority to teach didactically and infallibly. In my finitude, I must begin as an autodidact, repeatedly resolving to become responsible for my life.

“Becoming human” in time cannot be learned by rote method. The temporal movement of human becoming is excellently unfit for political platforms or religious catechisms wherewith one is inculcated into group adherence. Human becoming is curiously at odds with religious and secular ideologies alike. Climacus performs as a humorous gadfly in a theocentric as well as secular age. He disturbs both civilizational mind-sets whenever they suffer from an overproduction of objective religious or secular certainties coupled with a dearth of earnest selves. Religious fundamentalists and *apparatchiks*, because of rigid structures of adherence, equally shipwreck on human becoming.

Human becoming is a finite venture marked by what Climacus describes as a threefold dimension of existential pathos in the immanence of the moment: pathos in its initial, essential, and decisive expression. This threefold temporal intensity of the immanent moment is not to be confused with emotional instants dispersed into upheavals and tonalities of immediate living. Existential pathos accompanies ethical action, and it is the latter that in repetition grants continuity to one’s life.⁸ The pathos-filled care for becoming qualifies my finitude by its temporality. I call this quality of time the immanent, ethical-existential intensity of the moment. That I undergo my life with existential pathos at all signifies that I am temporal. In my becoming I am unfinished, I set myself for myself as a task. The moment of repetition forward transforms the linear as well as recollective time. Forgetting that human becoming is marked by a temporal task, I repeatedly confuse my life with stationary or finished things, products, tools, exchange values. This forgetting and longing conflate the moment with instants, as if living could be “had” like a five minute “Uncle Ben’s rice”. I am never something fixed that I could possess or give away, to which I or another could adhere. No sooner than I construct Archimedean points, erect architectonics of objective certainties in thought or social life, mount seemingly ultimate plateaus of reflective understanding, celebrate defining victories in personal life or career, stabilize my boat in world history; I am confronted with the immanent intensity of the moment. My comic difficulty is that I am unable to be finished with life ahead of living it. Enter: existential pathos.

When I care for myself not just aesthetically, as if from a poetic distance or through an idea of myself, but consider the entirety of my life, then I am transformed by

⁸ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 431).

existential pathos. Becoming human requires me to inhabit an immanent intensity of time, thereby transforming the passing-away of instants into the self-transformative moment of care for self. To care for the eternal absolutely is to seek it for its own sake, rather than for the sake of something else. I do not seek my happiness for the sake of other ends. By wanting to become happy—whether as a poet or lover, spouse or single person—I must transform my relation to time. If love is how I define happiness, then I do not seek to be in love for a day, a month, or even a few years; no, “all time, existence, is a time for being in love.”⁹ It does not matter that my perspective is marked by becoming in time. To care with existential pathos means to seek my eternal happiness in every now. That is how the ethical-existential now transforms the nostalgic and longing instants into the moment of resolution. I can die a good death knowing that I have loved wholly. Instant happiness vanishes with the passing away of time; and so I do not need to wait for physical death to live already every second in desperation. Every instant of becoming which I do not convert into a time for being in love—the moment—is always already unhappy, nostalgic, longing. Eternity is a quality of now, a moment in which time and eternity interface, not an objective something that comes before or after living.¹⁰ If I do not live now with the pathos for eternal happiness, no political or religious adherence, not even afterlife expected as a retirement home to-come, can teach me the path out of anguish into the moment.

1.1 The initial expression of existential pathos

What Climacus defines as the initial expression of existential pathos confronts me with the most common and yet utterly comic situation that I can care throughout my life absolutely yet for something relative.¹¹ It is as if I were thrown into the play of distorting mirrors and struggled to tear myself away from their magic charm. The mirror room can be the Platonic Cave of Ignorance, it can be the literary allegory of searching for oneself in *Steppenwolf*¹², in a world view or ideology by which I define my life or a TV reality show. Each mirror offers me a definitive image of myself, captivating me with its virtual actuality, stabilizing my becoming with claims to an absolute value. It takes some time for me to see through my most beloved mirror play, to unmask its particular enticements. It takes a lifetime to wake up from the Cave of all mirror plays, a cycle of unhappy loves rebounding into more unhappy ones. I discover that what appeared as me is nothing more than a comic distortion of myself. What strikes us as comic is not the pathos for absolute ends, as the very search for love and eternal happiness is something one is unable to shed; the comic lies in loving relative ends as absolutes.¹³ The comedy of errors turns into an earnestly discerning pathos when I begin to learn to relate relatively to the relative ends in my life and absolutely to the absolute.¹⁴

⁹ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 397).

¹⁰ Kierkegaard (CA, 1980, pp. 82–84, 87–93).

¹¹ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 387–430).

¹² Hesse (2001).

¹³ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 422).

¹⁴ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 407).

With the distinction between the first (immanent) and second (transcendent) degree of faith, we will be able to differentiate with some nuance Kierkegaard's mature clarification that "to have faith, this and only this relates itself as possibility to the moment."¹⁵ The initial existential question of my life-orientation is to discern what is relative and what absolute in my life. This situation already transforms me from a dupe of history into someone who has become a task to oneself. The existential degree of faith names the first intensity of the moment. At this junction we are still learning to become human by undergoing the tasks of finitude. I am rattled each time when absolute concerns invested in relative ends collapse as so many gods with clay feet. From the perspective of empiricism and positivism the categories of self, love, and spirit do not possess objective reality. What cannot be thought of as an object to be owned or sold, that cannot be fixed or perceived in finite shapes. The relation to the absolute ends cannot be represented in an objective form. Becoming human stands in Climacus for becoming subjective. His book is not a road-map to self.¹⁶ The pathway of temporal becoming is the most elusive, hidden, yet the most intimate dimension of human existence.¹⁷ I am to become subjective. Yet this is not a path to some homunculus sitting within me, as if in a monastic cell or over against the world that is out there. As if becoming-subjective were a noun rather than a verb, as if it could be gained by introspective, navel gazing self-objectification!¹⁸ The initial pathos of my becoming teaches me that while I am in the objective world of relative ends, I am not an object among other objects. The task of becoming subjective in every now fills the pathos for eternal happiness with the time of loving. If I cannot find myself in time, no adherence to this life or in afterlife can teach me the way to self. "No, only when the man is there, and when he ventures as it must be ventured ... then is the moment—and then the circumstances obey the man of the moment."¹⁹ There is no objective, aesthetic guide for my venture. The absolute good "is defined only by the mode of acquisition, the absolute difficulty of this is the only sign that one is relating oneself to the absolute good."²⁰

1.2 The essential expression of existential pathos

No sooner do I learn how to discern absolute from relative ends, then my venture's immanent faith suffers "the essential expression of existential pathos."²¹ Existential suffering thus essentially demarcates every generic and name-brand of religious life from its impostors. Because I am thrown immediately into the world, in my finite beginnings I find myself immersed absolutely in relative ends.²² To even lift off from this relative self-absorption, I must begin by discarding all excess baggage

¹⁵ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 339).

