Article

Kierkegaard on “Sobriety”: Christian Virtues, the Ethical, and Triadic Dyads

John J. Davenport

Department of Philosophy, Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458, USA; davenport@fordham.edu

Abstract: In her recent book, Kierkegaard and Religion: Personality, Character, and Virtue, Sylvia Walsh argues that Kierkegaard is not a virtue ethicist in the most common senses associated with eudaimonism, which he understands as enlightened self-interest. However, recent disputes about whether the aspects of “character” that Kierkegaard praises are virtues rely partly on whether the “ethical stage” in Kierkegaard’s moral psychology remains important within Christian faith, even when most strictly conceived in his late works. This in turn depends on how we understand the difficult works–grace relation in Kierkegaard’s conception of Christian faith. In this essay, I argue that the ethical existence sphere remains important even though, in works like Practice in Christianity and Judge for Yourself!, Kierkegaard argues that Christian faith is not a mere outgrowth or natural “development” of ethical earnestness or care—hardening the break with immanence that he introduced in earlier works. While he emphasizes a total transformation, a break from natural moral consciousness, and describes Christian qualities as a reversal of ordinary human expectations, there remains an underlying continuity with the attitudes and stances constitutive of the ethical and religiousness A (as existence spheres). This becomes visible when we identify three aspects found across the aesthetic, ethical, and Christian religious versions of major concepts in Kierkegaard’s work, including positive character terms. I use “sobriety” as discussed in Judge for Yourself! as my main example. This analysis confirms several important points advanced by Lee Barrett on the works–grace relation. The paradoxical standoff between ethical effort and grace is bridged to some extent by the continuing significance of the ethical “sphere” as a part of the “religious”, even in Kierkegaard’s late works and journal entries.

Keywords: virtue; sobriety; redoubling; aesthetic; ethical; religious; faith; grace; works; God; striving

1. Introduction: Framing the Problem

In her recent book, Kierkegaard and Religion: Personality, Character, and Virtue, Sylvia Walsh argues that Kierkegaard is not a virtue ethicist, especially if virtue is understood as essential to achieving “human flourishing (eudaimonia)” as the goal for “a good, rich, and fulfilling life”. His “upbuilding” discourses and later religious works do focus on “qualities or conditions such as grace, forgiveness, new life, faith, hope, love, joy, and consolation that characterize Christian existence...” (Walsh 2018, pp. 74–76, 119). But, although she rightly notes that having a theory of virtues is not sufficient for an author to count as a virtue ethicist, Walsh warns that describing any of these conditions as “Christian virtues” can be misleading.

By contrast, I have argued that this debate is driven partly by an underlying disagreement about whether the “ethical stage” in Kierkegaard’s moral psychology—and the human effort and ethically informed striving for which it is a generic label—remains ineliminably important throughout Kierkegaard’s writings, even though it needs to be incorporated into/transformed by faith (as Fear and Trembling implies, e.g., at FT 70; see Davenport 2019a, pp. 230–36). In this essay, however, I will affirm one of Walsh’s main reasons for doubting the “virtue ethicist” label—namely that, for Kierkegaard, even when our efforts are ethically motivated, they never count as our achieving progress towards our
perfection or eternal happiness (Walsh 2018, p. 149). Instead, through guilt and suffering, these efforts reinforce our nothingness before God (CUP 549). Yet, following Lee Barrett, I will also argue that Kierkegaard equally insists that human ethical choice and commitment are indispensable in the ongoing existence of one trying to live in faith. Even in Kierkegaard’s last book written before the articles constituting the Attack on Christendom, qualities of character involved in ethical striving within faith are conceived in ways largely continuous with their portrayals in Either/Or, Two Ages, the Concept of Anxiety, Stages on Life’s Way, the Postscript, and his discourses that speak spiritually without relying on distinctively Christian claims.¹

This argument does not intend to refute Walsh’s most important points. On the contrary, she also emphasizes “the cultivation of religious inwardness, earnestness, subjectivity” involved in forming “personality” and substantive character as activities that we do (Walsh 2018, p. 175), even if we eventually recognize that this happens only with grace. Rather, my goal here is to show that we can discern this continuing relevance of the ethical (and ethico-religious) “existence spheres” or life views even beneath several formulas in Kierkegaard’s late work that starkly oppose several qualities often associated with laudable prudence in non-Christian virtue ethics with “negative qualifications” essential to living in Christian faith, such as awareness of sin and the ongoing risk of offense² (Walsh 2018, p. 176). Although the opposite of sin is faith rather than “virtue” (Walsh 2009, p. 104), this is because sin is more than (mere) vice, and faith is more than virtue: from the participant’s perspective, faith is experienced as a second movement embedding their ethical efforts and guilt, rather than as passivity on top of prior mere passivity. This helps us to avoid misimpressions that Kierkegaard’s late works may give, and, in the process, makes it possible to envision a genus of ethically “virtuous” dispositions (that are beneficial to their agent and to others) which comport with his strictest form of Christian religiousness.

These misimpressions arise both because the theme of three “existence spheres” or fundamental life orientations is only explicit in the pseudonymous works through the Postscript, and because Kierkegaard’s writings seem to shift around 1847 towards lumping everything but Christian “religiousness B”, understood in the strictest way, together as “the world”. This shift becomes increasingly pronounced in the signed discourses leading up to Practice in Christianity, published in September 1850, which shocked many clergymen and civic leaders loyal to Bishop Mynster in particular.³ Even in that work, though, “the Moral” at the end of Part I says that the person humbled by recognizing the strictest Christian ideal in confession normally ought to return to exactly the sort of finite works and family life—including the virtues of loving family members—that Judge William praised (PC 67), even though they are not our highest loves.⁴

Moreover, as I have argued in previous essays, something like the progressive relationship between the existential stages (and their subcategories) implicitly informs Anti-Climacus’s analysis of sin in Sickness Unto Death, which exhibits more continuity with earlier pseudonymous works than is often realized (Davenport 2013). This is reason to ask whether the same holds in other writings later in Kierkegaard’s “second authorship”—though perhaps only up to The Moment. More generally, does the continuing importance of “the ethical” entail a valid sense in which the qualities of character praised in the earlier pseudonymous works and accompanying signed discourses are virtues, rather than merely “glittering vices”, from the strictest Christian perspective? (Walsh 2018, p. 97). To begin making a case for this position, I must further qualify my view that “cumulative” relationships always hold between Kierkegaard’s existential categories, according to which the religious stage in general preserves within it transformed versions of both “the aesthetic” and “the ethical”, and religiousness B also preserves aspects of religion A (Davenport 2008).

My cumulative principle needs to be nuanced because in his later, explicitly Christian writings, Kierkegaard mobilizes many examples, described with a panoply of powerful metaphors, to show that authentically “Christian existence”—both inwardly and in social life—is not a mere outgrowth or natural “development” of ethical earnestness or care. These writings develop and further emphasize this break introduced in the Fragments
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and *Postscript* with the theme that a fully faithful relation to God cannot be a (Hegelian teleological) “necessary development of immanence” (CUP 543).{[5]} Walsh is certainly right on this much. Contrast Aristotle’s *phronēmos*, who grows more expert in ethical discernment and more habituated in devotion to *kalon* or noble ends, and to balance in related emotions and affects, over time. For this person, sober reasoning about circumstances leads to self-confidence in their own goodness (megalopsychia) attained through beneficial actions that should be publicly lauded, even when they are not. {[5]} Instead, Kierkegaard increasingly emphasizes a total transformation, a break from natural moral consciousness, an inversion or reversal of ordinary human expectations, and a “redoubling” (*Fordobling*) in which strictly Christian qualities and attitudes at first look like their opposites (Walsh 2018, pp. 118–19).

