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INTRODUCTION

Though he very rarely characterized himself as a philosopher, that is how world history remembers Søren Aabye Kierkegaard. And yet, while Socrates was his sage and he profoundly respected Kant, Kierkegaard ultimately became a virulent critic of philosophy, especially of the academic ilk. G.W.F. Hegel was the regnant philosopher king of early to mid-nineteenth-century European philosophy. While Kierkegaard, in his early career, admired the speculative German thinker, he ultimately concluded that Hegel and other intellectual system builders “are like a man who has built a vast palace while he himself lives next door.” Writing in his journal, Kierkegaard insists, “Spiritually, a man’s thoughts must be the building in which he lives—otherwise it is wrong” (JN, vol. 2, Journal JJ: 490, p. 279). In addition to being unable to bring their scholarly studies to quotidian life, Kierkegaard complained that philosophers neglected the question of how to communicate the wisdom that philosophers (lovers of wisdom) are supposed to care about and ultimately possess.

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Plato wrestled with the question of whether or not the written word was an aid or an impediment to the good and just life, but for the most part the focus in philosophy has always been on *the what*, on the content of thought, as though wisdom in life were a mere matter of information capable of being directly disseminated en masse. With their emphasis on reason, Hegel and other virtuosi of abstractions spent little time pondering *how* it would be best to communicate their conclusions. Indeed, philosophers can seem almost narcissistic in their indifference to the subjective coordinates of their readers. They reason through an issue, such as “What is love?” and then publish the argument, usually in a treatise form accessible only to the likes of philosophy professors.

Unlike other members of the Socrates guild, Kierkegaard grappled with the question of the *how*, as opposed to the *what*, of communication. Someone with an epistemological interest might conclude that while most philosophers probe the question of knowledge, Kierkegaard made a study of belief; Kierkegaard, however, was concerned with more than nodding intellectual assent.

As he wrote in the first few pages of his writing life, Kierkegaard sought a truth that he could live and die by—one to which he could mold his everyday existence. Ordinarily, we think of truth in terms of ideas expressing or reflecting reality. Kierkegaard’s thinking, at least on matters moral and religious, moved along a different vector; he prodded himself and his reader to represent ideas in the medium of actions. On his analysis (hoping the reader will forgive the colloquialism)

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when we fail to walk our talk we literally fail to grasp what we are talking about.

Kierkegaard maintained that a good deal of what goes for communication is chatter, lines we have memorized, ideas that have not been appropriated, as in “The women come and go. Talking of Michael Angelo.” It was not just spouting clichés that Kierkegaard railed against, it was the spiritlessness that was given voice in palaver without inwardness. He observed, “Spiritlessness can say exactly the same thing that the richest spirit has said, but it does not say it by virtue of spirit. Man qualified as spiritless has become a talking machine, and there is nothing to prevent him from repeating by rote a philosophical rigmarole, a confession of faith, or a political recitative” (CA, p. 95).

The inwardness that renders our talk something more than talk was the exotic bull’s-eye of Kierkegaard’s thinking. Like the efforts of a strange meditation teacher, it was as though all of Kierkegaard’s writings were directed toward cultivating a certain sort of subjectivity. Sometimes Kierkegaard’s prized inner state was described as inwardness, subjectivity, or faith, but more often than not, it was called “earnestness.” Of course, there are no direct outward manifestations of this mind/soul set. Earnestness can take a multiplicity of forms depending on the situation and circumstances. In our own “present age” it is an alien concept; mention earnestness and students will often cock their heads puppylike in puzzlement. Perhaps it is closest to “character,” but there is more to earnestness than being strong willed, upright, and master of your desires.

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Though we delight in his psychological epiphanies, Kierkegaard could be considered an anathema to our happiness/self-fulfillment-obsessed age. He urges us to understand that to a large extent happiness is a matter of fortune. It is something that Kierkegaard believed could happen more or less “as a matter of course,” and Kierkegaard was firm that, regarding the development of the spirit, nothing happens “as a matter of course.” Twisted as it might seem, Kierkegaard thanked his almost perversely difficult father for ruining his prospects for happiness and yet preparing him for faith. In his lapidary *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard wagged his finger, referring to the hiddenness of despair. He writes,

[H]appiness is not a qualification of spirit, and deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair; it very much wishes to be allowed to remain there, because for despair the most cherished and desirable place to live is in the heart of happiness. (SUD, p. 25)

Like Luther, with whom he was always grappling, the Lutheran Kierkegaard thought in terms of the two worlds, this one and the world of the spirit. In this realm, the one who does the work may not get the bread. In this realm, it helps to have chiseled features, an inheritance, friends in high places, and higher education, but these gifts are not left under everyman's tree. Far from it. Walking beneath this sun, we rattle around in a cage of constant comparisons. As one of

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Kierkegaard's pseudonyms expressed it, "The secular view always clings tightly to the difference between man and man and naturally does not have any understanding of the one thing needful . . ." (SUD, p. 33).