¹⁶ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 409).

¹⁷ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 406f).

¹⁸ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 414).

¹⁹ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 338).

²⁰ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 428).

²¹ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 431–525).

²² Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 431).

accumulated with the false senses of myself. If I am not there, then the moment can never be there either. I already learned that existential pathos is not some aesthetic fortune cookie or emotional avoidance of pain. Now I learn that I become human only by ongoing dying to immediacy.²³ This task of becoming by dying to myself is my essentially suffering action. “Immediacy expires in misfortune; in suffering the religious begins to breathe.”²⁴ This proto-religious sense of moment delivers me into a radically passive undergoing of inward surgery, “the highest action in the inner world,” from which, and Kierkegaard knew this before Jean-Paul Sartre, there is no exit in existence.²⁵ Suffering for love, this proto-religious pathos, is neither quietism of action²⁶—though it is a kinesis of intensified temporal finitude—nor morbidity, even as it is a dying to self-identifications.²⁷ Climacus, not a sado-masochist, is a suffering Socrates of Christendom²⁸:

- witnessing self and other with jesting earnestness
- risking oneself in living with an objective uncertainty
- guiding by the indirect signs of faith as distinguished from positive beliefs
- apprehending in suffering all but the negative signs of religious inwardness as distinguished from an aesthetic religiosity of fundamentalism.²⁹

What do I suffer in the finite moment of temporal intensification, in that strenuous action of non-action, what is my suffering’s earnest jest?

The humor of my absolute pathos for eternal happiness is that my immediacy pretends to be capable of everything, but in actuality I am capable of *nothing* (here read: no thing, no “what”). I continue to act, repeatedly act, inwardly discover that I cannot win love or myself through an objective something. Earnestly I suffer in my repetition, in jest I strive to “becoming nothing”—neither the author nor the owner of my life.³⁰ Genuine religious suffering is humorous rather than self-flagellating, it has that unbearable lightness of existing that marks every earnest becoming in time. I discover that existential pathos always already moves by generic faith. Note that in the sphere of immanence the *transitive, ethical-existential intensity of the temporal moment* is expressed by faith in the first degree. And existentially, the generic nature of this faith signifies lack of a label of an organized religion or adherence to any particular group or doctrine. This faith’s immediacy, unlike the naive immediacy of beliefs, lives by one’s risky existence. In existential faith I move not by received certainties but rather by virtue of suffering my finitude. My suffering existence acts as a lived *epoche* (i.e., bracketing), whereby my natural attitude is suspended or placed out of commission. In the new attitude of generic faith, which later thinkers called phenomenological attitude, I venture to love with absolute pathos that which

²³ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 461).

²⁴ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 436).

²⁵ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 433).

²⁶ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 471).

²⁷ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 463).

²⁸ Mooney (2007, part 1).

²⁹ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 448f. 453ff).

³⁰ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 464).

is an objectively uncertain, hidden truth. Becoming subjective in truth, all received cultural and ascribed identities of my imagined self are transformed into nothing.³¹

Ancient Jews held that to meet God face-to-face would be to die. Climacus's existential faith is inflected by this Judaic prohibition on G-d as an objective certainty. Dying to immediate self underwrites the moment when *I* can be there.³² To love with absolute pathos is terrifying, for genuine intimacy manifests human vulnerability and powerlessness.³³ Whether in love or risking in faith, one cannot own one's beginnings.³⁴ To seek G-d as an objective certainty is neither to love nor to believe with the pathos of the ultimate. Prayer, that intimate love-making with the divine, just as the nakedness of lovers, admits no observers,³⁵ albeit Kierkegaard speaks of G-d as the lover calling human lovers to a holy threesome.³⁶

1.3 The decisive expression of existential pathos

Climacus anticipates the intuition of Benjamin that human historical progress is catastrophic.³⁷ This marks human beginnings by guilt—by founding violence of states and cities, by claiming to be equal with the gods, by usurping creative beginnings as my first creation. Said differently, I become who I am not by developmental progress, in continuity envisioned by psychologists and social reformers, but by transformation, in discontinuities. Spiritual teachers, revolutionary thinkers, and even evolutionary biologists speak of leaps. By transformative change, I mean self-relation to time. Becoming human imparts not only a lesson in the ongoing divestment of cultural, traditional, and conventional absolutes into which I have been socialized as the self I think I am. Becoming human throws me not only into radical finitude of my received hermeneutical horizons—meanings, contexts, values, history; it teaches me not only that “when time itself is the task, it is a defect to finish ahead of time.”³⁸ Becoming human teaches me likewise the Kafkaesque lesson that I am guilty because I arrive late in the moment. Temporally, I am already immersed in the beginning before I actually begin. I am always making another beginning and in the end of my journey I discover “the total guilt” of never having begun the task.³⁹ My pathos unmasks the inherent delusions of progress, when it teaches me that existentially moving forward means going deeper, and that the essential movement is neither conservative nor progressive but on the spot.⁴⁰

³¹ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 461, 483).

³² Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 338).

³³ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 484f).

³⁴ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 486).

³⁵ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 509).

³⁶ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, pp. 260, 450). On the Judaic dimension of Kierkegaard's view of God- and neighbor-love, see Westphal (2008) and Wood and Aaron Simmons (2008); cf. Mooney (2008).

³⁷ Benjamin (1968) and Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 525–555).

³⁸ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 164).

³⁹ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 526).

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 527).

The pathos of existential guilt has just as little to do with particular crimes as existential suffering has to do with masochism. Just as the immersion in the immediacy of relative ends is the hereditary sin of civilization, culture, and absolutized communitarian values, so the guilt of postponed liberation is the hereditary sin of moral, social, and revolutionary projects. Racism, patriarchy, domination are social equivalents of absolutized relative ends; decolonization requires dying to immediacy of a divinized culture, reason, and society. Yet each time the liberation struggles to flee the moment, their pathos for happiness is postponed to the future horizon of activism or revolution. The revolutionary projects suffer the social equivalent of guilt that one is always already delayed in relating with an absolute pathos to eternal happiness. The revolutionary who sacrifices the present for the future is just as guilty as is the believer who postpones happiness of eternal life for an afterlife. Climacus is satisfied neither with the melancholy time of social activism nor with the ultimate disconsolation of the therapeutic couch. The pathos of lived time unmasks dishonest happiness of every guilty freedom and justice.

