On the Virtues and Vices of the Singular Will: Seeking “One Thing” with Kierkegaard

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Abstract: In this essay, I follow the example of recent Kierkegaard scholarship in the attempt to consider Kierkegaard’s work from a personal point of view. Accordingly, I begin with a biographical account of my first encounter with Kierkegaard’s notion that “purity of heart is to will one thing”. I explain that were it not for the intervention of one of my early professors, David Kangas, the idea might have prevented me from getting married. I then offer a reading of “An Occasional Discourse”, where that idea is worked out, and suggest that Kierkegaard faces a serious challenge of what I call “empty formalism”. The worry is that his account offers general suggestions without any practical direction on how to live. By showing how the notion of singularly willing the eternal can be productively understood as a kind of virtue, I contend that Kierkegaard both avoids empty formalism and also manages to resist an overly determinate model of ethical life that eliminates the ambiguity of morality and the riskiness of faith.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; David Foster Wallace; David Kangas; virtue; lived existence; singular will; purity of heart; An Occasional Discourse

1. Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard famously claims that “purity of heart is to will one thing”. But, what could this defense of the singular will possibly mean in practice? In this essay, I offer an interpretation of his “An Occasional Discourse” where he defends this idea. My suggestion is that we can easily misunderstand his account as overly determinate relative to external achievements. That is, it is wrong to understand the “one thing” as simply some historical alternative between this or that concrete object of desire. However, we can also fall into error if we give in to an overly universal and abstract conception of the “one thing” as lacking all determinate content in the first place. I think that once we appreciate these misreadings, we can see how the possible worry about Kierkegaard’s notion of the singular will is that it invites an “empty formalism” relative to lived existence. In response, I argue that we should see the singular will as a kind of virtue that helps us to avoid the vices of double-mindedness and busyness (understood as matters of aesthetic confusion). The singular will is virtuous in that it facilitates character development grounded in faithful decision. Indeed, what Aristotle might term the habitual nature of virtue as character building, I find to be a matter of what Kierkegaard terms “becoming a self”. When virtuously directed in relation to “one thing”, we can begin to see that Kierkegaard leaves room for thinking about what to do, but resituates the what as being in constant relation to how we take ourselves up. In other words, what we do and how we do it are, ultimately, grounded in who we are becoming. When we are grounded in relation to God/the Eternal/the Essential, we can appreciate that some whats are off the table and yet decision will always remain necessary in light of the ambiguity intrinsic to embodied finitude.

In order to get specific about the misunderstandings of Kierkegaard’s account, I want to get personal. These possible misunderstandings are not just theoretical objections, but matters of lived praxis—at least that was the case for me when I was first reading
Kierkegaard. That said, let us start then with the self I was (at 22 years old) when the misunderstandings of the singular will were very real temptations, and then turn to a sustained consideration of Kierkegaard’s text in the hope that we can avoid such misunderstandings moving forward.

2. Philosophy Is Personal and the Stakes Are High

Ideas have consequences. Since books contain ideas, reading books has consequences. Sometimes these consequences can be severe. Reading Kierkegaard’s work almost ruined my marriage—or better, prevented it from happening. Let me explain.¹

My first serious engagement with Kierkegaard was occasioned by courses that I took at Florida State University with David Kangas (who since has tragically passed away). See Kangas (2007, 2018). The enthusiasm he brought to his teaching was only surpassed by the rigor of his thinking. Reading Kierkegaard with Kangas was like being invited to wake up from a Kantian dogmatic slumber and walk, fully awake, into the task of living on purpose such that every single second of existence is approached, as Kierkegaard would say, as the moment of decision.

My first sustained reading of Kierkegaard, when I was 22, was about two years prior to my decision to propose to my then girlfriend, Vanessa. In those two years I became enamored with the seriousness that Kierkegaard brought to the life of the mind as enacted in existential ways. I breathed deep the life-giving encouragement I found in his insistence that faith is a “task for a lifetime” and that “becoming a self” demanded full investment. I embraced passionately his reflections on “neighbor-love”, his critique of the “Church Triumphant”, and his recommendation to avoid a life defined by transitory pleasures that inevitably lead to the boredom of metaphorical “crop rotation”. But, perhaps most importantly, and yet most problematically, I became devoted to the importance of striving for the characteristics of “that single individual” to whom Kierkegaard dedicated so many of his Discourses. It was to this idea of becoming a singular self who was defined entirely by a commitment to faithfulness, and the existential–theological task that it announced, that I resolved to commit all my young energies and emerging philosophical abilities.

To understand the attraction that his thought had on me, we need to remember that Kierkegaard had an impressive knack for crystalizing complicated ideas into phrases worthy of an Instagram post or a graphic on a flat-billed ballcap: “Knight of Faith”, “Teleological Suspension of the Ethical”, “the Leap”, “Absolute Paradox”, “the Moment”, “the Single Individual”, “the Simple Wise Man”, etc. In my early 20s, standing above all such pithy summations of pages and pages of philosophical depth was one phrase that, like the final kiss in The Princess Bride, left all the others far behind: “Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing”. There it is. That phrase, and the entire text of “An Occasional Discourse” (Kierkegaard 1993, pp. 3–154) in which it is worked out, became for me the key to a life of meaning, purpose, and direction. As a 22-year-old philosophy graduate student, finding my “calling” and “purpose” and “direction” were of utmost importance and here, in this single phrase, Kierkegaard seemed to show the way forward. Indeed, I was struck by the way that the notion of the singular will was not merely an abstract consideration of a philosophical idea, but instead a concrete reflection of Kierkegaard’s own lived experience. Indeed, he frames it in the context of a “confession”. Kierkegaard had seemingly lived out the very struggle of existential confusion that I was facing in my own life.