But that odd duck of an excogitator, the fragments of whose thoughts are strewn before us, believed that the truths about essential matters in life, about how to live, were more than less universally distributed. If this were not so, rich folks and scholars would have a better shot at salvation than the grizzled man who plows snow in the winter and runs that lawn service with his children in the summer. And if there was one thing that the very wealthy and preternaturally talented Kierkegaard was convinced of, it was this: in the realm of the spirit, all worldly differences, talents, and bank accounts will have no purchase.

Pascal famously said that if we could just learn to sit still for ten minutes and do without distractions, there would be no more wars. A similar insight seemed to percolate in the mind of our Pascal of the north. Rather than pass on knowledge, Kierkegaard hoped to direct us to the study of ourselves. He once confessed, "I want to make people aware so that they do not squander and waste their lives" (JN, vol. 4, Journal NB: 137, p. 94). And by squandering and spilling our lives he meant, among other things, half purposefully losing the understanding that we are fundamentally eternal beings, with an aspect of ourselves existing outside the flow of time. The insistence that we are more than our brains and bodies might offend Enlightenment sensibilities, but that was what Kierkegaard felt commanded to try

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to believe. Judging from the words that streamed from his stylus, I suspect that his efforts were not entirely in vain.

With the aim of awakening himself and others, Kierkegaard developed a theory and practice of what he termed “indirect communication.” The basic tenet was that you should know where you are calling from and to whom you are speaking, and adjust your communiqué accordingly. Write merrily for the merry and abstractedly for the abstracted.

For example, Kierkegaard believed that he lived in a world of nominal Christians who had forgotten—perhaps it would be better to say, who made a point of forgetting—what it meant to be a Christian. To remind himself and others of the nature of Christianity took some indirection on Kierkegaard’s part. It was not a matter of providing a theological tome. Something more subtle, more subversive was necessary. For Kierkegaard, that something extra came in the form of his pseudonymous authorship.

Kierkegaard wrote many books under his own name, but almost all of his classic works, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, had a nom de plume on the title page. Scholars have endlessly debated the question of how to interpret the pen names, but in his eponymous *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard bids us to treat the pseudonyms as though they were distinct authors. After all, they refer to and even critique one another. Hewing to Kierkegaard’s instructions, I would argue that the dif-

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ferent authors are as characters in a novel. They each glimpse life from a different window, and yet many of their observations seem to come full throated from the voice behind the voices. Accordingly, more than a few of the quotes captured in this compendium derive from one of Kierkegaard's alter egos.

In virtually every one of his works Kierkegaard moans about his fellow human beings being in a rush, as though life were a matter of getting through a calculus course or something. Kierkegaard devotee Ludwig Wittgenstein once described philosophy as "the art of thinking slowly." And yet, many if not most students will press a professor to cut to the chase and get to the point about Kierkegaard or whomever! One only knows how he would have groaned about the Twitter epoch, but Kierkegaard complained of his countrymen craving books that they could peruse during their naps, of wanting to acquire the bread of life wisdom without kneading the flour. And how might he have reacted to a book of Kierkegaard quotations?

I doubt that Kierkegaard would have had a problem with the absence of context. After all, he wrote an entire book of nothing but prefaces. Kierkegaard well understood that like a Zen koan, the truth expressed in a line or three can glisten as a legitimate object of reflection and appropriation. Make no mistake about it, Kierkegaard played the scribe, copying hundreds of lines from the likes of Seneca, Cicero, Plato, Luther, and of course the Bible. Sometimes he used these apothegms to help him sharpen a point, but at other times he drew on them as a source of spiritual sustenance. In

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the cauldron of the break with Regine and writing *Repetition*, Kierkegaard put these words into the pen of Constantine Constantius, who in turn scribbles a letter to his “Silent Confidant”: “. . . Have you really read Job? Read him, read him again and again. I do not even have the heart to write one single outcry from him in a letter to you, even though I find my joy in transcribing over and over everything he has said, sometimes in Danish script and sometimes in Latin script, sometimes in one format and sometimes in another” (R, p. 204).

As I hope this text reveals, there are many sentences from Kierkegaard that, even standing alone, both open a vista onto Kierkegaard’s mind and nurture the centrifugal thought he so artfully and passionately encouraged.