What can redeem this existential guilt of unfulfilled longing for innocent time? “The moment does not come any more than a sterile person begets children.”⁴¹ Time itself cannot be a punishment. Human temporality as such commits no assignable crime. Nor can unhappy time be made up by acts of penance, as if by outward or self-inflicted pain one could begin innocently. If I begin with the full awareness of what it means to be human—harness my late beginnings as guilt-consciousness—then reflective honesty joined with humor can transform my entire existence. In guilt-consciousness, conceived of as a total category of existence, the innocence of the child cohabits with the earnestness of the adult. “The cultivation of spirit in the relation of absoluteness and childlikeness joined together yields humor.”⁴²

Neither the initial creature need for life orientation, nor the essential suffering of the religiously awake spirit, nor the decisive guilt-consciousness should be conflated with a category of personal or social illness to be cured by a therapist or social activist. An irreducible boundary must be maintained among the spheres of psychosomatic health, socio-economic liberation, and spiritual awakening even as we seek a collaborative relationship among doctors, therapists, activists, and pastoral care workers.

And we must not confuse existential guilt with despair, as only the former arises from our finitude. Finitude does not need cure, only one’s convoluted relationship with it would. Existential pathos in its triple dimension of creatureliness, religious awakening, and radical temporality, expresses the transformative, modal dimensions of the human condition. Transformative acts—dying to the immediacy of culture and becoming aware of temporality—impact *how* I inhabit my concrete existence. The “how” (when I can do no-thing) acts as the first corrective to the “what.” The “how” inwardly qualifies the projects of psychological freedom and social liberation, as both by definition move developmentally, progressively. This corrective does not invalidate or replace social progress or psychosomatic healing. Rather existential pathos curbs in human projects their tendency to hubris, as it laughs whenever we run

⁴¹ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 338).

⁴² Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, p. 550).

ahead of ourselves. In existential pathos I undergo a lived anamnesis of my finite, difficult beginnings. *I begin to be there.*⁴³ I become human by repeating the immanent moment of my finite beginnings, I repeat myself responsibly, in that manner I move forward. My ethical-existential task marked by the triple pathos of becoming is an ongoing, earnestly jesting, dangerous remembering of what it means to be human.⁴⁴

2 Comma or pause: collisions of becoming human

We arrive at two sets of collisions that are divided by a silent pause between the motion and rest of becoming, signified by a single grammatical comma in the main title for my meditation.

If human becoming did not suffer insurmountable collisions, then we could be satisfied by striving for psychological maturation, psychosomatic health, and socio-economic justice. Interior and social progress alone, given sufficient time, could and would heal all wounds of history. The *religious* would be *ethical* in the normative senses sought by philosophy.⁴⁵ *The moment would be there* when human progress was there. It would seem that I can become human by evolution, whether psychological or social, alone. Yet human becoming suffers existential collisions that do not get answered within the sphere of the *transitive, immanent, ethical-existential intensity of the temporal moment*. Not knowing myself as spirit, I spend my life punctuating time as a grammatical comma and so in coma (the living dead, I wait to live). The moment is when I become in the moment. This becoming is marked by religious sobriety or second ethics of works of love. I must become sober about becoming human by learning how

- melancholy and nostalgia of the passing away of time affects revolutionary projects
- disenchantment accompanies one's reality healed from neurosis
- on the flip side of progressive beliefs, the despair of revolutions and human development sows its own forms of secular and fundamentalist terror
- secular and religious terror intensifies by the drunken zeal of the holy wars on terror.

Living with existential pathos teaches me that the *either/or logic of collisions and transformations* differs from the *both/and logic of development and transitions*. In both modes of movement I change and retain dimensions of self I have become. Yet a key difference seems occluded by conflating disjunctive transformations with developmental transitions. In the developmental mode I experience gradual

⁴³ I wrote extensively about the difficulty of beginnings in my earlier work (Matušík 1993; cf. Kangas 2007). Heidegger's *Dasein*—being there—never stops learning from Climacus.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard (CUP 1, 1992, pp. 542–555).

⁴⁵ I discuss elsewhere why Emmanuel Levinas's biblical critique of Kierkegaard's distinction between the ethical and the religious operates with a second ethic of works of love which he failed to account for in Kierkegaard (Matušík 2008b).

progression or adaptive evolution; in the transformational mode I undergo qualitative upsurges, existential leaps, gestalt switches, musical key transpositions.

The “either/or” mode of change qualifies not only the work by that title but all paradoxical ordeals of Kierkegaard’s authors, personae or pseudonyma.⁴⁶ If we allow ourselves to read the authorship as if “Kierkegaard” named a drama rather than the author of many distinct works, then we may witness how each pseudonymous character is becoming human through a significant existential collision. I move my meditation to that dramatic moment when collisions of becoming require a musical key not provided by the individual pseudonyma but only by the performance of the “Kierkegaard” drama as a whole. In order to effect this fast forward staging-cut, the pace-setting scenes lead up to *the moment of halt* at which we arrived with Climacus’s three intensities of existential pathos. Climacus’s existential pathos introduces a generic, brand-free faith of the first degree—“religiousness A.” The collision of community with the individual is resolved into a higher-level, modern virtue-ethics of freedom. I am ushered into finite freedom and so required to regard the other with earnestness. No wonder that Martin Heidegger’s analysis of “becoming-towards-death” and Sartre’s secular project of “becoming atheist” were inspired by Climacus’s character.

Arriving at the two sets of collisions divided by my sickness unto death, my coma, a single grammatical comma in the main title for my meditation, I learn at last that there are collisions within each existential sphere or between them, and there are collisions affecting all spheres and their existential pathos. The first set of collisions, those of or in existential spheres, defines the struggle of all pseudonymous characters. Their ordeals are resolved by shifting of spheres, as one character corrects the correctives issued by another. Leaping from the aesthetic to the eudaimonistic or communitarian ethics, then to the ethico-religious freedom of existential pathos, increases the difficulty of human becoming. As difficult as this movement of repetition is, immanently I am taught my beginnings autodidactically by the human condition. This experience fills the descriptions made by phenomenology and hermeneutics. At its highest pitch, living my temporality in earnest jest, hard at work to divest myself of cock-sure agency or authorship, this Climacean movement, celebrated yet often misunderstood by postmodernity, still lies at my will’s disposal. Resolving the immanent collisions of “becoming human” requires an intensified movement on the spot. As sobriety cannot accomplish anything by my will or in an existential switch among lived spheres, I am pinned to the spot, going and coming from nowhere by virtue of a halt. The first set of collisions is my becoming human, the second set requires a new musical key—becoming sober—and a new perspective—the religious.

3 Becoming sober

We have forgotten what it means to be human, humans have forgotten what it means to be spirit. Kierkegaard’s pseudonyma stimulate recovery from forgetting in the

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard (EO, 1987).

first degree: I can recover my humanity by becoming rooted in finitude, wherein I return to my temporal beginnings in the autodidactic school of anxiety. I undergo psychological maturation and answer intellectual doubts, but most importantly I meet freedom's possibility. Faith in the first degree underwrites existence. Existential faith is not yet religious faith.