In a famous journal entry, the then 22-year-old Kierkegaard writes the following:

What I really need is to get clear about what I am to do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find my purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. . . . So let the die be cast—I am crossing the Rubicon! No doubt this road takes me into battle, but I will not renounce it. I will not lament the past—why lament? I will work energetically and not waste time in regrets. . . . Do not look back as Lot’s wife did, but remember that we are struggling up a hill. (Kierkegaard 2000, pp. 8–12)
Without mentioning it directly, Kierkegaard explains that the notion of “purity of heart” is not just a matter of moral uprightness (despite what so many youth pastors might say as they pass out “purity rings” at the end of church services), but more so it is a matter of selfhood. Seeking such purity is ultimately a way of naming oneself as moving in the right direction toward whom it is that one hopes to become. In a vein reminiscent of Seneca’s encouragement to have no regrets in life because we appropriately prepare for death by living well (Seneca 2018), the uphill climb that Kierkegaard announces as the direction of his own singular will was, I thought, entirely appropriate for the direction of my own will as well.

Life is to be “lived forward”, as Kierkegaard explicitly notes (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 12), but to will one thing means that we cannot just run headlong in whatever direction that we please. Orientation matters and only because it does can we understand that struggling uphill is not the same thing as running down to the river. Finding one’s calling is more than just picking up whatever phone is ringing on the table nearby.

Inspired, then, not only by Kierkegaard’s writing, but also by his life, I could not help but think that his broken engagement with Regine was the lived manifestation of his singular will to strive for the truth that was true for him. Indeed, to will one thing pretty trivially means not being distracted by other things. If the singular will facilitates purity of heart, then the divided will, or what Kierkegaard terms “double-mindedness”, would seem straightforwardly to lead to despair. For Kierkegaard, that certainly seemed to entail that he needed to break free from the distractions of romantic entanglements, and the social expectations that attended them, in order to throw himself, fully, singularly, into his writing as the instantiation of his calling.2

My embrace of the pithy phrase, “purity of heart is to will one thing”, would have been fine if I had only loved one thing. As Emmanue Levinas (1969, pp. 212–14) explains about moral life, things would be simple if there were only one singular Other to whom we owed everything.3 But there are always other others. Hence, decision must be made about how to live precisely because it is not obvious how to do so.4 In my case, I did not just have one Other (philosophy), I had another Other: Vanessa. I was defined by two loves and so decision was required.

Probably unsurprisingly given how many goth kids who read Nietzsche transpose his critique of Christianity onto their own frustrations with their parents’ expectations of church attendance, in my case it did not take much for Vanessa to become my Regine. My devotion to philosophy quickly become analogous to Kierkegaard’s “finding a truth” that was true for him. I began to wrestle deeply with whether I could remain “pure of heart” while also being divided between my two loves. I definitely felt like I was struggling uphill, but was not sure exactly was at the top of it. Was it philosophy or Vanessa toward which I should be struggling?

Relationships, like faith, like morality, and like life, never are as simple as we might wish they were. Indeed, as Jacques Derrida (2000) provocatively suggests in relation to the practice of hospitality, decisions are only genuine in the face of the undecidable. If there was a clear algorithm for how to choose, then there would not be the need for real choice. As Derrida says somewhere, without risk there is no faith. So, borrowing from another of Derrida’s texts, what it means to “learn to live” is, “finally”, a matter of facing up to this risk and willing oneself forward nonetheless (Derrida 2007). To this Derridean account we can add the Kierkegaardian awareness that without faith there is no singular will. Indeed, without the singular will, Kierkegaard explains in “An Occasional Discourse”, there is no purity of heart because what it means to will “one thing” is simply to will “the good”. Indeed, as he will eventually write, “If a person is to will the good in truth, he must will to do everything for the good” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 79). The logic seems straightforward. No compromises. No deviations. No distractions. The good alone is to be willed. Everything else must be abandoned in the name of such singularity. Although I was reading Kierkegaard for insight into how to live, what I kept finding appeared to entail being alone, isolated, and narrow. Frustrated by such entailments, I consoled myself with
the thought that even if I lost Vanessa’s love, at least I would be defined by “willing one thing”. Relationships be damned! Purity of heart here I come!

Hesitant in taking such a step, though, it occurred to me that my Kierkegaardian professor, David Kangas, was also married! How had he been able to do that given that he knew Kierkegaard’s insistence on the singular will much better than I did? I reached out to him and remember vividly walking into his office and explaining to him my heartfelt agony: to propose or not to propose? I felt like I was the author of the “Diapsalmata” (Kierkegaard 1987a, pp. 17–44) and profoundly aware that no matter what I chose, I would regret it. Despite Seneca’s and Kierkegaard’s warning about not having regrets, I did not see any way to avoid that outcome. Even if I did not “look back”, it was hard to know how to move forward.

After listening to me, Kangas leaned in a bit and, with a smile, said: “Kierkegaard was an idiot. He should have gotten married”. What?! Kangas went on to explain something that has stayed with me ever since. He pointed out that sometimes purity of heart is knowing that willing one thing requires being invested in a bunch of stuff that often cuts against each other in our daily lives. The goal is to do it all with an eye toward what matters regardless of the situation. The “either/or” that defines Kierkegaard’s work, Kangas taught me, was not either to do philosophy or to get married. It was, instead, and more deeply, a matter of either being fully invested in something that makes everything that you do resound with significance, or losing yourself in the crowd as you keep trying a series of alternatives in the effort to distract from the emptiness that overruns it all. Misunderstanding the existential either/or as a matter of just contingent external alternatives ultimately amounts to the despair of the aesthetic life in which nothing is grounded in anything beyond itself. Everything is immediate and, as such, fleeting, transitory, and ultimately meaningless.