Such an emphasis on reversal can certainly make it sound like we are required to “die to” all universal-ethical duties, or that all stances earlier put under “the ethical” label are actually errors arising from natural human attitudes, our better natural motives, and beliefs in our powers of agency, all of which the true Christian must totally invert and cast off. On this view, the quickening of spirit through ethical choice that Judge William advocated in *Either/Or* was merely an illusion of “the world” with which Christianity is in essential conflict. But I will argue that this appearance is an artifact of the dialectical relations between phenomena (and their corresponding concepts) through which Kierkegaard describes how the different values valorized in each stage or existence sphere appear when looking backwards from a strict Lutheran viewpoint emphasizing the doctrine of justification by faith rather than through “works”.

Put differently, authentic Christianity brings into religious faith the ultra-demanding paradox that we are absolutely required to regard our ethical efforts as nothing before God, while *still* being absolutely required to make these efforts to the uttermost. This is in addition to trust in God’s miraculous capacity to fulfill ethical ideals in accord with divine promises, which distinguishes religiousness generally (types A and B) from infinite resignation (which religion A still embeds). The relationship between these two aspects of strict Christian faith is too paradoxical to be described as simple cumulation (like nested circles), but that idea still continues in a more paradoxical guise within this Christian existence as Kierkegaard understood it.

The next section sketches a basis for this view, drawing on insights in two related essays by Lee Barrett and a couple of further points from Paul Martens. Section 3 then illustrates the dialectical form of the Christian paradox by focusing on the account of “being sober” in *Judge for Yourselves* (written in 1851–1852 but published posthumously) as a representative case from Kierkegaard’s more strictly Christian writings. The last sections then employ these findings in order to defend the cogency of a qualified sort of “humble virtue” within Kierkegaard’s second authorship.

2. Reframing the Ethical-Religious Relation in Terms of Works and Grace

In an early essay on *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!*, Barrett shows that Kierkegaard was intent on maintaining Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, while nevertheless restoring Christian good works—which were emphasized in *Works of Love* and other writings from 1848–1851—to their essential roles, in accord with the “third use of the law” in Lutheran theology (Barrett 2002, pp. 77–110). Barrett begins with Kierkegaard’s view, emphasized early in *For Self-Examination* (published in September 1851), that Luther was contending with a society in which people strongly felt the need for forgiveness of their individual moral failings, but had been confused into imagining that they could earn it through works—especially by the types of self-denial emphasized by monastic movements and the Catholic priesthood. In mid-19th century Denmark, Kierkegaard thought that the main problem was almost the opposite: deluded into imagining that baptism and citizenship had made them Christians, most people mistook this cheap status without real confession as “an excuse for indolence” (Barrett 2002, pp. 82–83, commenting on FSE 15-24; compare NB 28:82, KJN 9, p. 281). In better cases, this meant merely
getting on with their customary duties as officers, servants, husbands, clergymen, etc., with consciences troubled only when they violated these social standards. So, Kierkegaard says, we need to reemphasize more demanding works as a corrective.

Thus, as Garff explains, N. F. S. Grundtvig saw in *Practice in Christianity* a recognition that even encouragement to develop “hidden inwardness” could serve as an excuse for attempting very little outwardly—venturing no sacrifice of material interests—that could raise suspicion in others that one might really be trying to live as a Christian. Such bad-faith inwardness would be “the empty posturings of a pretended piety” (Garff 2005, pp. 664–65), which imagines that the goal is to merely avoid any outward acts or works that might set one apart.

But, as his response to A. G. Rudelbach (a Grundtvigian theologian) showed, Kierkegaard was also contending with the socially smaller yet still significant danger posed by enthusiastic “sectarians” who were at least personally appropriating the Word, but misunderstanding it as a call to improve “external institutions” of all sorts (Garff 2005, p. 663). Hence, Kierkegaard’s simultaneous determination to combat “spiritual pride” and the “self-righteousness” of “zealots” (see Davenport 2019b)—whose mistakes differed from the medieval monastics, but still involved misunderstanding the place of works—by reaffirming that, despite their importance, good works do not establish “a true relationship with God” (Barrett 2002, pp. 84, 87). First, human works will always fail to fulfill “the standard of perfect love” (this much is clear even at the limit of religiousness A, in the “totality of guilt” section of the *Postscript*). Second, even perfect works would still have to become as nothing before God in order for their human agent to fully appropriate the need for grace. In both these ways, even saints must be humbled (Barrett 2002, pp. 85–86). As Kierkegaard puts it in a formula, “Christianity’s requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required—that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nevertheless grace” (FSE 17).

The outlines of this duality have become fairly well known after decades of scholarship placed Kierkegaard anywhere along the spectrum from total Fichtean Pelagianism, through semi-Pelagian and Synergist positions, to complete predestinarian/monergist, as Barrett has explained (Barrett 2021). Yet it may be a little harder to see just how fine a line Kierkegaard is walking here, or how multilayered his implied conception becomes. For we seem to have at least two “movements” or steps in logical (if not chronological) sequence here.

First, we have sublevels of law, ranging from “cultural mores” and “natural law” to the revealed prototype of Christ’s exemplar life (Barrett 2002, pp. 89–90), which correspond roughly to the first universal-natural ethics and the “second” universal-agapic ethics of the pseudonymous books and *Works of Love*. Readers and commentators often imagine that there is no continuity here, i.e., that the “second ethics” of neighbor love is just a total inversion of natural law and natural virtues. But Kierkegaard emphasized this contrast as a rhetorical strategy against “Christendom”. In fact, he always maintained that even in the fallen and unredeemed state, some innate aptitude for tracking the Good, however imperfect, remains: worldly people often have “a highly developed eye for genuine generosity, selflessness, etc.” even though they may use such discernment mainly to envy or despise these good qualities in others (NB 11:26; KJN 6, 18; compare NB 11:32; KJN 6, 21 on categorical or unconditioned goods). Judge for Yourself! agrees, affirming that every sane adult, whatever their level of intelligence, has enough capacity for ethical knowledge (JFY 118; compare NB 19:12, KJN 7, p. 343). This is why we secretly harbor “a suspicion” that “we are not really sober”—i.e., because we cannot bear to face the hard truth about how unethical we really are. For “personally to strive to be the honest, upright, and unselfish one” would be such a hard “effort” (JFY 113). These are virtues recognized by natural ethics, even if Christianity infinitely enhances what they require. The challenge is to develop this self-suspicion by wanting or willing to have a conscience.

Second, as Barrett says, “the law stimulates the sense of moral failure that makes... gratitude for God’s forgiving grace [psychologically] possible”. Even if social and natural law are not enough to break down our fallen resistance, the infinite perfectionist demand of
neighbor love, as personified by Christ, will break through—although it can also provoke offense instead of confession. This sense of failure is the condition “that makes awareness of the need for grace possible”. Only then can an individual with an awakened conscience grasp the need for “justification by grace” (Barrett 2002, pp. 83, 90; compare p. 86; Walsh 2018, pp. 106, 122). This is why, as Paul Martens explains in an insightful essay on the Holy Spirit in For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!, a human person’s dying to the world is first elicited through her making some modest effort to do good works (Martens 2002, p. 202) or, more rigorously, to follow the divine law—before that agent has really come to recognize many of her moral shortcomings or made any authentic confession of sin. For this is the “lowest form of godly piety” that orients her towards “inward deepening” (FSE 24). As Martens aptly puts it, “the apostles did not learn to love [directly] through their suffering, but they took the first step” (Martens 2002, p. 207) with Christ’s inspiration.

This in turn is compatible with the theme, going all the way back to Either/Or II, that in order to deeply appreciate the importance even of customary norms—and certainly of natural law—a person must make some earnest effort to begin ethically-guided choices (which will seem to come from their agency). This is why, in Christian terms, it is precisely those who have worked hardest to love and care for their neighbors who can perceive most clearly that they still remain infinitely short of the mark and so confess this nothingness before God (while also taking to heart that this very humility is a symptom of grace working in them). As Kierkegaard explained in a remark deleted from the margin of the final manuscript of Judge for Yourself!, God’s infinity is such that, in comparison, “any human striving, even the most honest” becomes “nothing, wretchedness, abomination” in its inadequacy (JFY 251). This is what we discover in bringing our efforts before God, which is why we cannot, without grace, even will to measure ourselves by the highest standards of all (Christ as prototype).