Speaking in his own rebellious voice, Kierkegaard warns Christians and the secular powers (be they nationalists or imperial regimes) that every individual and the established order ought to remember to live in fear and trembling. Living soberly in the moment, one acquires awareness that "we are in the process of becoming."⁴⁷ Sobriety cures forgetting in the second degree. But note that, dialectically speaking, this new sobriety unmasks how forgetting in the first degree always-already relates back to forgetting in the second degree. In the first degree, I think that I forget because I never seem to have remembered. I seem to be unconscious of myself. In anamnesis forward (i.e., repetition), I become human by learning from finitude and temporality. In the second degree, I discover my repressed and suppressed self who has been there all along as the living dead: I know now that I forget (always and already) because I *will* to forget. To remember in the second degree, I must sober up from self- and other-deception. Until these higher-level collisions become revealed to me, I appear to have overcome the first ignorance in the movement of existential pathos—by learning in the school of possibility. Its anxiety and existential guilt are not yet embraced as flowers of evil. I confront the second way of forgetting myself through deepening self-aware anxiety of existing—by waking up to all sources of despair in suppression of myself as spirit. Forgetting myself as finite marks ignorance in the first degree, forgetting myself as spirit reveals ignorance in the second degree. In retrospect, I learn that my self-forgetting is traceable back to my willed ignorance from the very beginning.

Human self is becoming; the sober self becomes in spirit; the first self is marked by temporality, the second by awareness. The first becoming delivers me into the existential moment, the second into a halt.

3.1 But is waking up from spiritual sleep just as natural as waking up by rested body at daybreak?

To become a sober German, Czech, American, as pupils learn from history, it is not enough to be born as one, to pledge oneself to a national flag. Becoming human asleep—like an infant who joins Christendom through baptism or the Jewish covenant by circumcision but never grows into adulthood—I am unaware of myself as spirit. Becoming human self recalls me to finite existence; becoming sober intensifies the temporal moment by requiring wakefulness and awareness.

Just as in becoming human, so also in awakening, the movement is occasioned by collisions in existence. The immanent collisions of temporality and pathos require transcendence *between* existential spheres, and these shifts intensify my difficulty of beginnings. There are collisions wherein I meet radical limits and failures of being

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard (PC, 1991, p. 88).

able to sustain my freedom's possibility. This moment is the halt of *religious-existential, intransitive transcendence*.

Limits can be cognitive as well as existential. In his attack on the real existing Christianity, Kierkegaard is keenly aware of the death of God in Christendom. Yet he is less concerned with basic beliefs, proofs, and epistemic warrants for a cognitive certainty regarding "God." Against the despair of modern philosophy of religion that seeks such warranted propositional beliefs, he celebrates the objective uncertainty and absurdity of faith. Against the despair of Christendom that has become "the enormous guild of business-operating pastors" and abolished Christianity in the process of marketing the crucifixion, he embraces the low Christology of the power of the powerless.⁴⁸

Lacking our pluralist and postsecular context, he nonetheless begins with the hiddenness of God as the existential requirement for radical freedom and love. His authorship imitates divine hiddenness by disclaiming any authority. Kierkegaard is not a didactic author, he offers no catechisms, he never speaks *ex cathedra* or with an *imprimatur*. He teaches by setting the individual free. In staging "Kierkegaard" as a modern theater of the absurd, I am confronted with myself, no longer safely tucked in the audience or peeping with my theater binoculars from the second gallery. As in a vivid analytical dream, I stand center stage, unmasked, alone, with all furnishings, props, costumes, lights, other pseudonymous masks reflecting aspects of my personal journey, revealing my inward state.

The failures of becoming human represent the first degree of ignorance which I am unable to cure by overcoming my limits, or by expanding learning, or by striving in an autodidactic school of my will. The spheres of intentionality and freedom's possibility collide from within. This is a collision affecting the entire immanent—normative as well as ethico-religious (the generic faith of the first degree)—sphere of existential pathos.

Let us keep in view the two sets of collisions, two sets of forgetting oneself, and two sets of self-recovery. The series in the first set pertains to each immanent sphere of becoming human—aesthetic, ethical, ethico-religious. Collisions of forgetting what it means to be human are resolved by leaps, transcendence, between the spheres and by paradoxical intensifications of the existential pathos. The task of self-recovery requires my ongoing dying away to immediacy, suffering temporal limits, and strenuous autodidactic task to empty myself of hubris. Echoing Climacus, Sartre no less than Albert Camus understood that becoming human is a lifetime work at negating one's desire to be God. The first series of collisions, forgetting, and recoveries propels Climacus's becoming human in existential faith, Sartre's becoming atheist, and Sisyphus's happily disconsolate effort at nothing. Along with his contemporary atheistic theologians of finitude—Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud—Kierkegaard no less than Lévinas enrolls honesty for the sake of a religious critique of established religious orders. This I call *redemptive critical theory*.⁴⁹

The series in the second set signals a more radical crisis of the sphere of immanence whose movement is no longer at my will's disposal. The folds of

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, pp. 135, 160, 161).

⁴⁹ On redemptive critical theory, see Matušík (2008a).

immanence collide onto themselves. The phenomenological name for this collision with the entirety of human existence with its freedom is *despair*, the religious name for despair enacted in full awareness of the divine presence is *sin*; the postsecular as well as systemic translations for despair (*fortvivelse*) are the spiritless modes of modern life: will to power, exploitation and immiseration, neurosis and addiction.⁵⁰

Having forgotten my deeper self, I must wake up.⁵¹ Becoming sober catapults the movement on the spot; any other movement is underwritten by my sagacious mind and self-deceiving will, hence it is insufficient to nurture me soberly. To what degree a thinker or activist, even the most ruthless critic of everything existing, a shrewd hermeneut of suspicion, a bold prophet of the death of God, a sophisticated postmodern deconstructor of the grammatical I, an honest social rebel or revolutionary—to what degree any critical theory can become sober *qua* critique or social revolution, this remains an open question. “[P]urely philosophically, it could be a subtle question whether it is possible for one to be in despair and be fully aware of that *of which one despairs*.”⁵² Redemptive critical theory and action, if it is to sustain its honesty, require the movement of human and sober becoming.

Sartre was sober enough to concede that there were no conversions *en mass*. The path of adherence contains insurmountable contradictions, since a great social leap forward could not sustain itself in sobriety against what it wanted to replace in the first place: individual and systemic sin. Kierkegaard was neither a missionary for a Church membership nor a social revolutionary for a vanguard or regime change. No activism and social progress can on their own bring sobriety: This lesson requires a learning curve yet to be absorbed by secular and social reformers and revolutionaries alike in ways that would be integrated in liberation projects.