Kierkegaard himself expresses this distinction between the aesthetic either/or of transitory foci and the existential either/or of faithful living. Life requires, he notes, that one be allowed to grow in the soil where one really belongs, but that is not always so easy to find. In this respect there exist fortunate creatures who have such a decided inclination in a particular direction that they faithfully follow the path once it is laid out for them without ever falling prey to the thought that perhaps they ought to have followed an entirely different path. There are others who let themselves be influenced so completely by their surroundings that it never becomes clear to them in what direction they are really striving. (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 3)

Notice here that Kierkegaard is, still at only 22 years old, already announcing the pressures that attend being lost in the “crowd”. He understands the importance of overcoming the influence of what Friedrich Nietzsche terms “the herd” and Martin Heidegger terms “the they”. Longing to be one of the “fortunate” ones who are devoted to “one thing” such that they faithfully cultivate a singular will, Kierkegaard goes on to cry out, in what I take to be an incredibly honest admission in the face of the crowd: “Naturally every person desires to work according to his abilities in this world, but it follows from this that he wishes to develop his abilities in a particular direction, namely, in that which is best suited to him as an individual. But which is that? Here I am confronted with a big question mark” (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 4). Almost simultaneously channeling Nietzsche’s claim about questions and question marks being everywhere (i.e., life outstrips philosophy), and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s proclamation that we can always do otherwise, Kierkegaard declares: “Here I stand like Hercules—not at a crossroads—no, but at a multitude of roads, and therefore it is all the harder to choose the right one” (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 4).

Grappling with the difficulty of how to decide what to do when he was compelled by a variety of alternatives, he notes that “perhaps it is my misfortune in life that I am interested in far too many things rather than definitely in any one thing” (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 4). It is at this point that Kierkegaard does something decisive that I believe lies, to some degree, dormant in his thinking until he returns to it explicitly in “Purity of Heart”. He
vulnerably admits that his “interests are not all subordinated to one but are all coordinate” (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 4). Here, he clearly distinguishes what I will term the existential either/or as a better option than the aesthetic either/or. It is not, ultimately, about which course of study he prefers, but about where he will anchor the significance of whatever direction he chooses. It is not, finally, a matter of this or that, but of from where our choice of this or that derives its singular importance.

Although I will be primarily focusing on the differences between the existential and the aesthetic in this essay, it is worth noting that the aesthetic mode of living is not unique in leading to such despair. If we attempt to overcome the aesthetic despair by sliding to a problematic notion of the ethical, such that we now see everything as only ever significant as an instance of the universal, then we might overcome the distraction of contingent alternatives, but this comes at the cost of losing all existential traction. I want to make clear here that by “the ethical” I am thinking of the notion of it in Kierkegaard’s thought that is actually a reflection of Hegelian Sittlichkeit (and defended exclusively by pseudonyms), rather than what we might term a properly Kierkegaardian ethics.

That said, we will begin to see such a Kierkegaardian conception of ethics emerge in our eventual consideration of “willing the good” in the following sections. Accordingly, Kierkegaard’s notion of “the good” in “An Occasional Discourse”, should be understood as consistent with the view presented in Works of Love (Kierkegaard 1995), and to some extent found in the “ethico-religious” defended by Climacus in the Postscript (Kierkegaard 1992). Nonetheless, problematic conceptions of the ethical (e.g., as defended by Judge Wilhelm and challenged by Silentio) risk overstating the role of the universal in moral decision. In brief, the singularity of decision itself would fall away in the face of just an interchangeability of moral data. Yet, this fact reveals the despair of the Hegelian ethical life in which everything matters only insofar as it is really reducible to something else (viz., all of history is really just the particular manifestation of the progress of Spirit, etc.). If the “ethical” goal is to minimize our singularity in the name of more fully inhabiting the universal social role that we are called to play, how, then, are we to find ultimate joy in the face of the fragmentary and contingent specifics of our lived existence? Here, we find the inverse of the basic issue that we faced in the aesthetic either/or. Namely, when confronting the shared problems of radical particularity (aesthetics) and abstract universality (ethics) we are propelled beyond pithy slogans and into the hard work of faithfulness. Purity of heart requires that the Hegelian din of the crowd begins to lose volume as selfhood emerges as a task irreducible to universalizable social identities (ethics) and also external accomplishments (aesthetics).

Having now been married to Vanessa for as many years (22) as I was old when I had that fateful conversation with David Kangas, I often have similar sorts of conversations with my own students who, upon reading Kierkegaard, get excited about the importance of the singular will, but quickly assume that it is a decision among aesthetic historical alternatives. Which major? What girlfriend or boyfriend? Which internship? What study away program? Now finding myself in the role for them that Kangas played for me, I tell them that the key is to realize that the “thing” to which we turn in order to frame the options as options in the first place is the real existential either/or that is in play when it comes to cultivating the singular will. Do we “will one thing” such that our selfhood becomes shaped by the devotion to such a standard, or do we appeal to various standards depending on what suits our fancy? The goal is to find the virtuous mean between the abstraction of the universal and the particularity of externality. The virtue of the singular will, as we will see, is that it invites a lived investment in being properly directed—such that our character/selfhood is anchored in the necessity of decision, but an awareness that not just anything can be chosen. It matters that we choose wisely, even if there are no divine guarantees available to applaud our decision.

Thanks to Kangas’s words that day, I proposed to Vanessa and also kept reading Kierkegaard (though I probably made a mistake taking several of his books on our honey-moon!). I learned that what matters most is seeking to cultivate the virtue of a singular will.
while avoiding the vices of misunderstanding such willing as either excessively particular or deficiently universal. Getting clear on the difference between such virtue and vice is crucial if we are properly to understand Kierkegaard’s “An Occasional Discourse”. More importantly, though, it is crucial if we are to apply his discourse to our lived practice.

3. Empty Formalism and the Vice of Busyness

Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits (of which “An Occasional Discourse” focusing on the notion of “purity of heart” is the first part) was written immediately following “The Corsair Affair” and, as such, reflects an incredible awareness of the fickleness that defines external applause. The trajectory of the text moves from a focus on how to achieve purity of heart, to a discussion of what we can learn from the lilies and birds about being a human being, and then concludes by considering the role of suffering in Christian existence. What runs through all three parts of the text is an abiding concern with the possibility of joy. Kierkegaard’s own agonizing experience during The Corsair Affair did not lead him to abandon the possibility of joy because of his suffering, but to dig even deeper into what it means to find joy as the enactment of faithfulness.