Clearly, there is more subtlety in this dialectic than is indicated, for example, in the bivalent formula of a mid-1849 journal entry saying that the human race divides into “two classes of people” that worldliness conflates, namely “[w]recked subjects, fallen persons—and those who seriously and truly live for an idea” (NB 11:16; KJN 6, 14). For this dichotomy is roughly the distinction between aestheticism and the infinite pathos found in ethical striving and religiousness A and B, whereas the Christian dialectic has faith/grace in two places with ethical striving in the middle.

This idea is found repeatedly in Kierkegaard’s writings after 1848, and in numerous journal passages. For example, on hearing the teaching that it is really God working in us to whom the credit goes for our good works, the person seeking faith “does not sink into inactivity” but “immediately goes to work…otherwise he does not really see that it is God who sows and reaps and gathers into barns” (JFY 186, my italics). Likewise, the gambling addict who says to himself, “tonight you are going to leave it alone” no matter what happens tomorrow, has a fighting chance because he is making a start now, unlike the one who deludes himself by thinking, “okay, tomorrow I will stop” (FSE 45).

Similarly, in a late 1850 journal entry on Christianity as “a believing” corresponding to a “quite definite kind of existing, imitation [of Christ]”, Kierkegaard says that faith can precede imitation, but only insofar as action that tries at least partially to fulfill “Christian ethics (the unconditional)” brings one into a situation where “for the first time there can…properly be talk of becoming a believer” (NB 21:16; KJN 8, 16). We might gloss this as follows: a quasi-faith of sorts—in which Kierkegaard would see grace already working—is needed even to begin trying to imitate Christ’s love in earnest, through which self-sacrificing effort one discovers just how infinitely grace is needed, which in turn enables confession and faith sensu strictissimo. The ethical, even in its general sense, is still crucial here: it is because no one ventures “to leap existentially into the ethical” that Christianity “does not actually exist” in mid-19th century Denmark (NB 12:148; KJN 6, 237). For “the highest point of Christianity” is “ethically rigorous” (NB 11:149/KJN 6, p. 147).

Likewise, in that deleted marginal addition, Kierkegaard says “I should learn to strive more zealously in order still to have something, as it were, that can be annihilated” before
God (JFY 252). In other words, only through moral striving are we positioned to have revealed to us the failure of that striving and the consequent need for infinite forgiveness—and then accept that even that preparation via initial striving was a gift (one kind of grace precedes another). Speaking of himself personally, Kierkegaard also said, “my duty is to make sure that God can get a grip on me—and then he will care for the rest [the outcome]” (NB 11:203; KJN 6, 123). In other words, it is as if the human agent’s will must contribute something that God can use for good, beyond our capacity to predict or control. Even if grace is involved in the first steps, as construed in these ways or related forms, so is the human will as a finite and founded source. And then, in the stillness wherein the person accepts the need for grace, “[f]aith ought to make striving possible:” precisely because I accept that ethical striving is not needed for my salvation, my striving should be renewed, extended, purified (NB 20:65/KJN 7, p. 436).


To recap briefly, in the contemporary debate concerning whether Kierkegaard’s full corpus supports a moral view reasonably described as a kind of virtue ethics, the verdict turns (at least partly) on whether the theme of three existential “stages” or basic life-orientations are still part of his final considered view. For the stages have a cumulative structure: aesthetic and ethical noemata (intentional objects) and volitional-emotional noetic states of the subject retain a modified role as they are subsumed within religious faith, just as the defining commitments of religiousness A remain aufgehoben inside of religiousness B. But in the works after 1848, Kierkegaard seems increasingly to invoke sharp two-sided contrasts: either Christian faith or “the world”, the incarnate God or Mammon. His emphasis on “redoubled” concepts, with Christian versions of love, knowing, gift, hope, and more, each described as an apparently complete inversion of a familiar worldly sense of the same term, deepens this impression that when we finally understand Christianity, we must reject the entire “ethical” category of the pseudonymous works worldly—as if it was a righteous deception—even though, in the earlier works, such as Fear and Trembling, development within the ethical seemed to bring the agent to infinite resignation and thus to the cusp of faith.

Yet, in the prior section, we found reason to think that such a bivalent resolution of the tension is far too simple. For the “works–grace” relation proves to be deeply dialectical; there are at least three movements within it, as this relation is experienced by the human participant. Even partial, halfhearted, and incomplete ethical striving can lead one to a more unconditional ethical commitment or infinite pathos, which must ultimately run aground in life. This makes possible a genuine recognition of ethical failure so total that the person is harrowed to their core, almost forcing them to feel the need for forgiveness in the most personal way possible—something as far as imaginable from empty recitation of a prescribed confessional text. This resembles infinite resignation in the earlier register of the three stages, but now it has a more extreme form without which the human person could never become willing to accept the shocking demands made by Christ as the way to salvation. For those commands exceed even the demands found in different species of religiousness A, to say nothing of pre-religious ethical conceptions based on (say) natural law or Aristotle’s virtues as fulfilling our natural telos.

At this point, the truly penitent confessor can perceive only the rigor, the demand to sacrifice everything for Christ, because they are taught that our every immoral act is another wound in his side on Good Friday. Confronted this way, the sinner may instead choose to be offended, despite their existential desperation after recognizing their sinful alienation from God. 15 Only much later, upon accepting Christ’s atonement for their sins and trying to act according to Christ’s teachings of neighbor love and subordination of material and sensual goods—while honestly admitting that these commands are too difficult to entirely fulfill—can the forgiven one begin to feel the blessings that Christ promised. Without these blessings, as Martens says, Christianity would only be “arid striving”—the unsustainable
state of infinite resignation without faith—not the “life that is Spirit-filled and blessed” in its fullest form (Martens 2002, p. 208).

These blessings are the paradoxical comfort in suffering, the hope beyond hope, the sense of giftedness that flows from Christ’s promise to be with the person always, supporting and encouraging, receiving every sorrow and pain that the believer brings before Him, and even working through the believer’s agency to bring about beneficent results for others—far beyond the believer’s power to predict or guarantee through their own good efforts (however earnestly made). There is much more here than simply “obey because God is almighty”—or, better, “because God is love”. For, in this sanctification process God, as the person of the Holy Spirit, “holds one unconditionally engaged” in good works (Martens 2002, p. 210).

If this is on the right track, then there must be more to the Christian redoubling of practical concepts than first meets the eye: a complex interplay of factors must underlie the apparent dichotomies. Here is a possible explanation: Kierkegaard’s several formulae emphasizing deeply opposed senses of traditionally good character traits arise from Janus-faced aspects (and even equivocal meanings) of the middle terms in a deeper three-position schema through which Kierkegaard understands such qualities of character. The result is that many of the diametric contrasts that he deploys for poetic advantage are, in his own full view, incomplete; for heuristic purposes that change by context, they focus on one or two parts of the underlying three-place relation. The full picture is often not directly stated, because it would be too complex for the ordinary readers that he hopes to inspire. And, sometimes, perhaps he is not fully aware of the triadic relations in explicitly worked out terms himself. But they are virtually always there beneath the surface.