The collisions in spheres of existence, in their immanence as well as transcendence *vis-à-vis* one another, point to the path of transformation that leads narrowly through the inward gates of singular individuals. The narrow passage is the difficulty of beginnings welcoming everyone in every generation. This is a very bad piece of news for churches resting on membership and tradition, as much as for social revolutionaries hoping for a systemically innocent radical social beginnings. A clean slate guaranteeing for individuals and future generations beginnings that are not difficult cannot be had. This is not to say that neurosis, power, and social oppression are ever justified; it does mean, however, that progress and social revolution do not of themselves sober up.

3.2 So how is becoming unlike becoming, becoming sober a more intense human becoming?

The first becoming assigns me tasks of temporality by converting instants into the immanent moments of responsible existence:

⁵⁰ On secular theologians of suspicion, see Ricoeur (1977); on secular equivalents to sin-consciousness, see the convincing argument by Westphal (1999). I adapt “postsecular meditations” to address the phenomena of the religious arising *after* the death of God (Matušík 2008a).

⁵¹ Kierkegaard (EUD, 1990a, pp. 313–320).

⁵² Kierkegaard (SUD, 1980, pp. 61n; cf. 47, 151ff).

- I learn to treat relative ends relatively and only absolutes absolutely
- I keep shedding the false immediacy of received culture and imagined self
- I continually detach myself from the desire to be my own origin—to be G-d.

Awakening initiates me into the sober moment, the second degree of becoming, and it turns me to myself as spirit. The second becoming roots me in concretion more radically than temporality's finitude can; it pins me down to a limit that is more severe than doubt. I am grafted onto the spot when I discover in me the modes of collision whose abyss I am unable to cross at my will.

Tolkien illustrates a collision of power.⁵³ The bearer of the ring of power cannot overcome its seduction even with the best intentions to use power well. How far must one travel to destroy the evil effect (both systemic and personal) of dominating power? Tolkien's landscapes, visualized by the film as much as by the media narrations of the war on terror, sketch the struggles with the evil ring as an external matter. Yet why are the Tolkien landscapes so uncanny? It is because the many journeys to undo the power of the ring are traversed in inwardness. If reforms or revolutions are not rooted inwardly in sobriety, systemic and personal changes fail to extricate their outcomes from the problem, and the cancer of domination reappears. Freely I can dispose of the ring of neurosis and dominating power only in myself. I must suspend even my wise intentions and good will to bear the ring just for a moment, up to a point, for the good of the nation, vanguard Party, oppressed class or gender or race, chosen people or the Church, etc. What is to be done? History repeatedly testifies that violent efforts at overcoming evil power fail whenever I take power, build a revolutionary party with a power monopoly, or deploy a security apparatus to guard that very power which I have grabbed or helped to grow even for good aims. My radical project and my revolutionary person are totted from within with the life of a creepy golem, and no cultural revolution except waking up can clean this set of existential self-contradictions. To sober up to dominating power is not to be a passive pacifist; but it is to know that violence even when used to undo violence corrupts, and corrupts absolutely. I become sober by speaking truth to power first in myself. This is the core of active, nonviolent resistance.

4 Halt in the moment

The moment is heaven's gift to ... the believer. ... [T]o have faith, this and only this relates itself as possibility to the moment.⁵⁴

Becoming in the moment is revealed as an ongoing return to and repetition of the beginnings. The transitive movements of finitude and sobriety presuppose their intransitive possibility. I can actualize transitive possibilities available to me in the sphere of immanence, *ex materia* (preexisting resources), I can never will or own my beginnings (I discover that I can do no-thing at the beginning because I exist

⁵³ Tolkien (1990).

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 339).

always already *ex nihilo*). There are two possibilities which must be given to be at all there: the gifted possibility of my gratuitous human condition and the gifted possibility of redemptive hope. A religiously “tone-deaf” Habermas acknowledges both gifts when he argues against positive eugenics on the ground that no finite human should come to occupy the role of “God the Creator and God the Redeemer” as a programmer and improver of the species. As a methodological atheist, Habermas argues that “we do not level out the absolute difference that exists between the creator and the creature.”⁵⁵ The impossibility of begetting myself by myself halts me in the moment suspended as a creature flowering out of nothing.

Becoming *ex materia* borrows from the gift *ex nihilo*. The moment is when I am there, but being there, I discover myself doubly late.⁵⁶ I am neither endowed with *causa sui* competencies of the first possibility to exist nor with the messianic now-time of recovered redemptive possibility. Nonetheless, the first gifted possibility is presupposed by my very existence. The second possibility is invoked in hope by every addict and every field work in a truth-commission, each awaiting redemptive im/possibility of recovery. In the order of beginnings, the gift of the moment is always already there, and only in that sense of the moment I too can be there. I am there, in the moment, because there is possibility.

4.1 Yet how do I wake up from ignorance that does not issue from ordinary lack of knowledge?

More than the generic faith of existential pathos is needed to neutralize despair. Ignorant that I could be in despair, unconscious of myself as spirit, this is precisely to be unaware of myself. To be a sleeping human is to despair. I despair more intensely when I become aware of myself and in freedom I imprison myself. My love despairs when it does not meet its beloved in solitude; when love is thereby incapable of intimacy it despairs; when I cure my loneliness by wanting to possess another, in fear to stand alone, I despair. Awake to myself in despair, I flee myself, wanting to be someone else, wishing to do away with myself. In despair wanting to become human, I cling to my ground and origin, and then my power to freely create destroys and despairs. The moment is when the human becoming is there soberly, but now this is the moment of halt when any liberating use of my freedom becomes a second gifted possibility.

Intellectual doubt can be met by knowledge, the flight from finitude can be ethically repented, and in learning from existential pathos I may accept my human condition. To discover that I have been in despair all along, that consciously or not, I have been addicted to invidious power, and that now full of myself I have no power to break my addiction lest I break my tormented will (become sober), this is to wake up from the second degree of ignorance into the halt of the moment. In becoming sober, the religious sphere proper is posited for the first time, becoming in the moment the religious is consummated through gift’s granting of possibility. The religious is posited in sobriety as a negatively saturated phenomenon and in the

⁵⁵ Habermas (2003, pp. 114–115).

⁵⁶ cf. Kierkegaard (TM, 1998, p. 338).

moment as the uncanny.⁵⁷ The religious moment is neither a basic belief or religious proposition nor positive epiphany. The negatively saturated phenomenon is revealed in my addicted will incapable of freeing itself from self-inflicted bondage. The generic name for the negatively saturated phenomenon of this collision is despair, secular names for these postsecular collisions range from neurosis to will to power to immiseration; the religiously declared equivalent name for all second-order collisions is sin.⁵⁸ Great religions speak of this condition of freedom's lost possibility as a fundamental illusion or ego-attachment, and the post-Kantian and post-Holocaust thinkers harken to the intensified figure of radical evil. That is why neither knowledge nor will or something intentional but faith yields to the moment of gifted possibility that I can begin anew.