Interestingly, Howard and Edna Hong quote Eduard Geismar as saying that he is “of the opinion that nothing of what [Kierkegaard] has written is to such a degree before the face of God” as “An Occasional Discourse”. Although I certainly understand this sentiment and have often recommended this text (along with For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself! and Practice in Christianity) as excellent places to start for getting a sense of Kierkegaard’s mature thought, I actually think that Geismar’s phrasing gets it backwards. This text is not best described as where Kierkegaard stands before the face of God, but rather the text where he stands before his reader as most exposed in his own bare humanity. After all, it is a discourse offered on the occasion of a confession—the occasion more than any other where we are most vulnerable and honest with ourselves and others. The crucial thing, though, is that Kierkegaard understands the depth of his, and our, humanity as fundamentally anchored in the relation to God.

The face of God shows up for Kierkegaard most profoundly when we are wrecked by the emptiness offered by the world. It is in this sense that the author of the “Ultimatum” at the end of Either/Or II can say that it is an “upbuilding thought” to realize that “in relation to God we are always in the wrong” (Kierkegaard 1987b, pp. 335–54). We are best able to inhabit what it means to be who we are and were made to be only when we start from the fact of our relational humility (see Kierkegaard 1980). Until that brokenness sets in, we are deceived by the thought that we might just be able to find joy in ourselves and the fleeting pleasures offered by the crowd if we just tried hard enough to avoid the boredom of the aesthetics and the abstraction of the (Hegelian) ethical. All pretensions of self-sufficiency are rooted out when we fall back upon our own inability to save ourselves. This point is crucial for following the trajectory of Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits. We start with confession in order to develop the ears to hear the wisdom of the lilies and the birds, which then encourages us to rethink, and lean into, our sufferings. Only by engaging in this lived progression away from egoism can we genuinely become aware that finding value in externals will always leave us cold. Another way to put this might be that only in light of the virtue of humility can the virtue of the singular will begin to signify as such.

It is with this in mind that we can best understand the dedication of “An Occasional Discourse” and the fact that “it seeks that single individual, to whom it gives itself wholly, by whom it wishes to be received as if it had arisen in his own heart, that single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader, that single individual, who willingly reads slowly, reads repeatedly, and who reads aloud—for his own sake” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 5). Pay attention to the intentionality and purposiveness expected of the reader. The goal is not to understand the text as an object to be grasped, but to develop selfhood by wrestling with the text as an invitation. The single individual reads not to show off to others how much he has read, but “for his own sake”. The outcome is not meant to be a book report
or even a glowing recommendation of it in _Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews_, but rather more effectively to navigate one’s own humanity. It is standing exposed before God, in the confessional moment, that our humanity, our selfhood, our singularity can most likely avoid being lost in the crowd. We might go so far as saying, in an almost Heideggerian way, that this discourse does not simply pose questions to the reader, but puts the reader in question.

This focus on the humanity of the single individual, and thus what it means most deeply to be a human being, is made clear in the opening prayer:

Father in heaven! What is a human being without you! What is everything he knows, even though it were enormously vast and varied, but a disjointed snippet if he does not know you; what is all his striving, even though it embraced a world, but a job half done if he does not know you, you the one who is one and who is all! (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 7)

Kierkegaard effectively illustrates here that the reason to turn to God is because turning anywhere else leads to ruin. Notice also that he returns to the notion of “striving” that we saw in his early journal entries. But now, the striving is not simply toward a truth that is true for him, but toward knowledge of God in the attempt to achieve some form of authentic self-awareness. God is named here at the outset as the condition by which all human effort gains any meaning. This is the key to everything that follows. Only because of God, or what Kierkegaard will term “the Eternal”, does finitude gain its significance. Our humanity resounds as meaningful when our will is singularly oriented toward that which names everything else as of secondary importance.

The problem, though, is that it is unbelievably hard to know what it looks like to will the eternal given that, in almost every case, our will is concretely directed toward the empirical contingencies of aesthetic desire. And when we attempt to overcome such distraction, we often do so by turning to an abstract problematic conception of an ethical universal that just further separates us from the lived traction that singularly willing the eternal is meant to foster. It is here that we can see the potential problem of “empty formalism” that attends the singular will. I can only be singular in my willing by willing something, but the something that Kierkegaard encourages us to will—viz., the eternal—seems not to be of much help when it comes to making actual daily choices. Sure, I should will the eternal, but how does that help me know whether I should get married or not? How does willing the eternal help me decide between majoring in philosophy or sociology? Why would willing the eternal make a difference in my life that is all too overwhelmed by the pressures of making it to a paycheck at the end of the month?

On the one hand, either the eternal is willed as instantiated in some concrete particular, but then it does not seem to be very eternal after all, or it is eternal (as universal abstraction) and never confused with particular choices, but then it does not seem to give us any actual guidance for how to live. We seem to be faced with an empty formalism such that if willing the eternal has any content then it is not eternal, but if it is eternal, then it is unhelpful for living. I propose that we understand this as a quasi-Aristotelian problem of navigating the vice of excessive determinacy as well as the vice of deficient indeterminacy. Reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s early search for a truth that was true for him, we might now ask: _of what good is it to have a pure heart if it has no practical implications for my life?_ Perhaps leaning into the Hegelian idea of such an empty formalism as attending Kant’s notion of “the good will”, Kierkegaard immediately equates the notion of willing the eternal with willing the good: “the person who in truth wills only one thing can will only the good, and the person who wills only one thing when he wills the good can will only the good in truth” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 24). But, yet again, what is “the good”? And if one is to will it “in truth,” then it needs both to be more than an abstract concept and also to be irreducible to concrete particulars. It seems we have not made much headway. We remain in need of a virtuous mean whereby the singular will can avoid the extremes in both directions.
Kierkegaard does offer at least some suggestion as to how one might go about distinguishing between the “one thing” and that which only seems to be so unified: “The person who wills one thing that is not the good is actually not willing one thing; it is an illusion, a semblance, a deception, a self-deception that he wills only one thing—because in his innermost being he is, he must be, double-minded” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 25). Double-mindedness is presented as the vicious alternative (in both directions) to the virtue of the singular will now understood as something of a mean between those bad options. And yet, the question just returns: what exactly does it mean to will the good such that one could avoid being double-minded? Well, the closest Kierkegaard comes to offering a specific answer is when he puts some alternatives out of bounds as non-options. As he explains, the good cannot be some specific external phenomenon held in esteem by the crowd, “because pleasure and honor and wealth and power and all that is of the world is only seemingly one thing” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 26; emphasis added). Before moving on, it is important not to miss the value of his claim here. Whatever it means singularly to will the good, it cannot mean just to will anything. Even if there is some relativism that would locate will as singular not only in relation to what is willed, but also in relation to the self who wills it, this relativism cannot be absolute.