When it came to the pulsating question of how best to live, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms preached that we should think of life from a first-person perspective. There are many who enjoy deliberating on theories of love, ethics, and whether or not the soul is immortal, but Kierkegaard held that these are problems the answers to which fundamentally define who you are. To contemplate them from a third-person point of view is for him a contradiction in terms. Take for, example, the issue of whether or not the soul is immortal. Kierkegaard’s lyrical but philosophical persona, Johannes Climacus, writes,

Honor be to learning! Honor be to the one who can learnedly treat the learned question of immortality! But

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essentially the question of immortality is not a learned question; it is a question belonging to inwardness, which the subject by becoming himself must ask himself. (CUP, p. 173)

Climacus continues, “Objectively the question cannot be answered at all, because objectively the question of immortality cannot be asked, since immortality is precisely the intensification and highest development of the developed subjectivity” (CUP, p. 173).

Later, in the same text, the author jabs that people who have been in flux their whole lives, who have never developed inner continuity, anxiously ask whether or not they will be the same in heaven.

Unlike other philosophers, Kierkegaard did not seek to generate general theories but instead was always riveted to the individual’s relationship to ideas—which for him meant grappling not with the cause or explanations but with the issue of *meaning*. Indeed, fierce attention to the question of meaning, insistence on the inside-out approach to existence, in contrast to looking for a code, theory, or a step-by-step instruction manual, is part of the reason Kierkegaard is widely regarded as the father of existentialism.

Given the enormous accent on the first person, permit me to open the door and bring myself ever so briefly into the picture. I have been walking with this strange Dane for decades. Like all relationships, ours has had its peaks and valleys. There have been times when I have shaken my head in disgust at Kierkegaard’s violent judgments on others, such as when he states, “Most

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men are characterized by a dialectic of indifference and live a life so far from the good (faith) that it is almost too spiritless to be called sin . . .” (SUD, p. 101). Even for his era, Kierkegaard’s views on women were much less than enlightened, and he has, perhaps rightfully, been accused of anti-Semitism. It is also troubling that the rich man who never had to wear the yoke of working for someone else seems less than urgent about economic inequalities and assuaging the suffering of the poor. Kierkegaard’s repugnance for anything that rings of the need for reciprocity is a stone in the shoe as well. Nietzsche observed that genius is not just a matter of gray matter but of being able to tolerate mega-voltage inspiration over long intervals. Like all thinkers who burn like torches, the incandescent Kierkegaard had his dark maniacal side and blind spots. But, oh, the effulgent light and epiphanies powerful enough to help his readers see themselves from a new perspective.

I came to Kierkegaard crawling on cut glass and on the tail of a brutal marital breakup. I had dropped out of graduate school for the second time. My untethered life was like a page from a newspaper blowing around in the wind. Who knows how these things happen, but I picked up his *Works of Love* in a bookstore/coffee shop. Like a therapist, the immortal dead man helped me to understand that when the earthquakes of existence come, letting yourself sink will lead only to sinking deeper. There is no bottom. I can’t cite the verse, but Kierkegaard helped me to grasp that psychological suffering was not a stench but something a person

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could do well or poorly. His way of recasting the landscape of human existence helped float my spirit when I was going under in ways that were positively chilling to everyone around me.

Again, “we are not in any hurry” or if you are in a hurry, you can fast-forward to Kierkegaard’s own words. But then again, if you have the time, perhaps you will follow me as I reflect on a few more of the guide-wire ideas that I found in the writings of this Mozart of the spirit. Here, for instance, is a quiet diary entry that grabbed me by the collar:

In every generation, most people . . . live and die in the delusion that things keep on going, and that if it were granted them to live longer, things would keep going onward in a continuing, straightforward ascent with more and more comprehension. How many experience at all the maturity of discovering that there comes a critical point where things turn around, when what matters from then on is an increasing comprehension that more and more comprehends that there is something that cannot be comprehended[?] (JN, vol. 6, Journal NB12: 134, p. 225)

In a sense, this entry is another inscription of the warning against that acidulating feeling of “I’m late. I’m late for a very important date,” as though our eternal lives depended on amassing chestnuts of wisdom and knowledge. In the end, more knowledge is not going to bring the peace and salvation that every Nicodemus craves.

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But what is involved with understanding “more and more,” that there is something of fundamental importance that cannot be understood? How does the understanding understand that life is not just a matter of understanding? What does it mean for the intellect to step aside? Perhaps that we all need to muster the ability to live with cavernous uncertainty about matters of piercing importance. Given the unquenchable human desire to be in control, bowing to the unknown involves learning to abide with the anxiety lapping at our ankles and threatening to take us out to sea.