Becoming human in despair is not equal to becoming a skeptic or doubter. In reverse, to wake up from my second degree of ignorance, to sober up at the beginning, I do not need to become outwardly religious, lose or get my "religion," wear this or another brand of a religion, wave a flag, pledge myself to a doctrine. Kierkegaard—even as in his life he was trying to become a Christian, indeed walked through a Lutheran perspective onto God, and so wrote for other Christians—never identified religious faith with a doctrinal brand. To hold out for a particular teaching, e.g., the decidedly Christian mystery of the Incarnation, did not require Kierkegaard to conflate religious faith necessary for apprehending the mystery of this particular teaching, with a doctrinal belief-system. Faith is distinct from belief, just as the how is distinct from what and existence-communication from religious name-brands. Thus with all categories of philosophy and history also Kierkegaard's own Lutheranism must pass through the category of single individual. This is how I understand Kierkegaard's paradoxical *Christianity without Christendom*, or, if we adopted John Caputo's Derridean parlance, a Kierkegaardian *religion without religion*.⁵⁹ Becoming in the moment that overcomes despair moves neither by greater knowledge nor by power but by faith. Camus noted in the opening pages of his *Myth of Sisyphus* that nobody would die over the ontological argument, and so likewise nobody could genuinely overcome despair with a catechism lesson.⁶⁰ Faith is not a doctrine but awakening. When I respond to despair with this risk—faith in the second degree means moving over the abyss without attachment to what I know or will as good—I am like the one who vanquishes the ring of power by detachment from power and without the illusion of conquering power with power. I do not spy on evil externally, do not build a security city against friends or foes, citizens or foreigners as possible enemies. I keep dying to my ego and established religious and secular orders alike. I die to that great self-attached empire, which is belief in one's power as the absolute good for oneself or the world.

⁵⁷ For the notion of radical evil as the negatively saturated phenomenon, see Matušík (2008a, part 2).

⁵⁸ See Becker (1973) for the comparison of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair with Otto Rank's post-Freudian notion of neurosis.

⁵⁹ Caputo (1997, 2001, Chap. 5; 2007).

⁶⁰ Camus (1960, p. 3).

4.2 How does my suppressed, deeper self wake up from my willed ignorance?

If I am self-suppressed, I cannot use my freedom's possibility to realize a novel actuality. Sobriety breaks my ramparts, the moment announced intransitive hope, only then *I am there*, then *the moment is*.

Analytical minds might consider Kierkegaard's hieroglyph of the self, "a derived, established relation ... that relates itself to itself [in the relation] and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another," to be illogical and nonsensical.⁶¹ Most first-time, graduate or undergraduate, readers of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Part One, A, a, break their rational teeth on deciphering the opening two pages about the self. Anti-Climacus is too earnestly religious to be flippant, yet waking up the deeper self escapes us if we seek it as the conclusion to a syllogism. The joke of his exposition "for upbuilding and awakening" (subtitle) is as much on Hegel as on analytic approaches to spirit. To know myself in the moment I must not only learn to become human and sober but also *how to despair well*. This is hardly the first choice of intellectual staple for rational minds. Neither propositional beliefs nor arguments suffer despair.

Waking up to myself who relate myself to myself in my bodily necessity and psychical possibility, and becoming wakeful in the moment, I learn that the self I am is neither body nor mind. So this nuance is lost on both the materialist-idealist and the mind-body problems. To accentuate spirit is thus not to fall back to a Platonic or Cartesian dualism. Spirit is not what is classically meant by *anima*, soul. To despair of my body's shape or of mind's happiness is not yet to despair well. I forget myself if I despair over something but not of myself.⁶² The self that can despair is not of the mind-and-body or hylomorphic problem. The self is the "third"—body, soul, and spirit as the third—that relates itself to itself in the psycho physical synthesis of body and mind or soul. Body undergoes physical pain or pleasure, mind suffers mental illness or harbors intellectual doubts or gains intellectual clarity, the self *qua* spirit either despairs or moves in the moment by faith. I wake up in the moment as that deeper self by learning not that I must but rather that I am able to despair. With this great advantage over the animal kingdom (this is my ability to despair, in order to destroy despair), I must negate despair's possibility in actuality. That overcoming is a lifetime field and task, yet it can become actual only in the moment, not *en mass*.⁶³ Sartre is forever right—for the self delivered to despair there is no natural, unaware exit from it. Whether one can be fully aware of what one despairs, having in oneself a "true conception of despair," while choosing no exit from oneself in despair, whether despair allows transparency about oneself, or whether the revolutionary optimistic toughness has not learned to despair, this each must decide at the beginning.⁶⁴ We know minimally this: Kierkegaard intensifies Sartre's movement on the spot, dying to one's useless desire to be God. There is no exit from despair—or there is sobriety's deliverance into the moment. When becoming in the

⁶¹ Kierkegaard (SUD, 1980, pp. 13f).

⁶² Kierkegaard (SUD, 1980, pp. 60, 61).

⁶³ Kierkegaard (SUD, 1980, pp. 15ff).

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard (SUD, 1980, p. 47).

moment one must not adhere to a belief or progressive project, but rather one is called to inhere in faith.

My deeper self awakes when I know *of* what I despair. Herein lies one of Kierkegaard's greatest discoveries; at least it is the one that made the greatest impression on my thinking about radical evil. Even before Marion spoke positively of the religious as a saturated phenomenon and riled up all postmodern atheists like Dominic Janicaud about mixing up religious oranges with phenomenological apples, Kierkegaard discovered the negatively saturated phenomenon of demonic power. It is only with admitting this possibility of becoming demonic, diabolical, radically evil that I am delivered from the pathos of colliding with my failure to become human into the pathos of religious existence. This is that diabolical dimension of radical evil whose epiphany is the unthought of modern philosophy from Kant to Habermas and of politics from the ancient times to the present age inanities about the "war on evil." Yet it is a discovery that the very same first-time reader of Kierkegaard who stumbles over the opening maze of relations that compose the self never fails to point out in *sober disbelief*: To despair soberly is to know oneself as despairing not over my failed body or mind or over this or another loss of things and persons but as despairing of myself. But then how can willing to be myself ever deliver me also to a form of despair and its most intense modality to boot?