If the good cannot be “of this world”, then, it stands to reason given Kierkegaard’s longstanding distinction between temporality and eternity, it must be the stuff of eternity. Yet, it still does not seem like we have gotten very far. To achieve purity of heart, one must avoid double-mindedness by willing one thing, but that one thing must be the eternal in order not to fall prey to the deception of external acclaim. The idea is that if we are willing anything “of this world” then we are actually willing the applause, celebration, and comparative status offered by our society. Hearkening to the distinction in Works of Love (Kierkegaard 1995) between preferential love and neighbor love, Kierkegaard here complicates the way in which preferential love is not necessarily problematic. What matters is that our preferences be properly oriented. To prefer external acclaim amounts to double-mindedness because whatever we will in order to achieve it will always be historically fleeting. Perhaps I claim singularly to will to be an excellent musician (listen to the crowd cheer!), or to be an excellent athlete (here comes the Sports Illustrated cover!), or to be a successful entrepreneur (Forbes 500 list, anyone?). Although all of these might be noble pursuits for one’s temporal existence, they cannot be ultimately willed as the “one thing” because they only ever open onto something else that now distracts me from the singularity of the eternal. This distraction, I think, amounts to the fact that in double-mindedness we are thrown back onto ourselves in problematically egoistic ways—notice the comparative way in which all of these activities get framed (viz., I am excellent and worthy of applause precisely because I am better than the others). The eternal, alternatively, always draws us out of ourselves in relation to an Other that eschews all comparison and stands, absolutely. The eternal admits of no comparison.

I acknowledge that this all sounds compelling, yet, here we are, again, without much clarity about how one would enact it as a lived practice. Even if we know that some things are off the table, we appear to be faced with only a negative definition. Almost admitting the problem, Kierkegaard notes that there can be no experimental method for judging whether one is willing one thing or not—there simply is not enough time to run through all the options for what one could will. In what I consider the most telling passage in the entire text, Kierkegaard presents the difficulty he faces quite explicitly. Let me quote him at length:

To will only one thing—but is this not bound to become a lengthy discussion? If anyone is really to consider this matter, must he not first examine one by one every goal that a person can set for himself in life, designate one by one all the many things that a person can will? And if this were not enough, since considerations of this sort easily become run-of-the-mill, must he not try willing one thing after the others in order to find out which one thing it is that he can will if it is a matter of willing only one thing? Indeed, if anyone would begin in this matter, he certainly would never be finished; or rather how would it be possible
that he could finish when he expressly started out on the wrong road and still continued to proceed further and further on the road of error that leads to the good only in a lamentable way—namely, if the traveler turns around and goes back, for just as the good is only one thing, so all roads lead to the good, even the road of error—if the one who turned around goes back on the same road. (Kierkegaard 1993, pp. 24–25)

Evidently there is no way, via scientific rigor, to discover the “one thing”. The singular will is not a phenomenon available for such objective analysis. The reasons that Kierkegaard gives here are twofold. First, there simply is not enough time. Like Tristram Shandy, there would be no way to consider every option because the concrete particulars available to be chosen actively change as we live in relation to them. But, second, even if there were enough time, in practice, such an approach would be, in principle, misguided. Here I find it instructive to consider Kierkegaard’s use of the metaphor of being lost and only getting increasingly lost until we return to where we initially went off the trail. In other words, so long as we think that we can achieve the singular will through the process of accumulation, we will remain attached to the aesthetic either/or as definitive for our evaluative judgment. Yet, that approach misses the point. When it comes to the singular will, more is not better, and it might not even be more. For this reason, Kierkegaard turns to a discussion of freedom in relation to the good. The idea here is that so long as we are convinced of our own ability to save ourselves, we will inevitably be trapped in relation to a myriad of options—all of which represent a false choice.

In the hope of finding a way forward, we must realize that worry about empty formalism is insurmountable if we do not change the register at which we ask about how to recognize the “one thing”. As Kangas showed me, we must not confuse the one thing as a matter of choosing this or that, but instead realize that it is a choice about the stakes of choosing in the first place. Drawing on analytic epistemology, we might say that it is akin to the problem of the criterion. The real question is not about what counts as X, but what counts as the standard by which to judge X-ness. With this idea in mind, we should notice that Kierkegaard helpfully qualifies his distinction between the temporal/worldly and the eternal. “The worldly in its essence”, he notes, “is not one thing since it is the nonessential; its so-called unity is no essential unity but an emptiness that the multiplicity conceals” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 29). This is crucial. The singular will, in order to be truly singular, must not be directed toward anything nonessential. This is why nothing in the aesthetic register of concrete particulars will ever satisfy. Alternatively, abstraction fails the test of essentiality and so problematic notions of the ethical will also fall short. In contrast to both extremes, the eternal names the eternal as that which shows up identically as essential regardless of the phenomenal manifestation.