To test this hypothesis, let us consider more deeply Kierkegaard’s striking portrayal of “sobriety” in *Judge for Yourself!*, which one of Walsh’s main sources. This work on 1 Peter ch.IV begins with “being sober” in the familiar aesthetic sense of not believing in any childish nonsense, especially of the romantic, ethically idealic, or religious kinds. This aesthete speaks like Dickens’ Scrooge to his nephew, saying

> I stick to facts; therefore I never play the game people make such a big fuss about under the name of love, in which one is indeed always swindled if one is not oneself the swindler. No, I do not love one single person—but wait a minute, there is one person I love. . ..namely, myself. (JFY 97)

This totally cynical attitude of “sagacity” (klogskab) is a composite of minimal and natural epistemic sensibility as opposed to “simple folly,” which Christianity also rejects (JFY 100), and the shrewd calculation of trends in order to advance the one’s material interests and standing. It rejects personal categorical devotion to any cause, including the right or the good, other than oneself (JFY 104-5; PC 193). Thus, it contrasts with all higher or “infinite” passions, including even romantic love of another person and other noble albeit amoral callings.

Kierkegaard describes the Christian faith of the apostles as exactly the opposite of this jaded view that equates “being sober” with worldly “sensibleness, levelheadedness, sagacity”, etc., and which regards anyone who “relinquishes probability” for the sake of higher goods as drunk. This is Christian redoubling: the worldly senses of practical concepts like sobriety get reversed, so that it is the apostles giddy with astonishment and infinite joy on Pentecost Day who are truly sober (JYF 98). Thus the basis for those readings that emphasize a total dyadic contrast: either Christianity, or everything else. But, in fact, a triad underlies this.

(1) It is not only “thieves and robbers and murderers and adulterers” who will “not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven” (notice the free use of natural-ethical concepts here), but also “the flabby”, who are too thoroughly conformist ever to commit a serious crime (unless perhaps when they can be certain of anonymity as part of a huge mob). “Others, however, have more will-power, more intense passions, a deeper craving for decision and action”, even though they still do not relinquish their concern for probabilities (JFY
These are the persons mentioned earlier who devote themselves to a romantic cause in all sincerity, thereby risking themselves (NB 29:10/KJN 9, p. 304), rather than losing themselves in a political or cultural movement (NB 29:2/KJN 9, p. 299).

(2) We can certainly imagine such pathos combined with a concern to avoid crimes and to help others in need (as intrinsically important): then, we have an ordinary ethical agent. They can see more practical possibilities than the listless person who ventures nothing, because agents with pathos are willing to try much harder. Still, they have not quite reached what Kierkegaard generically calls “resigned heroism”, which requires continued devotion to some noble end despite fully recognizing that it is socially or naturally impossible according to rational assessment. Yet even such heroic devotion comes no higher than persevering despite the hopelessness of its goal. In this way, it remains sober in a purely ethical sense: it cannot see or trust in ultimate goods that are possible only through God (JFY 99).

(3) Here, Kierkegaard goes out of his way to emphasize that “[a]ll religious venturing, to say nothing of the Christian, is on the other side of probability, is by way of relinquishing probability” (JFY 100). This is a clear allusion to Climacus’s broad category of religiousness A, in which a person can venture only by relying on God or the divine—not on one’s own “wishes, cravings, and plans” (which is that “simple folly”). Such religious venturing/willing soberly recognizes that this means not dictating in any detail what form the miraculous fulfillment of ethical striving must take for one to thank God sincerely for the gift of making something worthwhile out of one’s efforts. For example, one cannot demand to defeat Caesar or even the most demonic tyrant who is bent on devouring the whole world—much less to win a football game. For that turns faith into a demand for proof via one’s preferred miracle, which is “taking God’s name in vain”. One cannot expect any “immediate” success (JFY 100), but only ultimate fulfillment in the hereafter. True faith requires that

[y]ou have also understood that you did not appeal to God in order to bring about your [particular] victory but that you might have an understanding with God that he would strengthen you to be able to bear succumbing for a good cause. . . . (JFY 101; my italics)

All this is still consistent with religiousness A. Christianity is not distinguished from this kind of reliance on God until we add in the recognition of sinfulness and consequent awareness that even our best effort falls morally short. Then, being sober means coming “to oneself in self-knowledge and before God as nothing before him, yet infinitely, unconditionally engaged” (JFY 104). Here, the paradoxical relation between grace and works is on full display.

Now these three senses of sobriety are patently a recapitulation of the three existential stages, with infinite engagement as ethical effort, recognizing the nothingness of this effort as infinite resignation that potentially leads into the religious in general (A), with the confession of sinfulness and dependence on God-in-history as religiousness (B). This complexity is masked by the polar contrast between secular and Christian “sobriety”, which leads Kierkegaard to suggest that any attention to “the probable” at all can obscure the difference between “what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is false” (JFY 104-5). Only the religiously modified ethical conscience is truly safe from this corrupting influence that encourages us to lose our “deeper self” in “knowing” in the objective sense, “in comprehending, in thinking, in artistic production, etc.” (JFY 105). Ethical self-knowledge is only complete—or as full as it can be for finite persons—“before God” understood as the personal Being (the most personal of all persons). For the ethical is unconditional, but the personal God is the most unconditional of all. God’s perfect love is, to a mortal person conscious of it as a standard (rather than as personally directed towards her in grace), like the crack of a lash that brings us out of aesthetic daydreaming (JFY 106-8).

How can we explain this elusive way that the existential stages seem to have vanished under redoubled Christian concepts, but actually remain just beneath the surface? Or,
how there can be a progressive continuity underneath a total discontinuity in which, to improve at all, you must also “regress” or recognize yourself as farther from God than at the temporal beginning of your first halting steps towards anything higher than yourself (NB 19:27 / KJN 7, p. 353)? To understand this, we have to consider three factors or sets of attributes that cut across the existential stages, like variables taking on different values in Kierkegaard’s descriptions of phenomena within each stage.

First, we have negative and positive ethical qualities of the agent’s condition or spiritual state (abbreviated E+ or E−), which are most directly a function of the person’s motivational and volitional responses to considerations that they view as ethical (in a moral vocabulary shared with others). Second, we have the agent’s use of natural powers of volition, including their use of finite human reasoning, especially as related to planning actions and projecting likely outcomes (abbreviated P for probabilistic calculation). Third, we have more ethically neutral features of the agent’s activity, often including accidental properties that are connected to social roles (Rs) or that become socially salient in other ways bearing aesthetic or religious significance (call these Z).

For example, the faithful person is like the lilies and birds in carefreeness (a Z feature) and by resting in God without projecting likely future difficulties (-P): she believes that it is really God who works (JFY 186). But she is unlike them in her ethical effort (E+) that is ultimately attributed to God. The first and second variables are related, but it is useful to distinguish the agent’s states of willing and reasoning from their ethical valance. These three sets of features are dimensions of variation that Kierkegaard uses to characterize different combinations of activity and attitudes in his existence spheres. We can illustrate this by looking at how they are specified to define the three main forms of sobriety.

In aesthetic sobriety, non-folly and “levelheadness” is central (JFY 120): the sober person is not insane, alcoholic, lotus-eating, self-deluded, or an idle dreamer unmoored to hard social facts. He is keenly attuned to social standing and customs for each social role (R), but also to his own contingent tastes and aptitudes. In themselves, these contingencies may be ethically neutral (R or Z values). But Kierkegaard emphasizes that the aesthetically sober individual’s purposes, plans, and practical attitudes are controlled by their estimation of social probabilities (P). These uses of their natural capacities (the second variable) are actually or potentially tainted by the anti-ethical sophistication of sagacity (an E− quality). As we saw, more heroic characters without this vice are at least halfway into the ethical life stance because they care about something or someone else unconditionally (Davenport 2000).

Ethical sobriety, as an intermediate state, is not emphasized in “Becoming Sober” as a distinct kind of soberness, but we can easily reconstruct what it must involve. It is devoted to ethical norms as the agent understands them, and thus has positive ethical value (E+). But the agent is not yet trying to live by the infinite love commands that can only be fully intelligible within religious faith. Instead, the agent’s devotions remain limited by what their reasoning views as probable according to science and social facts (P). This can change if they develop into an infinite pathos for an unconditional good, which strains against the extreme improbability of success—thus verging on insobriety (as aesthetically understood). Still, the ethically sober person does not turn to follow every perceived shift in potential advantage, like a sagacious weathervane. And their integrity and sense of duty remains compatible with many ethically decent social roles (R1, R2, R3, etc., as values of the third variable), including marriage for love rather than for social connections and wealth.