Sartre got it right when he identified the desire to be God as despair, though he learned it from the religious thinker Kierkegaard. But Sartre's calling it a useless, vain passion, because the God one desires to become does not exist, misses the phenomenological discovery of the negatively saturated phenomenon intimated by Kierkegaard: There would be no such mode of existence possible—in despair to will to be oneself—if the cosmos were truly absurd, empty, anomic, and so without any relation to the self one wills to be. There would only be two modes of despair, the unconscious one, which antedates the Freudian discovery of neurotic repression, and despair of weakness or self-hating annihilation, the mode called, in despair not to will to be oneself. The third variant, the positively willed radical evil or the mode of despair called defiance, should not be possible. To will one's existence despairingly makes little sense without a prior vocative relation to the other whom one could hear, by whom one is addressed, and so whom one may defy in relating absolutely to the absolute. Defiance is what in popular imaginary goes by the name of demonic or diabolical. It is quite lost on modern philosophy of religion—and this is its despair—that mythological devils and demons never suffer doubts about God's existence, they neither need proofs nor postulates, as finding basic propositional beliefs is not their problem. Ivan Karamazov provides a springboard for analytical evidence from evil against God. His or the Grand Inquisitor's will is hardly a case of intellectual doubt; no, defiance is one's willed refusal of unconditional love.⁶⁵

Derrida rediscovered in reading Kant through Kierkegaard that the religious is both posited and destroyed with the possibility of radical evil.⁶⁶ Derrida sides with Kierkegaard against Kant and Habermas. This human-all-too-human possibility, radical evil, is our diabolical stupidity whereby we enact the humanly unforgivable.

⁶⁵ Matušík (2008a, Epilogue).

⁶⁶ Derrida (2002, p. 100, Paragraph 51).

In despair I can will to be myself because I am spirit who can defy the twofold gift of the moment—creation and forgiveness. There is accordingly but one mode of unforgivable acts by which a freely defiant spirit can bind itself against the gift and *refuse to become/“be there” in the moment*: Refusing the offer of unconditional love. Sacred texts allude to this act as the sin against the Holy Spirit.

It would be existentially uninteresting to speculate about the apocalyptic time of the Last Judgment or the place of eternal damnation as if in parallel with great revolutionary solutions to the problems of human suffering and injustice. From Derrida as much as Benjamin, we have come to learn to live with messianicity without messianism, awake at home in exile, with impossible hope. If I fail to live my every now with the pathos for the gifted moment at which time and eternity interface, then no cheap version of immortality could ever teach me exit out of despair. One is wise to be reminded as much of the biblical prophet Ezekiel’s sobriety that we are but dry bones, the Buddhist awareness of transitoriness of all things, as of their Christian echo on Ash Wednesday that we are dust and to dust return. Yet despair is about the lived time, not about some place or time *after* or ahead of life. As terminally addicted persons attest, the quality of the now lived in despair is always already life-eternal in hell. For existential reasons, and not to score metaphysical points with philosophical talking heads, Kierkegaard insists that neither suicide nor overdose on intoxicants can answer one’s living despair. The cure he proposes for suicidal despair is not to placate but intensify one’s awareness of what one despairs, to be there in the moment’s halt, *to have a prayer in hell*.

4.3 How can even my awaken, deeper self ever sober up if I will to be myself despairingly?

Writing in his own name, Kierkegaard counsels taking two most astonishing steps in the halt of the moment: One, sober up by imbibing yet “something stronger” to assist one in taking any step⁶⁷; two, sober up with unconditional love’s “revolution.”⁶⁸

The first step then has been a “halt” whereby I am served not a blended drink of probability,⁶⁹ thinking I can tinker with my addiction to power or my own good will, as “in the probable one does not drink oneself sober.”⁷⁰ With the stronger drink, I come to myself “*as nothing*.”⁷¹ The stronger drink is my becoming nothing in the second degree, “*nevertheless infinitely, unconditionally engaged*.” The first degree of nothing emerges within the existential pathos of becoming human as one who embraces temporal finitude; the intensified, second becoming nothing awakens one to the bankruptcy of moral, political, and also religious projects insofar as they serve heroism of one’s apotheosis, ego’s or empire’s will to power. “The halt *is*”; *es*

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, pp. 106, 120).

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, pp. 264–279).

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, p. 130; cf. PC, 1991, pp. 23–66).

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 104, cf. pp. 100, 102).

⁷¹ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 106).

gibt halt, il y a “a halt of sobriety,” and the halt launches inward activism in each single individual.⁷²

Anticipating many a twelve step program into the moment of sobriety, with a halt as the first step of awakening from despair, I must admit the most impolitic thing that I am in despair, I am despairing by my free will, not by nature, history, or through another individual or social group, that I am incapable of freeing myself by my or social revolutionary resources alone. To awaken, just as every addict desiring sobriety from toxicity, I must admit that a negatively saturated phenomenon has effectively captured my life as hostage. Perhaps all secular and religious institutions in need of detoxification from power must in fear and trembling admit globally, multiculturally, ecumenically the same: “the first condition for becoming truly sober is to confess that one is intoxicated.”⁷³ I understand in action that my earnest nothing arises now from having been intoxicated by my free will all along, yet I am wholly incapable of another free act than this admission. Halt! I must “begin all over again from the beginning.”⁷⁴ I know genuinely that there is no exit lest my “becoming nothing is to become sober.”⁷⁵ The first momentary step means: in becoming sober I get worse in order to get better.

Spiritual sobriety is an inverted world.⁷⁶ An ego-addicted self suspects selfless action as all but stupidity. Sobriety seeks neither conservative nor progressive power, as it seeks no power, other-worldly or worldly, at all. This is not because social progress or even social revolution could not deliver us to a better system of economy and politics; rather it is because addiction cannot be broken and sobriety achieved by changing social structures alone. One cannot become and so be there in the moment through a group adherence or social revolutionary leap. Caring for individual and social ills by first becoming human and sober, this humble yet difficult task of standing alone—this is judged by secular and religious establishments as selfish lack of social concern, complicity, intoxication, tolerance of systemic violence.⁷⁷ “[B]ut this deification of sagacity in our day is precisely the idolatry of the age.”⁷⁸ “Christianity became *the power* of the world, ... the retrogression, the deception, had already begun.... Secular sagacity hit upon the idea of turning the lives of those witnesses ... into money or into honor and prestige.” In secularization only that distilled aim of money and power has remained. Not another “doctrine” but rather “the unconditioned is the only thing that can make a person completely sober.”⁷⁹

The first step for organized religions “(secularly organized, secularly normalized, secularly guaranteed, etc.)” is to admit that in their addiction to power and money

⁷² Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 130).

⁷³ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 120).

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 130).

⁷⁵ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 106).

⁷⁶ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 103).

⁷⁷ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, pp. 98f).

⁷⁸ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 103).