To will the eternal, which just is to will the good, is not ultimately characterized by the specifics of its instantiation, but by the existential dynamics that accompany willing it. Reminiscent of the how/what distinction developed by Climacus, whereby, I believe, there is no hard conflict between the “how” and the “what”, but instead an encouragement to see them as mutually informing each other, Kierkegaard spells out a few such attributes as focused on the interaction of how we will (singularly) and what is, then, willed (the good). The first characteristic anchors how we are to will the one thing and the remaining characteristics fill in what we can expect to follow if we get the how right. First, singularly willing the eternal dismisses all concern for reward since it must be willed for its own sake (Kierkegaard 1993, pp. 37–40). Second, singularly willing the eternal roots out fear (Kierkegaard 1993, pp. 47–49). Third, singularly willing the eternal fosters deep and abiding freedom (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 51). Fourth, singularly willing the eternal leads to disregard for the opinion of others—due to their being lost in the world and its value system (Kierkegaard 1993, pp. 52–54). Finally, and most importantly, singularly willing the eternal rejects the idol of busyness (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 66). This last point is worth thinking through a bit more since it is a favorite idol of capitalistic societies craving consumption as a woefully inadequate replacement for genuine relationship and meaning.
Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness warrants an essay all its own, but as a summary of his view, consider the following passage:

in busyness there is neither the time nor the tranquility to acquire the transparency that is necessary for understanding oneself in willing one thing or for just temporarily understanding oneself in one’s unclarity. No, busyness—in which one continually goes further and further, and noise, in which the true is continually forgotten more and more, and the multitude of circumstances, incentives, and hindrances—continually makes it more impossible for one to gain any deeper knowledge of oneself. (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 67)

By “transparency”, one should think about the famous passage at the opening of The Sickness Unto Death (Kierkegaard 1980). There, we find selfhood as directed most essentially toward such transparency before God and oneself such that the goal is to, as Anti-Climacus writes, “rest transparently” (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 14). Such rest can be heard both in the Augustinian sense of finding peace in God and also in the sense of escaping the busyness that distracts us from realizing our own despair. The eternal offers peace because it allows busyness to show up as what it is: double-mindedness. Notice also the echoes of “crop rotation” whereby the only satisfaction is found in always getting more and more stuff, which just leads to actually finding less and less joy (see Kierkegaard 1987a, pp. 281–300). Moreover, the specific language is that of the opening of Fear and Trembling where Johannes de Silentio asks why everyone in our day wants to go “further than faith” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 7). His snarky comment that nobody has the courage to ask where it is that they are going resounds here in Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness. Everyone is so incredibly busy, but this busyness just brings them more stress, which leads them to get even busier. Further, in anticipation of the lessons learned from the lilies and the birds, busyness is inevitable in a world where no one knows how to be silent. One of the great underappreciated ideas in Kierkegaard’s authorship is what we might term a phenomenology of listening well (see Bowen 2024). When we learn to be silent, we learn to listen. When we learn to listen, we more learn who we essentially are. When we learn who we essentially are, we overcome the idolatry of what the world tells us we should be.

Although it might seem that we have made quite a bit of progress overcoming the charge of formalism, it is still not clear that we have discovered something like instruction on how to make decisions in the process of messy human life. In an impressively self-aware moment that hearkens back to his 22-year-old struggle for direction amidst the confusion of existence, Kierkegaard raises this objection to his own account:

If a person is to will the good in truth, he must will to do everything for the good. . . . Everything—but if everything is to be mentioned, will not this discourse easily become limitless in range, will it not become impossible to obtain a good grasp of all the diversities? And will not the discourse thereby become indefinite since the good can indeed require the most diverse things of different people, can sometimes require that a person shall leave his prestigious position and attire himself in lowliness, shall give away his possessions to the poor, shall not even dare to bury his father. . . . Therefore, instead of proliferating the details to the point of confusion and distraction, whereby also the status-competition of petty-mindedness is so easily brought to mind when one person thinks that by doing one thing he is doing more for the good than another who does something else, even though both of them, if according to the requirement they are doing everything, both are doing equally little—instead of proliferating the details, let us instead simplify all this in its essential unity and equality by saying that to will to do everything is: to will, in the decision, to be and to remain with the good, because the decision is precisely the decisive everything, just as it is the essential one thing. (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 79)

By announcing the problem so explicitly here, Kierkegaard also implicitly introduces the answer to it. When we do “everything” for the good, as demanded by the singular will,
we inevitably will face an impossible challenge figuring out what, specifically, to do. In other words, though we now have a sense of “how” to will it, and “what” is likely to follow from such willing, ambiguity remains regarding the content of our decisions. We know that we should not will power, fame, money, and worldly possessions, but that still leaves countless options available and apparently no firm guidance for how to choose among the options. Neither philosophy nor Vanessa looked very much like power and wealth, and yet how to choose? We have already seen that we similarly cannot turn to some sort of experimental analysis to provide clarity here since that misses the point altogether. So, what do we do?

4. Virtue Theory as a Kierkegaardian Resource

With the objection of empty formalism now in place, I want to offer some possible ways forward that are available in light of Kierkegaard’s analysis. It is here that thinking about the singular will as a kind of virtue really helps. There are three reasons that I find virtue theory to be such a benefit at this point. First, as we have already discussed to some extent, willing one thing must strike a kind of mean between the vicious excess of historical determinacy and the vicious deficiency of abstract universality. But, this mean cannot just be some sort of mushy compromise. It is instead the awareness that the temporal and the eternal must both be in play in faithful lived existence. Simply put, I can only will the eternal here and now. Only by choosing what to do with my finitude am I able to live a life that rejects the fleeting fame in the eyes of the crowd that inevitably results in the despair of double-mindedness. And yet, the “what” that I choose must be willed in a way that explicitly anchors my selfhood in “how” I relate to the eternal. Thinking about the singular will as a virtue to be developed over the course of one’s life speaks, second, to the way that the singular will should be understood as a kind of intellectual virtue akin to wisdom, humility, and honesty.

W. Jay Wood suggests that such intellectual virtues, “are deeply anchored habits of mind that contribute to the success of our many intellectual endeavors and ultimately to our ability to lead excellent lives” (Wood 1998, p. 7). Wood’s notion of an “excellent life”, I contend, can be viewed as similarly facilitated by singularly willing the eternal. As Kierkegaard says, it will likely lead to a life in which we avoid fear, find freedom and confidence, and reject the idol of busyness. Finally, understanding the singular will as a virtue that is developed habitually as we anchor ourselves in the “essential” invites an awareness that the task of “becoming a self” is implicitly also a matter of developing one’s character. It should come as no surprise that an emphasis on “will” as key to selfhood would be in line with this broadly Aristotelian conception of character development as the locus of moral life.