Sometimes Kierkegaard portrays anxiety as a teacher, at other times as a surgeon. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, his pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis teaches that the individual who properly understands anxiety will sense it coming on and think, “Now I am ready. Then anxiety enters into his soul and searches out everything and anxiously torments everything finite and petty out of him . . .” (CA, p. 159).

Unlike his more rationalistic brethren, who regarded the emotions as impediments to reason, Kierkegaard believed that we have much to learn from our moods and feelings. Again, like Pascal, who wrote of reasons of the heart, Kierkegaard held that there are lessons we cannot absorb save through the heart. It is in anxiety that we come to fathom the teeth-gnashing fact that we are free to do whatever we choose. It is through that feeling, which sometimes feels like a weight, that we appropriate our freedom. For better but often worse, our anxieties can tell us where our hearts are. And to listen to Magister Kierkegaard, if we

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sit still for the lesson and refrain from latching on to and obsessing about some finite end, angst can help us discern the difference between finite concerns and something else.

Today anxiety is regarded as a blight. Kierkegaard is aware that the feeling we throw pills at can beat a path to transgression and guilt, then to more anxiety, and so on and so forth. But anxiety, like despair, is also the palm print of spirit. Of the individual who boasts “. . . the great thing about him is that he has never been in anxiety” (CA, p. 157), the author of *The Concept of Anxiety* responds, “I will gladly provide him with my explanation: that is because he is very spiritless” (CA, p. 157).

In the introduction to the same text and in the guise of a psychologist, Kierkegaard stressed the significance of moods. There is, he observes, a proper mood for every concept. Pondering sin, he writes, “Whenever the issue of sin is dealt with, one can observe by the very mood whether the concept is the correct one. For instance whenever sin is spoken of as a disease, an abnormality, a poison, or a disharmony, the concept is falsified” (CA, p. 25). In other terms, wrong mood, wrong concept. And thus, an academic who reflects on the Holocaust in a puzzling mood, as grist for the mill of scholarly publications, would have missed the conceptual boat.

Thought and feeling are intertwined. In a footnote, Kierkegaard/Haufniensis explains, “That science, just as much as poetry and art, presupposes a mood in the creator as well as in the observer, and that an error in

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the modulation is just as disturbing as an error in the development of thought, have been entirely forgotten in our time, when inwardness has been completely forgotten, and also the category of appropriation . . .” (CA, p. 14n).

Present a text to a college student and his or her first reaction will be “I like that idea” or “I don’t like it” as though ideas could be tasted like different flavors of gelato. Every notion that bubbles into consciousness is attended with a feeling and the feeling that accompanies an idea reveals much about our personal relationship to that idea. According to Kierkegaard’s constant complaint, no one cares at all anymore about this inner modulation.

Kierkegaard’s laser focus on inwardness bends a bit in his pellucid “At a Graveside.” An offering in the series *Three Discourses on Imagined Situations*, this reflection is a skull on the desk. In our own age, we like to play almost counterphobically with visions of the end. Curled up on the couch and munching popcorn, we gobble thousands of images of death on the flat screen every week. But as for the real thing, that is another story. Some of us would like to pretend that if we just eat enough kale and go to our yoga and mindfulness classes, we can keep death on the other side of the door. Like Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, “At a Graveside” crafts a reminder of the retrogressive power given by the bone-deep understanding of our own mortality.

Kierkegaard wrote the masterful *Repetition*, and one aspect of his writing genius is his ability to effec-

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tively repeat himself with ever so slight changes. A veritable existential fugue, “At a Graveside” rings with no fewer than a dozen reminders that there comes a time when “all is over”—when we cannot add or alter a line to our life’s story.

The Epicureans used to argue that where death is I am not—ergo, we ought never to fear our own demise. Kierkegaard chuckles at this attempt to keep death outside ourselves. In this discourse, he maintains that thinking of myself and my death together rings an alarm—and he is not here talking about waking up in time to smell the flowers—but to being less careless about the kind of persons we are becoming.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard underscores the importance of mood, but in “At a Graveside” he argues that earnestness is something over and above a mood. Like anxiety and despair, earnestness reveals that the self is a self-relating activity. We are creatures who are constituted by a special relationship to ourselves, and as such we not only are visited by thoughts and emotions, but also have the task of interpreting and relating ourselves to those thoughts and emotions. For instance, yesterday I was out for a walk. A memory drips of a deed of which I am not particularly proud. The images come with a powerful sinking feeling. I can either swoon into a despondent mood and then perhaps say or do something else that I might regret, or, in earnestness, I can pat the mood on the back, sending it along and resolving to change my ways.