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, pp. 129, 107; cf. TM, 1998, pp. 30–32, 129–137).

they differ little from the secular mentality.⁸⁰ Kierkegaard warns Christians, but it applies across the religious and secular divide to all political and activist fields of reform and revolutionary action. “There is an existential qualification of the essentially Christian that is the unconditional condition; otherwise Christianity cannot be introduced. It is: *to die to*” oneself, die to despair over power and possessions.⁸¹

Sobriety is an inverted world because it signals an inward revolution to ground all future forms of social change: “this capital that a bank must possess in order to be a bank and that Christendom’s bank possessed, this has been used up, ladies and gentlemen! Instead of being able to draw upon the bank, we must first form a new bank with what is the real capital here: actions, character-actions.”⁸² Changing post-Christian civilization calls for “honesty” about its despair, this admission must form the first step of any activism.⁸³ Despair of reforms and revolutions of the past century was addiction to power and greater production, and the high price of intoxicated social engineering are the landscapes of spiritlessness and human devastation left behind on scales unparalleled by previous social experiments. In its postsecular forms, the age of globalization that inherited Christendom’s addiction to possessions and power is “in the most extreme need of becoming sober” after having “kept on being intoxicated with sheer illusion ..., [as] what we called Christianity was not really Christianity at all.”⁸⁴

The second step of Kierkegaard’s counsel is a corrective to those emancipatory projects that leave sobriety out of thinking and acting for liberation. Existential correctives act as necessary grounds for self-transformation capable of receiving redemptive hope, even though in themselves they are not sufficient conditions for social change. Corrective, the “how,” applies to the domains of social change, the “what,” regardless whether we speak as secular reformers and revolutionaries of possible hope, or invoke impossible hope of messianicity without messianism as the remnant of shipwrecked postmodern faithful after the “death of God.” Kierkegaard makes a straightforward admission of temporality’s revolutionary melancholy, that there is no ultimate, non-contradictory terminus for redistributive reparations of injustice. “Justice tries in vain to secure for each person his own; it cannot maintain the distinction between *mine* and *yours*; in the confusion it cannot keep the balance and therefore throws away the scales—it despairs!”⁸⁵ The guilty party and its descendants will always owe its victims of history what cannot be repaid or equalized—lost time, unredeemed suffering, precocious death. The injured party and its descendants can always find reasons for rejecting any remedy as deficient, for no punishment, reparative ordinance, even amnesty and pardon, can console for finitude, death, lost hope. Radical beginnings secured by revolutionary power (even if social revolutions could name their violence against the established systemic

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 133).

⁸¹ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 131; cf. TM, 1998, pp. 143–222).

⁸² Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 136).

⁸³ Kierkegaard (PC, 1991, p. 66).

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard (JFY, 1990c, p. 142).

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, p. 265).

violence “good”) without self-transformation cannot but produce new cycles of resentment and revenge. In a cycle of intoxication, how can one become human and sober? How can one become human in the moment, return to be there, by a social revolutionary leap yet without embracing active intransitive nonviolent form of existence?

Just as the despairing philosophy of religion needs to give up its search for perfect a/theism, proof or postulate; so likewise, justice must overcome despair though an intransitive hope of forgiveness and unconditional love. To break the addictive cycles of violence (even that aimed against systemic violence), we must strive for more than recognition, redistribution, and reparation. What is the more to be done?

Sobriety weds justice with mercy, it embodies an intensified revolutionary gift—“works of love.” “Love is a revolution, the most profound of all, but the most blessed,” writes Kierkegaard in 1847, it is “a revolution from the ground up.” What are the works of love that underwrite the works of justice? Like a food spice, it acts as a secret corrective, it is “actually not a work, *not* doing this or that.”⁸⁶ Yet this *wu-wei*, “doing nothing at all” of love, is “the most difficult work.”⁸⁷ The event of love introduces a “blissful confusion” into structures of reciprocity and exchange: “there is a *you* and an *I*, and there is no *mine* and *yours!*” With works of forgiveness and love, the distinction between mine and yours vanishes in the moment. And “the more profound the revolution, the more justice shudders; the more profound the revolution, the more perfect the love is.” In this, anachronistically, most Lévinasian accent found in Kierkegaard, my becoming human and sober yields to the moment of the other otherwise than is required by the reciprocity of erotic love and friendship, or by the logic of exchange and equal justice. This corrective more, becoming awake at home in exile, applies not just to solitary “*mine*,” but likewise to “a communal *yours and mine*” or to any “perfect community in *mine and yours*,” thereby to every “*ours*” based on self-love.⁸⁸

5 Implications of the moment

There are horizontal leaps within the sphere of immanence, none of these qualifies as the moment:

- Leaps in consciousness of the oppressed
- Leaps from theorizing liberation in philosophy or theology to actual liberating action
- Leaps between the logic of political and cultural recognition and economic redistribution
- Leaps in evolutionary progress, whether biological or social.

⁸⁶ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, pp. 265f).

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, p. 218).

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, p. 218).

The religious moment transpires in transcendence of a non-spatial now-time, in and out of *nothing*:

- Because there are no leaps of finite creatures into being there at the beginning, there can be no leaps beyond or out of the moment either.
- Because there can be no ultimate revolutionary resolution for the future generations of the existential difficulties of beginnings, secular and evolutionary progress, be it a transhumanist utopia or visions of new consciousness, cannot easily avoid becoming its own disaster.
- Religious movements that adhere to the triumphant and militant sense of salvation are the convex mirrors of social revolutions that confuse the moment with a plateau of *after* life.

Kierkegaard splits the difference between a Freudean stark realism and a Hegelian-Marxian evolutionary optimism. We are always already stuck with this human condition which might limit the scope of individual and social liberation. The now-time of the moment is in time but not of passing time, it is on a path but not of paths. I *remember* the fullness of what it means to be human only when my becoming awakens in sobriety. This nuance between transitive (social, revolutionary) and intransitive (contemplative, self-transformative) activism allows for a non-quietist leap into the difficulty of beginnings. Becoming in the moment is the individual's task yet never something asocial or acosmic.

I conclude by pressing this nuance home, becoming sober even more soberly to the realization of the difficulty of my and every social beginnings. Just as “the revolution of self-love,” so also its group equivalents in socialist and communist revolutions (and not just in their utopian, vulgar or twentieth century failed forms, not just in market imperatives that social revolutions wish to overcome) have a long path to becoming sober in the moment. The earnestly difficult lesson taught by Kierkegaard is this: There is no real progress without becoming human, becoming sober. I must be there for the moment to be there. To echo Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, historical progress does not of itself become sober. “This storm is what we call progress.”⁸⁹ Or again with Kierkegaard, progress is “by no means profound enough from the ground up.” “[S]elf-love's original contentious distinction between *mine* and *yours* still lies dormant within as a possibility.”⁹⁰ Even as an activist who has already become awake to every therapeutic and social ill, even as such a rare find in this world, I could still fall into despair just in that instant when I try to bring about social justice and health, lest my effort awakes to giving up the dream of a yet more perfect production of “mine” or “ours.” Even in my good and well intentioned self, woken up by the soundings of radical evil, I can still will to be myself but despairingly, lest I become human and sober, become in the moment through works of unconditional love.

⁸⁹ Benjamin (1968, p. 258).

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard (WL, 1995, pp. 266f).

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