As we saw, the religious sobriety of the apostles’ joy on Pentecost looks to the everyday social world like drunkenness or even idiocy. And it transcends all social roles and contexts (−R), and so is not sagacious in the slightest. Thus, it can appear to ignore customs: it might even invite a prostitute, beggar, or tax collector to sit next to the king at a feast (see PC 13). But this is partly because it builds on the negative moment of relinquishing reliance on probability (as understood by natural reasoning). In this, it superficially resembles aesthetically mad hope based on a wild notion of fate or fortune. Yet the apostles’ Christian faith is sober in deadly earnest and its content is not logically impossible, as we also saw. It
requires honest appraisal of facts about the world in order to resist worldliness through
devotion to the unconditional requirements of neighbor love (resulting in its E+ value),
while trusting in divine promises that cannot be measured by natural probabilities (~P).
Thus, its faith is a “hope” lying beyond the “no hope” judgment of the understanding
(FSE 82-83).

Now, we can line up these changing features, understood as values of the three
variables, with one line per variable, to bring out the dialectical relationships between the
existential forms of sobriety more clearly.

| Aesthetic sobriety: | E− (“flabby” indolence/noncommitment or studied sagacity); |
| Ethical sobriety: | P (pursuit of the self’s material good guided by the probable”); |
| Religious sobriety: | R (differing tastes, differing social roles). |
| E+ (willed commitment to ethical goods above other finite ends); |
| P (guided by the “probable”—up to a point, with growing tension). |
| ~P (not limited by the “probable”; absurd trust in divine promises); |
| ~R (irrelevance of social differences through faith in God). |

As expected, religious sobriety, especially in its Christian form, is the reverse of aes-
thetic secular sobriety in all three respects, and never the twain shall meet. But each also
resembles ethical sobriety in some, but not all respects: ethical features form a narrow
bridge by which the psyche and nascent spirit of a human person might pass some way
towards the religious form, until their reliance on probabilities flips into infinite resignation
(and later, perhaps, the higher Christian will to confront one’s moral failures concretely as
sins, as betrayals of the personal God—like Peter’s three denials). Even the apostles had to
pass through this resignation in which “every earthly hope was...lost” (NB 11:118/KJN
6, pp. 62–63). Then, the individual is prepared, so to speak, at least for religiousness A,
by staking everything on a divine promise that is made to all persons equally, irrespec-
tive of class, social position, or role (PC 91). In the Christian form, ethical devotion is
ratcheted up to its highest intensity (E++), demanding willingness to violate custom and
convention completely (~R) when necessary to secure the neighbor and stand against
worldly corruption.

Thus, in one sense, the polar opposition certainly is absolute. Yet, in another sense,
there is mediation, development, stages on the way to the strictest religiousness of all. And
this tension between the dyadic opposition and the triadic components in a participant’s
experience of a “pilgrim’s progress”—always interrupted by some pastoral truancies,
backsliding, or even offense—is itself essential to the Christian paradox. Work virtuously!
Yet only grace can get you any closer to God. It follows that, even if you never did a single
kind or just act in your life before you let yourself go entirely into God’s hands, if you
still recognize your sinfulness, you can be saved. But, in response, you must then work
twice as hard, make restitution, and be even quicker than others to recognize that all this
new striving and personal sacrifice is ultimately like nothing before God. Knowing that
the fate of all your later good works will be for God alone to decide must make you even
more determined to live in the joy (and joy in sorrows) of doing all you can to love your
neighbors. Or, as an 1850 journal entry puts it, after the sheep lies still in its helplessness
as the shepherd carries it, “it shall indeed have to strive again” (NB 19:8, KJN 7, p. 340).
Kierkegaard even suggests that forgiveness of sins is not complete until we strive to fulfill
ethical demands after it has begun (NB 19:23/KJN 7, p. 351).

The structure illustrated with sobriety is generalizable to other concepts/phenomena
that Kierkegaard uses to illustrate the “inverse dialectic” of “both immanent religiosity
and Christian” faith (Walsh 2018, p. 7; compare pp. 9, 119). It appears at first that the
Christian version shares nothing with any “secular” conception of character qualities, such
as earnestness, love, hope, mercy, joy, gift, horror, dying (see, e.g., SUD 7-8), and even
seduction; but, in each case, we can identify aesthetic, ethical, and religious versions by
varying the values of the three underlying variables. The religious and specifically Christian
versions of these concepts depend on what is retained/transformed from the ethical version, such as ethical striving, benevolent dispositions, and the cultivation of good attitudes. These E+ qualities are enhanced when the agent embraces the religious absurd (~P) and reconceives her efforts as dependent entirely on God’s grace: the E+ aspect is always the leavening element, without which existing religiously would be merely an inverse form of aestheticism—an anti-aestheticism driven by a divine revelation indistinguishable from madness.

In fact, in an 1850 journal entry, Kierkegaard even calls the “infinite sobriety, which is rigorous Christianity” a “pure air of the ethical”, so clean that one used to polluted ordinary air could die from it (NB 19:30/KJN 7, p. 359). Likewise, before getting Isaac (and the world) back, Abraham dies to the world in voluntarily giving up Isaac and violating his social role as a father (FSE 79; compare PC 108). But this counts as “dying to” only because Abraham continued throughout to love Isaac unconditionally (the E++ aspect of his case). Dying to, which happens “before the Spirit who gives life can come” (FSE 79), is always ethical work (Walsh 2005, pp. 87–88, p. 92). It is only because there is a valid sense in which, “humanly speaking”, you have come a long way through ethical striving that you can fully appreciate why, “before God”, you “have not come one inch, not one millionth of an inch, closer to God than the person who never strove”—or who even strove for evil ends (JFY 152).

With this in mind, I return to Kierkegaard’s crucial distinction between taking God “in vain” and genuine faith in ethical triumphs that are possible only through God. My example was a person praying for victory before his football game and later thanking God, on TV, for helping his team win. We can see now that this is taking God in vain for two reasons. First, the goal of winning a game normally has little to do with any unconditional devotion to a moral good (it is E-neutral). Without ethical works, the need for grace is not felt and so God’s forgiveness is taken in vain (FSE 24). Second, for Kierkegaard, genuine reliance on God can never demand such a specific temporal outcome, even if that result would have ethical value. Such a demand violates divine freedom; it tries (in vain) to turn God into our instrument, like a magic wand. The agent’s contingent role-based interests replace the good that is possible through God—as if God had promised a victory for the Rams instead of salvation. It is the same when “custom and usage become articles of faith” or Sittlichkeit is deified: that abolishes any personal relation to God (PC 91-92).

This is connected with Kierkegaard’s theme of “good and perfect gifts” (e.g., in CD): enduring faith will regard specific outcomes as “gifts” within an ongoing process of redemption, even when finite human understanding cannot see the value in them (see Hough 2015). John Lippitt comments insightfully on this point in the context of religious hope for the person in need of forgiveness. The “expectancy” of faith cannot hope for just any “eventuality” whatsoever; the good for which we rely on the divine has to be ethically qualified, as in the moral turning of a person needing forgiveness. And specifying “too determinately in advance what form” the fulfillment of the good must take risks instrumentalizing one’s personal relation to the divine (Lippitt 2020, pp. 199–200). Neither can we know what the infinite good of salvation involves in any detail.