The self for Kierkegaard is a kind of meta-entity. The earnest individual is able to keep a third eye on the

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flow of moods and recognize when they might lull him or her into forgetting what is important in life. For all of his screeds about the dangers of reflection, it is to this internal relating activity that Kierkegaard, from different corners of his study and in diverse voices, addresses himself.

Kierkegaard was a fundamentalist about “the self” and “the individual.” Does this mark him as a precursor to our own culture of narcissism? No less than Kierkegaard, the present age is also obsessed with the care of the self. Self-esteem fanatics, we postmodern men and women are haunted by worries of the sort that we are just not getting enough out of life, not realizing our full potentials. The burning question is “Can we have it all?” but the fretting is often about checks on a bucket list of experiences and accomplishments.

Most of us feel more urgency about the size of our waistline than about the girth of our capacity for compassion. Doing the right thing still has valence, but it is just one option among many, as in, I want to be a successful lawyer, have a good marriage and family, and be a good guy. Often by daubing a picture that the reader can see himself or herself in, Kierkegaard tries to kindle a concern about the self, but with a different set of categories up his sleeves than we are likely to find in the likes of *Eat, Pray, Love* and the boundless literature of the self-help and happiness market.

Aristotle taught that there is a degree of precision appropriate to every subject matter. In other terms, you ought not to expect the same measure of clarity in discussing ethics that you would in physics. Kierke-

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gaard was alive to this point. In his *Works of Love*, he baldly stated, “All human speech, even divine speech of Holy Scripture, about the spiritual is essentially metaphorical speech” (WL, p. 209); in other words, messy and imprecise. When we talk about external objects, we can examine them together to make sure that we are referring to the same thing—not so when we discuss the spirit or the self.

This admission is of paramount importance given the fact that almost every word that dripped from Kierkegaard’s pen had something to do with the life of the spirit. In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty wisely observed that philosophers tend to spin webs of metaphors only to quickly forget that they are speaking figuratively. It is easy to forget that the spatial images that Kierkegaard hones to describe our inner lives are, by his own accounting, only a rough description of the spiritual realm. From the first page to the last, our Galileo of the inner world described the vicissitudes of the spirit in terms of movement. There is the movement of infinite resignation daubed in *Fear and Trembling*, and in the same work the “movement of faith” is described in self-consciously paradoxical terms of giving up the world and getting it back, or of the detaching from the world and yet being fully present in it.

A central chord of Kierkegaard’s thinking on earnestness and faith resonates with Buddhist notions about enlightenment. Kierkegaard frequently frames the image of dying to the world to provide a glimpse of what is involved in coming alive spiritually. Among

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other things, this means not directing infinite passion to finite ends, not having your sense of self consumed with worries about whether or not you pass the bar exam or marry Jack or Jill. For all the angst that comes with our heart's worldly desires, in a backhanded way they provide something tangible to grab onto in life. If I just land this job I will be whole, or if only so and so loved me, I could don a "Life is Good" T-shirt. In America we are virtually indoctrinated with the notion that we should chase after some dream about ourselves, something that the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler called a "fictional finalism."

For Kierkegaard these ego visions, at least when they rise to a certain pitch, are a form of despair. In the crown jewel of his authorship, *The Sickness Unto Death*, a pseudonym very close to Kierkegaard's heart, Anti-Climacus, observes,

An individual in despair despairs over *something*. So it seems for a moment, but only for a moment; in the same moment the true despair or despair in its true form shows itself. In despairing over *something*, he really despairs over *himself*, and now he wants to get rid of himself. For example, when the ambitious man whose slogan is "Either Caesar or nothing" does not get to be Caesar, he despairs over it. But this also means something else: precisely because he did not get to be Caesar, he now cannot bear to be himself. Consequently he does not despair because he did not get to be Caesar but despairs over himself because he did not get to be Caesar. This self, which, if it had become Caesar, would have been in sev-

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enth heaven (a state, incidentally, that in another sense is just as despairing), this self is now utterly intolerable to him. (SUD, p. 19)

Despair represents a misrelation in the self. In most cases, it could also be described as a willed and semi-conscious ignorance of what it means to be a self. Those individuals who live by the shibboleth “Caesar or nothing”—get into med school or the *New Yorker* or nothing—cannot bear being themselves without these badges. They have placed the axis of themselves outside of themselves. This is one of the great perils of the fundamentalism about dreams in the United States. But as is often the case with Kierkegaard, the most important lines are threaded into the parenthesis.