Understanding things this way allows for a compelling embrace of what Simone de Beauvoir (1976) sees as the inherent “ambiguity” of ethical decision. This awareness is crucial if we are to avoid sliding into an “anything goes” position whereby we face a new version of empty formalism: if anything can count, then it doesn’t matter much where one comes down. Famously, Alasdair MacIntyre turns to virtue theory as a resource in light of the moral nihilism that seems to follow from the awareness that “there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture” (MacIntyre 1984, p. 6). MacIntyre endorses virtue ethics for similar reasons that Wood recommends virtue epistemology: both discourses are flexible enough to realize that overly determinate algorithms for action and for thinking are unlikely to be adequate to the complexity of our embodied subjectivity. And yet, virtue ethics and epistemology refuse to abandon a concern for the good. The good just becomes more compatible with the ambiguity that attends our lived experience. I propose that we read Kierkegaard as working in this general vein as well.

For Kierkegaard, when it comes to singularly willing the good, we are all radically on equal footing. It is not finally about this or that object, but about being fully invested in whatever we do as anchored in what is essential. But the “essential” does put some things out of bounds (as we have already discussed) and brings other things to the foreground
as plausible options for our historical decision. This is why one cannot do more or less than any other when it comes to the singular will. One either wills *everything* or does not will the good. The eternal is not about concrete particulars, but about the orientation of our selfhood. As I said earlier, this discourse is where I find Kierkegaard to be at his most human. He highlights this focus on humanity when he notes that “there is a common human concern that is called upbuilding. It is not common like the projects in which the crowd clamors and makes noise, because each participant is essentially alone with himself, but yet in the highest and most comprehensive sense it is a common human concern” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 106). That which upbuilds does not operate according to the logic of the crowd, but instead singularizes us in solidarity with all others faced with the essential, and profoundly existential, either/or: either meaningful selfhood or meaningless crowd. There is no algorithm for achieving purity of heart. Instead, there is risk and yet Kierkegaard does provide us with what I take to be a helpful sense of direction. In faith, we must be oriented toward the eternal in order that whatever we do, we do it singularly (how)—as grounded in the eternal and upbuilt in our selfhood (what).

The real choice is not whether to start a company or not, say, but whether we will allow money and fame and power to dictate our value and determine the direction of our risk. The awareness of the shared human condition requires that we also keep this in mind when considering discrete options for action. Does this choice encourage others to live toward the eternal or to become distracted by double-mindedness? Does this direction foster neighbor love or unhealthy competition? Does this outcome lead to greater solidarity in light of finitude, such that genuine community can emerge, or does it confuse community for popularity? Ultimately, essentially, the question is whether we will be defined by the busyness (and business) of the world, or if we will relate to the world as non-ultimate:

The busy ones, who neither labor nor are burdened but are only busy, presumably think that they themselves have escaped if they themselves have avoided sufferings in life; therefore they do not wish to be disturbed by hearing about or thinking about terrible things. They have indeed escaped, they have also escaped having a view of life and have escaped into meaninglessness. (Kierkegaard 1993, pp. 106–7)

I love this passage because Kierkegaard rightly notes the deception that accompanies double-mindedness. By being double-minded, we deceive ourselves every time we think that what we do makes an *essential* difference. As double-minded, whatever we do we fail to rest transparently in the power that established us and, as such, we fail to enact the task that is faithfulness. That is, by being double-minded, our decisions are incapable of being ultimately virtuous because we have abandoned the constant task of becoming for the finished achievement of being.

Kierkegaard, thus, changes the framework from that of the worldly logic of aesthetics (and Hegelian ethics) to the eternal logic of faith. He is not, ultimately, essentially, interested in the question of what to do (marry or not, this or that major, what job to take, etc.), but instead in who to become. Accordingly, Kierkegaard may never tell us to get married (or to stay single), and he will not tell us whether to start the company (or to go to graduate school), but he does give us profound help in living on purpose. As his own quasi-existentialist version of the categorical imperative, Kierkegaard offers two questions that we must ask ourselves daily:

- “What kind of life is yours; do you will one thing in truth?” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 126)
- “Are you living in such a way that you are conscious of being a single individual?” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 127)

It might seem that Kierkegaard is out of step, here, with that earlier journal entry where he says he just needs to know what to do. And yet, I think that the apparent tension is not as troubling as we might initially think. Kierkegaard’s point is not that willing one thing eliminates the importance of our lived practice. Instead, it is a matter of affirming ourselves as single individuals rather than as members of the crowd. In this way, the
ultimate virtue of the singular will is found when we realize that when we relate ourselves to ourselves as single individuals, we exist in a “relationship in which you as a single individual relate yourself to yourself before God” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 129).

Standing before God is neither tantamount to a dismissal of the importance of human behavior nor a disregard for others. It is because we stand singularly before God that what we do matters (indeed, now whatever we choose is, essentially, worth doing). And, indeed, it is here that we might plausibly begin to fill in much more positive content regarding “the good” as anchored in the example of God’s love as manifest, Kierkegaard thinks, in the example and person of Jesus. Here texts like Works of Love, Practice in Christianity, For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself!, and in interesting ways all of his “communion discourses” stand as concrete considerations of Christian virtue.16

Rather than viewing Kierkegaard as having shifted in his view about the importance of what to do, we can better understand him as just highlighting that it was never really about what to do, as an exclusively historical question, but about who to be, as a virtuous entanglement of the how and the what as both implicated in our existence. As he makes clear, we do not stop going to work because we listen to the lilies and the birds. Instead, we now must ask ourselves: “In the course of your occupation, what is your frame of mind, how do you perform your work?” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 139). Similarly, the singular will does not result in a narrow self-concern. Egoistic values are fundamentally inconsistent with singularly willing the good. Rather, when we are upbuilt, we should then extend that invitation to others as also sharing the common human condition whereby the ultimate existential either/or is missed so easily amidst the temptations of worldly (double-minded) priorities. Kierkegaard, then, asks one final question:

And what is your frame of mind toward others? Are you in harmony with everyone—by willing one thing? Or are you divisively in a faction, or are you at loggerheads with everyone and everyone with you? Do you want for everyone what you want for yourself, or do you want the highest for yourself, for yourself and for yours, or that you and yours shall be highest? Do you do to others what you want others to do to you—by willing one thing? . . . Do you want a different law for yourself and for yours than for others; do you want to have your comfort in something different from that in which every human being unconditionally can and will be comforted? (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 144)

In a discourse so entirely devoted to cultivating the singular will, we should not miss that Kierkegaard ends by positioning us as single individuals before God and others. It is here that we return to aesthetic decisions about what to do given the relevant range of possibilities at a specific time in our life. It is here that we are thrown back onto the ethical requirements of occupying social positions and inhabiting the responsibilities that accompany them. It is here that we realize he does not overcome empty formalism by just landing us in radical indifference.

And yet, everything is changed. No longer are we lost in indecision, but we can now find rest in the awareness that our identity is not, ultimately/essentially dependent on making the right choice of major, lunch, or movie. Purity of heart is not achieved via being smarter or more accomplished, but both of those things are fine when properly oriented. We should not miss the fact that Kierkegaard often praises the “simple wise” person. When it comes to the essential, the eternal, the good, wisdom is not a result of long hours of study, but of humble investment in the task of becoming the single individual. This is not something accomplished, as Silencing says of faith, in days or weeks, but is, instead, a “task for a lifetime” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 14). As C. Stephen Evans rightly notes, Kierkegaardian spirituality is a matter of one’s being “accountable” (Evans 2019). We are, essentially, accountable to God and to others—hence the eternal significance of our temporal existence.

Purity of heart is to will one thing, but that “one thing” is not something that can be possessed and set alongside all the other things. Simply put, it is willing ourselves to care more about who we are becoming than about what car we drive along the way. And only then can we go visit the Toyota dealer in the right frame of mind.
5. Conclusions: Kierkegaard’s Humanity

It would be quite simple to say that although Kierkegaard almost ruined my marriage, David Kangas saved it. But this account would miss what is crucial. My juvenile misreading of Kierkegaard mistook the singular will for a numeric decision. Kangas invited me to see Kierkegaard’s humanity—his flawed, fragile, finite, and beautiful humanity. What I needed to hear was that Kierkegaard could be an idiot—just like me. And yet, just like me, Kierkegaard thinks it is important to see God in each decision that we make and, accordingly, to see the humanity of every person we encounter. Kangas taught me more than he could possibly have realized. He taught me to lean into what it means faithfully to be myself. Only as such can I walk faithfully with Vanessa. In that sense, then, the virtues of the singular will require that we learn to choose wisely about what is worthy of our worship.\(^\text{17}\)

We develop purity of heart when we abandon the idea that we will ever be pure enough, on our own, to be worthy of love.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

1. I am often struck by how detached the scholarship on existential philosophy seems to be. Of note is the way that the work of Søren Kierkegaard sometimes gets considered as if it were a matter of abstract speculation about concepts such as faith, life, love, and despair. And yet, Kierkegaard’s entire authorship is a long critique of approaching things that way. Indeed, one might wonder whether in doing so we fail to hear his claims about the way we should read his work: “slowly”, “repeatedly”, and “aloud” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 5). For my part, I think we Kierkegaardians should more often follow the encouragement of scholars such as Merold Westphal (1991, pp. 1–18) and Lorentzen and Marino (2020) to do philosophy more often in a personal mode where one’s own concrete existence is explicitly at stake—that is, to do it in the mode in which Kierkegaard himself wrote most often. That is my aim in this essay.

2. Exactly how to understand such knowledge of oneself such that one’s “calling” could be understood as such is certainly a complicated notion in Kierkegaard. Patrick Stokes (2015) offers a helpful consideration of the various ways that one might conceive personal identity—in relation to the task of “becoming a self”—in Kierkegaard. See also Anthony Rudd (2012) on the relation of selfhood and self-identity to the narrative constructed of our lives. For more on Kierkegaard and narrative identity, see also Davenport (2012).

3. For more on Kierkegaard and Levinas, see Westphal (2008) and Simmons and Wood (2008).

4. For an expanded account of how this multiplicity of others works in Levinasian philosophy, see Simmons (2019).

5. Although focusing on “The Gospel of Sufferings”, Kangas does think through this notion of how to navigate the complexities of human existence and the distractions that attend it in his essay “The Very Opposite of Becoming with Nothing”. See Kangas (2005).

6. I have elsewhere discussed the various forms of the ethical in Kierkegaard’s authorship. See Simmons (2011, pp. 67–89).

7. (Geismar 1927, vol. V, p. 11); as qtd in (Kierkegaard 1993, xiv). Given this assessment, it is a bit perplexing that the text has not received more attention in the scholarship. For some examples of direct considerations of it, see (Perkins 2005; Connell 2005; Hough 2005; Martin 2005; Nelson 2005; Olivares Bogeskov 2007; Phillips 2000; Munzer 2016; Bertman 1972; Houmark 2018; Walker 1972).

8. See Podmore (2011) for a sustained discussion of what it means to stand “before God”.

9. Here I find Lippitt’s (2020) account of the relation between humility and hope to be instructive.

10. For more on the relation of God-knowledge and self-knowledge, see Cockayne (2017).

11. For a sustained account of Kierkegaard’s take on self-love, see Lippitt (2013). See also (Lippitt 2020; Evans 2004; Mooney 2008).

12. I find significant resonance between Kierkegaard’s move here and Jean-Luc Marion’s (1991) distinction between the icon that throws us back onto ourselves in egoism and the idol that pulls us beyond our egoism in a humble relation to the transcendent.

13. For a more extended consideration of the question “What is worthy of your finitude?” see my book Camping with Kierkegaard: Faithfulness as a Way of Life (Simmons 2023).
Here I am drawing on the notion of “worship” developed by David Foster Wallace (2009).

References


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