4. Humble Religious “Virtues”?

It is time to ask whether anything crucial for Kierkegaardian Christianity is lost by affirming the paradoxical role for ethical “virtues” described above. The trouble is that any language about positive character traits can inspire spiritual pride (Walsh 2018, pp. 75–86), and this is what most worries Kierkegaard. As Barrett rightly emphasizes, throughout his authorship(s), Kierkegaard coaxes “the reader to cultivate a suspicion of her own spiritual striving”, despite its importance for selfhood (compare FSE 44 on earnestness). For example, in Christian Discourses, he admonishes readers “to assiduously cultivate several different virtues and then advises them to entirely distrust their efficacy” (Barrett 2021, pp. 155, 159).
So let me suggest a new label, borrowing the Biblical Greek word “tapeinōsis”, for lowliness. The triadic structure that we see in sobriety implies a role for tapeinōtic virtues or passional-volitional dispositions that are ethically good, yet reflexively humble about their presence within the self. Christian sobriety can include virtues of this qualified sort. As Jeanine Grenberg has shown, a similar theme is found in Kant’s view that virtues can be cultivated despite our fallen tendencies, but not without risk of inflating a sense of one’s own moral ego. She argues convincingly that humility, understood as a non-comparative “meta-attitude” recognizing our agency as corrupt and dependent on external factors, can reduce this risk by regulating first-order virtues (Grenberg 2005, pp. 143–47).

A tapeinōtic conception of virtue regulated by humility in Kierkegaard would extend this idea. It could accept that no level of human ethical striving, even the most loving (E++), will bring about the absurd possibility of forgiveness for our sins, which is accessible only through God’s promise and Christ’s atonement (Walsh 2018, p. 99). It can also agree that one’s former ethical striving only reveals how one is falling farther behind a standard of daily perfection, and thus (in that ‘growing tally’ sense) more distant from God. This is the paradoxical pilgrim’s regress noted earlier (Walsh 2018, p. 105; compare p. 126 on needing upbuilding over time), which can also lead the agent towards choosing to take refuge in a demonic malformation of spirit that clearly contrasts with good character traits as manifested in good works after an initial forgiveness of past sins.

The tapeinōtic view can also affirm that becoming a self before God is our constitutive “ethical goal” (Walsh 2018, p. 129), while being clear that this requires the cultivation of character traits that strengthen and focus our neighbor-loving—including a willingness to accept earthly lowliness in patience; resisting temptations to avarice; rejecting status consciousness, social climbing, and false forms of self-confidence; and remaining suspicious of all goods that cannot be enjoyed equally (Walsh 2018, pp. 132–34)—even when they, along with notions of “merit”, have to play some role in just institutional structures. Petty scorekeeping, narrow eye-for-an-eye notions of justice, and an overemphasis on the reciprocation of any beneficial act must especially be avoided, while mercifulness is to be sought (Walsh 2018, pp. 136, 139, 144).

In all this, there are developments of virtue ethics in both ancient (Aristotelian, Stoic, and even Epicurean) and more modern forms (Humean, Smithian, Kantian, or intuitionist). The paradoxical sort of Christian tapeinōtic virtues that are encouraged throughout Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses, his Works of Love, Christian Discourses, Practice in Christianity, For Self-Examination, and the late Judge for Yourself! share even more with the “initial, fundamental, and higher virtues” laid out in the historical Johannes Climacus’s Ladder of Paradise, as Walsh helpfully lays out.

To be clear, my point is not that “sobriety” in general or in its New Testament sense exactly fits the definition of a virtue in any of these conceptions. Rather, the proposal is that the more specific features of ethical sobriety (as glossed above) function for Kierkegaard as psychological preconditions for confessional faith, or as steps towards the Christian telos or highest good as conceived in religiousness B. This holds even though the telos-promoting role of Christian virtues is suppressed when focusing on the “grace” side of the paradoxical works–grace relation, and even though there is no “direct ascent” towards God through virtues for Kierkegaard, given the crucial aspect of regress or “retrogression rather than progression” (Walsh 2018, pp. 146–50). For there is also still something like progression, given the roles of ethical striving both leading up to infinite resignation and once faith in forgiveness through Christ has begun. As Walsh puts it, we receive rejuvenating grace “so that we may resume our strivings” (Walsh 2018, p. 174).

Indeed, the continuing importance of the ethical as an “existence-category” or set of attitudes and volitional stances is indicated by the emphasis on human freedom of will (in the sense of spirit) in Anti-Climacus’s works and other late writings. Walsh rightly emphasizes that in Works of Love, “Christian love is voluntary, in as much as…human beings are always free to accept or reject God’s gifts to them” (compare JFY 156) (Walsh 2018, p. 142). This freedom is “a human being’s perfection in comparison with nature”. And
in *Practice in Christianity* (173), the concept of redoubling is even used in another sense for the human self’s “task of choosing to be itself in freedom” (Walsh 2018, pp. 167, 151). The stakes involved in free choice and volitional striving are raised higher in religiousness, and especially in Christian faith, given the perfectionist nature of the love commandments (see Matthew 5: 43–48). This remains true even though a person’s reaching their eschatological endpoint—when “eternity eventually compels him to become sober” and be forever the self he has become in life (JFY 117)—turns solely on faith and atonement. Freedom’s role is essential to the works side of the works–grace paradox. Christ’s being is itself a sign of the absolute demand to choose: either faith in the miracle that Christ is God (and in his promised miracles of salvation) or offense (PC 126-27). And, more generally, the point of indirect communication is to help the recipient to become “self-active” (PC 125), i.e., to engage her own powers of agency in response.

I also agree with Walsh that, for Kierkegaard, agapic love can become a kind of disposition, although it is not exactly a capacity of ours, nor an enhanced version of our natural dispositions, like Aquinas’s “charity”: it cannot be incorporated into a larger yearning for one’s eudaimonia (Walsh 2018, p. 144). But we cannot only say that, for Kierkegaard, “the sanctification or regeneration of the Christian believer” has nothing to do with “the development of virtuous character through one’s own agency”, and that “all spiritual effort on our part is only a jest and totally without merit” (Walsh 2018, p. 153). For this is only one half of the paradox; in the other half, affirming the reality of our free will and its better uses remains vital. Virtues are chosen dispositions, but dependent on God’s inspiration (Tietjen 2013, p. 126).

Likewise, the Holy Spirit does not act directly through our limbs without loving intentions coming from our heart or self in any sense—as if we were mere empty ciphers or colorless windows for God’s light to shine through. We at least participate in keeping the window shutters some ways open. Likewise, if we acknowledge no merits and demerits in human works (Barrett 2002, p. 93), we will not be able to run institutions and large systems fairly at all. This is compatible with saying that the kinds of merits of which human works are capable are not religiously meritorious in the sense of contributing to a person’s eternal salvation (merit is another redoubled concept).

In maintaining that committed agency is essential to the existing person’s experience in trying to live according to religious faith, I am not retreating to Martensen’s position that, from the “subjective, practical standpoint”, salvation is produced by the individual’s virtuous efforts (Walsh 2018, pp. 101–2). Nothing inherent in the subjective experience of the ethical (at any of its three levels—custom, natural law, or divine law), as described by Kierkegaard, really feels as if we are producing eternal salvation in ourselves—although corrupt influences might try to get us to misinterpret our experiences in that way. Rather, the point is that good works cannot only be results of the grace given that enables us to trust in God’s love—as if all the motivation expressed in them were externally imposed by the “coachman” in Kierkegaard’s analogy (Barrett 2002, p. 102). For, as we saw, some good motivation, along with efforts to act on it and to sustain or increase it, is normally involved in ethical considerations becoming salient enough to the agent that she can start to perceive her moral failure and—with grace-bestowed openness to revelation—her sinful betrayal of the person of God. Otherwise, it will not be clear why “[f]aith’s perception of life as a gift does not exempt anyone from effort and exertion in the task of doing God’s will” (Barrett 2002, p. 103). Barrett recognizes this, noting that the Lutheran third use of the law would “seem to presuppose some active cooperation of the individual’s agency with grace” (Barrett 2002, p. 108).