If the man had realized his ambition and become Caesar, he would have been in a state “that in another sense is just as despairing.” He would have been in seventh heaven and in despair. This would of course be an unconscious form of despair. For Kierkegaard, almost everything having to do with our inner lives is dialectical. It can mean one thing or the other. A sense of peace and contentment can indicate that you have been cured of despair, but more often than not it shrouds a misrelation in the self. People who are in the pink—who, as the saying goes, “have it all,” family, career, friendship, stability, adventure, good looks, and good conscience too, are least likely to grasp that they are barreling down the wrong road, in the opposite direction from becoming the individuals that they were meant to be.

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The notion of the unconscious was beginning to seep into consciousness in Kierkegaard's time. Like that other astronomer of the universe behind the brows, Sigmund Freud, Kierkegaard understood that what comes into awareness is only one set of rooms in our psychic lives. Perhaps the most potent use that Kierkegaard puts the concept of the unconscious to is in uncovering the corrosive powers of self-deception and the impact of the self-hoodwinking process on our moral lives.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus is trying to fathom what health and sickness ultimately mean. In Part I of this volume, despair is defined as an imbalance in the self and, a few pages later, in terms of gradations of consciousness of being a self. At the one end, there are those who are oblivious to the notion that they might be something more than a network of experiences; at the other extreme, there is the defiant form of despair in which the individual has a sense of the calling card of the eternal but refuses to pick it up because he or she insists on being a self on his or her own terms. In the second portion of the book the author unequivocally announces, "Despair is sin." But then what is sin? Here, Anti-Climacus turns to his pagan patron saint Socrates, and investigates the possibility that sin is ignorance. At first, the doctor of the soul seems to reject the Socratic conception of sin. After all, we cannot be held culpable for doing something wrong when we were ignorant of the fact that it is wrong to begin with—unless, of course, we are guilty of producing the ignorance that led to the wrongdoing.

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In this section, Kierkegaard's favorite pseudonym is puzzling over the fact that we humans are capable of passionately preaching one line and then doing the exact opposite. He exclaims,

[I]t is tragic-comic to see that all this knowledge and understanding exercises no power at all over men's lives, that their lives do not express in the remotest way what they have understood, but rather the opposite. . . . It is exceedingly comic that a man, stirred to tears so that not only sweat but also tears pour down his face, can sit and read or hear an exposition on self-denial, on the nobility of sacrificing his life for the truth—and then in the next moment, *ein, zwei, drei, vupti*, almost with tears still in his eyes, be in full swing, in the sweat of his brow and to the best of his modest ability, helping untruth to be victorious. (SUD, p. 90–91)

A few pages later there is something approaching an explanation:

In the life of the spirit there is no standing still . . . if a person does not do what is right at the very second he knows it—then, first of all, knowing simmers down. Next comes the question of how willing appraises what is known. (SUD, p. 94)

Here we have the tripartite model of the self that we find in Plato, Aristotle, and Freud. The understanding and the will are about to enter into a dialogue, but

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Willing is dialectical and has under it the entire lower nature of man. If willing does not agree with what is known, then it does not necessarily follow that willing goes ahead and does the opposite of what knowing understood (presumably such strong opposites are rare); rather, willing allows some time to elapse, an interim called: "We shall look at it tomorrow." During all this, knowing becomes more and more obscure, and the lower nature gains the upper hand more and more; alas, for the good must be done immediately, as soon as it is known . . . (SUD, p. 94)

And now the warning:

[B]ut the lower nature's power lies in stretching things out. Gradually, willing's objection to this development lessens; it almost appears to be in collusion. And when knowing has become duly obscured, knowing and willing can better understand each other; eventually they agree completely, for now knowing has come over to the side of willing and admits that what it wants is absolutely right. (SUD, p. 94)

At this juncture, Kierkegaard's psychoanalysis competes with Freud's. To listen to Kierkegaard, it is as though a constant whispering conversation were taking place between our lower nature, our selfish desires, and the will. Like Augustine, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms portray daily life as though we were in a constant battle with time. Procrastination is not a vice to joke about. In time, we can convince ourselves of almost anything. Given a few days or maybe just a few

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hours, we can talk ourselves into believing that the easy path is the right path, that we are morally obligated to do just what we want to do. It was because of our magic powers of self-deception that Kierkegaard judged hypocrisy to be a rarity. We don't preach one thing and do another; instead we change by increments what we are preaching to accommodate our desires.

The decision is suddenly in your lap—do you sacrifice a portion of your vacation days to pitch in with a community project to help the homeless? After all, you were a passionate advocate of the project, recruiting friends, and so on. Unfortunately, you didn't realize that an essential part of the effort would fall during your vacation. What do you do? Nothing rash, says good sense. Perhaps you should give yourself a little time to think about it, and as you mull over the matter you slowly come to realize that you can't take care of anyone else unless you take care of yourself. The next thing you know, the right thing to do is to throw down a towel and relax in the sun. And so it goes. Knowledge comes over to the side of desire, but according to Kierkegaard, it is always with some subliminal awareness that the righteous path leads to a car crash with our long- and short-term prospects for happiness. Anti-Climacus drives to this inconvenient conclusion: "And this is how perhaps the great majority of men live: they work gradually at eclipsing their ethical and ethical-religious comprehension, which would lead them out into decisions and conclusions that their lower nature does not much care for but they expand their esthetic and metaphysical comprehension . . ." (SUD, p. 94).

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We increase our store of knowledge about the world, but our moral and spiritual understanding becomes diminished. As time ticks by, we expect less and less from ourselves, morally speaking. It is, no doubt, for this reason that we tend to think of youth as a period of enchanted idealism, a time from which we awaken and come to our senses, or as Kierkegaard would have it, slip into a moral and spiritual slumber.

As for sin, the text continues, “. . . sin is not a matter of a person’s not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right” (SUD, p. 95). Or put another way, “Therefore, interpreted Christianly, sin has its roots in willing, not in knowing, and this corruption of willing embraces the individual’s consciousness” (SUD, p. 95).

Many scholars have taken up the project of trying to articulate something like a Kierkegaardian ethic. However, Kierkegaard thought much more in terms of the sin/faith dichotomy than good and evil. Still, if Kierkegaard is correct, then one of the moral assignments in life is to look into our own eyes and be honest with ourselves. It is not more ethics classes and experts that we need. Ethically speaking, it is not knowledge that we lack, but the resolve to hold on to what we know by abjuring from rationalizations. At bottom, even this admonition is rooted in a religious sensibility, for like Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard believed that you cannot become transparent to yourself, cannot properly read your inner life outside the light of the God relation.

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Kierkegaard's depth psychology and his views on self-deception also find expression in his *Works of Love*. In that text, love is presented as a salmagundi of seemingly immiscible qualities, a passion, a need, a feeling, and above all a duty. Although Kierkegaard describes a defense of faith as something akin to heresy, he occasionally pokes with the suggestion that the central ideas of Christianity, for example, that we have a duty to love, are so alien that no human could have ever come up with the idea.

The first page of *Works of Love* is a sheet of pure light. Just read:

If it were so, as conceited sagacity, proud of not being deceived, thinks, that we should believe nothing that we cannot see with our physical eyes, then we first and foremost ought to give up believing in love. If we were to do so out of fear lest we be deceived, would we not then be deceived? We can, of course, be deceived in many ways. We can be deceived by believing what is untrue, but we certainly are also deceived by not believing what is true. (WL, p. 5)

Love is a risk. Again and again, Kierkegaard hammers; there is a risk to being shrewd, calculating, and risk-averse. On the next page, the connection between love and self-deception is developed:

Ordinarily, when it is a matter of being deceived [*bedrages*] in love, however different the case may be, the one deceived is still related to love, and the deception is

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only that the love was not where it was thought to be, but the self-deceived person has locked and is locking himself out of love. (WL, p. 6)

This insight about locking ourselves out of love applies at two levels; it speaks to our relationships with others but primarily for Kierkegaard with locking ourselves out of our God relationship.

I have heard this sort of remark before, sometimes from my own lips: "Religion and all this talk of God is a basically a bunch of ghost stories. I'm not going to waste this, my only life, and perhaps what is most precious to me in this life on some imperceptible father figure that is supposed to exist, who knows where." For fear of being deceived and not getting the most out of life, every Doubting Thomas is hoodwinked, for again, you can be deceived by refusing to believe what is true just as easily as you can by being taken in by what is false.

Kierkegaard's instruction on learning to love will prompt the therapists to shake their heads. He writes, "The matter is quite simple. A person should begin with loving the unseen, God, because then he himself will learn what it is to love. But that he actually loves the unseen will be known by his loving the brother he sees; the more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the people he sees" (WL, p. 160).

The man who knew *amore* but never happy love warns that a love that is not commanded is always a preferential love, that is, a strand of love in which you adore a person for her gimlet eyes, or maybe her ability to listen but always because she has some quality

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that is of value to you. Kierkegaard insists that this kind of love, and the “fastidious” quality-attentive mind-set that goes along with it is, at bottom, a form of self-love.