This does not entail that anyone not yet moved by God to experience revealed truths about sinfulness could intelligibly aim to produce sin consciousness through earnest ethical efforts. For making ethical striving into a means in this way is practically contradictory: it would no longer be action for the sake of ethical ends. Thus, as Barrett writes, Climacus’s works insist that “[e]ven the consciousness of sin must be regarded as a gift that comes to a
person from a source beyond herself” (Barrett 2021, p. 151). We do not undertake ethical tasks in order to learn the need for grace; such revelation is almost by definition a gift.  

5. Conclusion: A More Personal Critique

In the end, a mere phrase like “lowly virtues” solves nothing by itself. The true conceptual challenge is to identify ethically good qualities of character that have a kind of built-in humility, making them resistant against that slide into reflection on any sign of humility in ourselves which always spoils it. For humility is one of the most clearly non-targetable among admirable dispositions and beneficial attitudes: attempting to cultivate it in any direct way is comically self-defeating. As Kierkegaard wrote, “one rarely sees anyone who writes humbly about humility...” (JFY 119). And yet people of many religious faiths feel an appropriate sense of obligation to so orient themselves in life that humility might happen to them in a largely spontaneous way—at least for some moments or longer periods, until reflective awareness causes it to vanish like the faery in the glen who can never be approached too closely. C. S. Lewis’s suggestion that the only remedy for the paradox of humility is to laugh at ourselves fits very well with Kierkegaard’s view that to find moral worth in our works is, from the highest viewpoint, only a jest (although lower viewpoints in which it is serious are nested within this highest one).

Yet Kierkegaard never fully succeeded in understanding the complex ways in which non-targetable goods (which are intended, but not exactly as means or as final ends) enter into the vital aspects of human agency and selfhood with which he was so concerned. One disturbing symptom of this failure that runs throughout his late works is his skeptical view that accepting a salary for serving as a minister or priest (let alone also marrying and having children) automatically means that such a person does not live as a Christian in the highest sense. In this, he was wrong.

Maybe Kierkegaard was correct that the greatest Christian witnesses proclaimed “Christianity in poverty and lowliness” (JFY 127) as mendicants, because any material profit is always suspect or can corrupt (JFY 128). Maybe he was also right that we should all admit possible conflicts of interest in any role intended to serve others’ good when “a living” is attached to that activity. His doubts about this apparently kept him from seeking a position as a local pastor. And he was surely correct that no charge should ever be required to hear the Christian message (NB 29:14/KJN 9, pp. 207–8), and that large living among many Christian clergy—especially those in leadership roles—after around 312 AD (with Constantine’s conversion) eventually used up Christianity’s motivational “capital”, spoiling much of its power of example (JFY 130, 134). The same has been true of many revolutionary movements over time, and often some figure has then emerged from them calling to renew the radical zeal of the earliest phases with a more anarchic edge. But none of this excuses Kierkegaard’s unjust attacks on salaried ministry.

Although his famous essay on “The Present Age” invites it, Kierkegaard would not have liked this comparison to revolutionary radicalism, because he followed his complaint about making a living by insisting that the church’s paid positions should remain unchanged, as long as salaried priests and bishops admit that their way of living is not Christian witnessing, or not the highest form of Christian life (JFY 135). But the comparison is apt nevertheless, because both Kierkegaard and the radical who romanticizes the Danton-esque or martyr-making phases of a revolutionary movement are largely blind to the good reasons why human life also requires institutions, systems for coordinating large-scale interactions over time in somewhat predictable ways.

In the context provided by such institutions live what MacIntyre called “practices”—professions devoted to different kinds of public goods. Religious ministry is certainly a special case, because many of the goods at which it aims are more deeply personal and even private to individuals. But its structure is still that of a practice, and it has to be largely that way. As MacIntyre explains, pure-hearted devotion to the goods for which the practice exists (which are distinct from the practitioner’s own material good) is always in danger of being corrupted by the institutions that arise to sustain that practice, because the
institutions are driven by “external goods” with exchange value in markets. The virtues are important in part precisely to resist this corruption (MacIntyre 1984, pp. 194–95). So anyone worried about the monetary corruption of ministers should be keen to defend the virtues of frugality, generosity, and modesty, among others.

Kierkegaard grasped this half of the story about the corruption that the growth of institutions around original sources of authentic inspiration almost inevitably brings. He failed to grasp the other half, namely that practices still depend on institutions for their continuation and growth, because the external goods that institutions pursue provide the material preconditions for people to continue pursuing the main goals of the practice for their own sake. The complex activities involved in practices can, usually via institutional mediation, furnish some of these preconditions for continued effort without those material goods necessarily becoming the practitioner’s (main) aim. In Kierkegaard’s biblical language, one can “seek first the kingdom of God” (JFY 112, my italics) while also having to be interested second in the material preconditions for serving God in an earthly life (“daily bread”). He is right to criticize anyone who “seeks first a living” (NB 19:285/KJN 7, p. 357; SK’s italics), but not correct to say that seeking material resources second, or depending on a stable supply of them as a basis for one’s normal efforts, is incompatible with selflessly serving the goals of ministry.

Without doubt, in circumstances where the two are placed in contingent conflict, one only seeks first the kingdom by sacrificing everything else for it (compare MacIntyre 1984, p. 198). But practices, including ministry, can survive only because they are not always in such total conflicts. Revolutionary upheaval works only as an exception to more mundane ordinary life, which still contains genuine goods. The dancer’s most incredible leap still flows back into the ongoing collective movement.

Despite my critical concluding remarks, Kierkegaard did sometimes see this. A few people, like Luther, have managed to live such that, “despite owning all earthly goods, they own them in such a way that they nonetheless do not possess them”—or (better) are not possessed by them—because they “are willing to surrender them” when needed (NB 18:101/KJN 7, pp. 329–30). A select few could even do so easily. These are spirits with Christian tapeinótic virtue, the most paradoxical form of virtue that there is.

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### Notes

1. It follows that these pseudonymous works may help rather than mislead people who lack faith in eschatological promises and consolations. They may also help others who have only come as far as what Climacus in the *Postscript* calls religion A. Religion A also seems to be the pre-Christian level on which several earlier signed discourses focus on qualities of character such as patience and the penitent recognition of one’s ethical shortcomings. On this point, see (Hong and Hong 1997, xii). For penitence in stillness before God, see, for example, “On the Occasion of a Confession” in TDIO.

2. Along with this bivalent opposition, as Walsh notes, also goes the pairing of “positive spiritual qualities such as faith, hope, love, [and] joy” with the negative senses of failure, lowliness, and existential suffering.

3. For this history, see Joakim Garff’s rich recounting, including helpful references to letters from the time and insightful critique (Garff 2005, pp. 650–67).

4. Kierkegaard’s own uncertainties, however, may be indicated by what happened to this “Moral”. Walter Lowrie notes that even though the second edition of *Practice in Christianity* published in 1855 retained the original Preface and the Moral, Kierkegaard “formally withdrew them in the newspaper broadside that appeared at the same time” during his Attack on the Danish Lutheran Church—presumably because the Moral now appeared too lenient: see (Lowrie 1944, p. xxvi). Kierkegaard also worried that *Works of Love* would appear to conflict with the doctrine of salvation sola fide (p. xxii) (Lowrie 1944, p. xxii). This supports Lee Barrett’s account summarized in the next section.
These letter abbreviations help to clarify that there are three variables underlying the three kinds of sobriety. These dimensions of

In the rest of this passage, there is also a clear indication that what we hope for from God in authentic religious hope cannot be

Kierkegaard also makes free use of the traditional concept of “vices” (JFY 103), and even refers occasionally to social justice (e.g.,

In 1849, Kierkegaard still described ethics, in contrast to “the aesthetic”, as related to “what is universally human” and

Likewise, the dying that Abraham endures in the Akedah is, for Christians, “the necessary result of imitating Christ” (p. 204).

And this is still compatible with the moral hero being “no closer to God than the person who never strove at all” (Martens 2002,

Also see CUP 546 on the “hard currency” of infinite noncomparative ethics in the “ethico-religious” (A) versus the “comparative,

In 1849, Kierkegaard still described ethics, in contrast to “the aesthetic”, as related to “what is universally human” and

“impossibility” that he is excluding.

And, soon after finishing Sickness Unto Death, he even hints that Anti-Climacus could be guilty of spiritual pride: see NB 11:209; KJN 6, 127.

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Even though Climacus in the Postscript repeatedly says that religiousness A, together with infinite guilt consciousness, is essential

On the virtue-unifying role of “magnanimity” in Aristotle and its rejection of timocratic or archaic status seeking, see (Davenport 2007, Ch. 7).

However, it goes without saying that Barrett and Martens will probably not agree with everything I draw from their inspiration,

Compare the journal entry at NB 28:101, KJN 9, p. 291, in which Kierkegaard describes Martensen as aesthetic “sober-mindedness”,

While the crowd views Kierkegaard as “half-mad” (he describes the Virgin Mary’s appearance in the same way at NB 28:93, KJN

Of course, this is most unfair to real Judaism, about which Kierkegaard knew little. But the conceptual distinction so badly

Martens also notes how FSE is structured around the three “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love (Martens 2002, p. 205).

Also see CUP 546 on the “hard currency” of infinite noncomparative ethics in the “ethico-religious” (A) versus the “comparative,

Some others may reach offense more directly, without passing through the harrowing and resignation; they are too superficial for

And some may even reach the nadir of “sagacity” and “shrewdness”, which dampens down any embers of conscience. The saint is no closer in the moral-ideal sense (because the task is infinite), but much closer in epistemic access to the full meaning of the love commands.

For a contemporary example of this, consider Kevin Carter’s famous 1993 photo, originally printed in The New York Times (March

2007, Ch. 7).

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Some others may reach offense more directly, without passing through the harrowing and resignation; they are too superficial for

Martens argues, following John Elrod, that, for Kierkegaard, the Holy Spirit “links the prototype and redeemer” roles of Christ

while denying that the Spirit’s inspiration only comes after imitation of the prototype. The Spirit is even the atoner, “in the sense

On this infinite pathos versus shrewdness, see (Davenport 2000, 2011, pp. 136–37, 144–45).

Compare the journal entry at NB 28:101, KJN 9, p. 291, in which Kierkegaard describes Martensen as aesthetic “sober-mindedness”,

Kierkegaard also makes free use of the traditional concept of “vices” (JFY 103), and even refers occasionally to social justice (e.g.,

In the rest of this passage, there is also a clear indication that what we hope for from God in authentic religious hope cannot be logically or metaphysically impossible—although Kierkegaard does not, given this text’s witnessing purposes, go into the type of “impossibility” that he is excluding.

These letter abbreviations help to clarify that there are three variables underlying the three kinds of sobriety. These dimensions of variation are three main features of existence phenomena that change across the three existence spheres—like a code that always involves (a) a number between 1 and 5, (b) a shape like a square or circle, and (c) a Greek letter; $\alpha$ and $\delta$ would be two instances of such a code.
The same applies to the carelessness of the lily and bird, which is part of faith, versus the care needed for works of love (NB 11:185/KJN 6, p. 109). Being put to death is yet another case in which there is a sharp contrast between Christ, who can legitimately allow it, and human imitators, who may not—and yet a triad subtends this polar opposition (see NB 11:33/KJN 6, pp. 22–23).

But Walsh notes its religious sense as recognizing one’s “ethical incapability” (p. 108), which is the other side of the paradox.

Still, there is an open question about whether Kierkegaard’s way of describing everything as potentially a good and perfect gift for the faithful person reduces the ethical aspect of the object of faith too much. If so, the problem is not his general formulae for faith as eschatological trust, but rather his affinity for some sort of “soul-making” response to the problem of evil that perhaps should be rejected on other grounds. On this topic, see (Davenport 2024).

Barrett also worries about how easily “natural law” and “cultural mores” lend themselves to “the illusion of the attainment of virtue”: see (Barrett 2002, p. 90).

Barrett also makes an interesting connection between this theme and Climacus’s return, late in the Postscript, to a sense in which human subjectivity is actually untruth after all (Barrett 2002, pp. 153–54). I would only add that there is another triad underlying the truth/untruth duality. For subjective/aesthetic approaches to ethical and religious matters are untruth, and only subjective ways of relating to them attempt to live them in truth (or sincerely); yet, religiously, these very subjective efforts themselves are not the ultimate Truth that lies “outside the individual” as the God-in-time (CUP 561). The second form of untruth is higher and distinct from the first, leftenved by what truth there is in subjectivity (this is part of the break from immanence).

Of course, because it is drawn from Kant, Grenberg’s conception of humility is not theistic in the same way as Kierkegaard’s. Yet the similarities are striking, especially on the importance of non-comparison with others, even though Kantian humility more clearly affirms the inherent worth and positive potentials of human agency.

On Kierkegaard as “a member of the western virtue-tradition”, and against Bruce Kirmmse’s critique of virtue readings, see (Tietjen 2013, pp. 117–24). His conception of virtuous “striving” that understands itself as “the reception of grace” (p. 125) is tapeinotic.

I try to explain agapic love in a way that avoids the pitfalls of “eros for God” models in Will as Commitment and Resolve.

Nor can we one-sidedly say with Kierkegaard only that neighbor-love is “not self-activated or self-directed” (Barrett 2002, p. 101). Kierkegaard’s own descriptions of its fruits in Works of Love actually imply a modest, finite, human form of “autonomy” in neighbor love (although this is not how he understood—or misunderstood—Kantian autonomy: see (Davenport 2017, pp. 54–55).

On the contrary, as Barrett (2021) says, Kierkegaard believes that sincere “striving for self-integration and self-mastery” in ethically oriented efforts actually facilitates existential “frustration”—presumably because some flaw that we cannot surmount is always discovered: see Barrett, “Human Striving and Absolute Reliance upon God”, p. 157.

After all, the coachman can only succeed because the horses are created with a capacity and inclination to run in their nature, which the coachman taps into and develops (although, to parallel original sin, we would have to imagine a fallen version of this horse nature, angry and violent).

This, Barrett (2021) notes, was a rejection of a doctrine of “self-initiated preparation for grace” held by some Danish Pietists (p. 152).

Perhaps my tapeinotic virtue-reading of the second ethics within Kierkegaardian Christianity still faces a serious problem concerning what theologians call asinity, or being an undetermined causal source (as implied at SUD 21). On possible human participation in asity, see (Rogers 2008).

Building on Jon Elster’s work, I describe the role of non-targetable good outcomes and virtues in (Davenport 2007, Ch. 5 §2). Garff rightly notes that Kierkegaard could never rest with the “Moral” in Practice in Christianity, which concluded that a private admission of weakness to God was enough: see (Garff 2005, pp. 665–66). For this came to seem like little more than hypocrisy to him. And perhaps Kierkegaard had unadmirable motives for imagining such a humble pastor role as unbearable for him, making his obsession about whether accepting a salary amounted to serving Mammon into a defense-mechanism. He all but recognized this at a couple of junctures (see NB11:125/KJN 6, 269).

At least in Europe; in the US, around the same time, many more Abolitionist Christians were witnessing in largely the ways that Kierkegaard lauded.

And in his last years, Kierkegaard also frequently said that no one (other than apostles) could have the right to require the highest types of Christian sacrifice from others—although he came near to doing this to Mynster and Martensen after Mynster’s death.

This was Hannah Arendt’s basic critique of many revolutionary movements that failed to secure their gains by constitutionalizing the principles for which they fought so valiantly: see (Arendt 1985).

This is one fascinating implication of Frances Kamm’s subtle analyses of “triple effect” and other aspects of intentional agency relevant for deontological conceptions of morality in (Kamm 2006).
References


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