Because love is all-inclusive, Kierkegaard allows that marriage and falling for the person of your checklist dreams can be included under the umbrella of his austere conception, but nonetheless, on his reading of the New Testament, we must first and foremost relate to lovers and friends as neighbors whom we are commanded to love. Then, he thinks, love becomes ennobled into something more than tingling and titivated, fundamentally selfish desire.

In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud quietly rages at this Christian notion of universal and unconditioned love, arguing that it is nothing less than a sin against love. For Freud, love is our most cherished gift, the giving of which renders us an open wound. To him, the idea of loving indiscriminately was pure pathology. In a sense, Kierkegaard concedes Freud’s point; from a secular vantage point the claim that the only true love is one that does not acknowledge differences is an abomination. And yet, Kierkegaard would counter that it was not familial love or romantic love that Christ was describing when he made love a duty and commanded “love your neighbors as yourself.” But at the risk of seeming a pedant or Pharisee, there is another puzzle here—how do we, and how are we supposed to, love ourselves?

Anyone with a modicum of psychological sensibilities knows very well that true self-love is hard to find.

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Glimpsed from the window of that study in Copenhagen, truly loving oneself is akin to worrying about the kind of person you are becoming. The concern that Kierkegaard finds constitutive of the self is not a matter of worrying about landing a job with benefits and paying back your student loans, but maybe something closer to questions, such as, can you put yourself aside and maybe skip that eighty-mile bike ride you were looking forward to and help that kid down the block prepare for his GED?

As already noted, Kierkegaard was a severe critic of the fantasy that we can and should endeavor to think about life and the hurly-burly of our existence from some kind of universal, perspectiveless perspective. He saw the present age as one in which people strove for impartiality and the kind of objectivity you might expect from a jury member or scientist. As he understood it, the secular edict was to suppress an interest in oneself, which for Kierkegaard was a form of spiritual suicide (cf. TA, p. 68). It is a suicide because it tends to amplify worries about careers while it mutes and sneers at the notion of fretting about becoming a self in the deeper Kierkegaardian sense.

But then again, we live in a fragmented world of buzzing screens and surfaces; maybe all these references to “something deeper” are a ruse. Whether it be Plato’s eternal forms or the Christian mansion beyond the sky, Nietzsche retched over the constant appeal to “a world behind the scenes”—a world that was always held to be more real than the warmth of the sun and shimmering sea. The philosopher with

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the hammer and tong warned that there was also arsenic in the appeals to a real self “deep inside,” and so on. Georges Brandes, the Danish critic, passed Kierkegaard’s works on to Nietzsche, but it was at a time when Nietzsche was deep into the madness he would ride for the last decade of his life. But even if it had been in his healthiest days, Nietzsche would have found Kierkegaard to be the most sublime and dangerous poison, a poison that makes us second-guess our strongest pulse beats.

Kierkegaard, however, was possessed of an ardent faith that what made us human was the willingness to trust in and bend our lives to the contours of something unseen and beyond reason. As Orwell wrote of Gandhi, much the same can be said for Kierkegaard: His “teachings cannot be squared with the belief that Man is the measure of all things and that our job is to make life worth living on this earth, which is the only earth we have. They make sense only on the assumption that God exists. . . .”^{*} One can only wonder how Kierkegaard might have replied to someone who earnestly pressed, why should I devote my life to a God whom I can’t see and who, if he is there, has not taken the best of care of me? The thinker, who in life could not dance, but who was the subtlest and most supple of intellectual ballet artists, once suggested that the best answer to that question of why believe might be “Because your father told you.” It’s his famous Either/Or. Choose.

^{*} George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi” (1949).

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A Note on Quote Selection

Permit me a confession and a few words on the selection of quotes in this text. Robert Hamilton has been quoted as saying, “a book of quotations . . . can never be complete.” That is especially true with a volume of Kierkegaard’s quotations. A word-gem collector could easily fill four volumes of epiphanic sentences from this thinker. In my selection, I have worked from that corner of the corpus where I have spent the bulk of my many years with Kierkegaard, that is, on those studies that bear on the psychology of our moral and religious lives. Of course, Kierkegaard often has the feather touch in delivering his weighty wisdom, but caveat emptor, this book is not “The Lighter Side of Kierkegaard.” As the wise and often hilarious *The Humor of Kierkegaard* (Princeton University Press) attests, there is a lighter and wittier side of Kierkegaard than the one encased in these covers. And that side of the man is not to be disparaged. For Kierkegaard, the face of earnestness/seriousness, a quality that he circles around on every page, is not a scowl. There is a reason the Buddha often looks as though he were about to break into a chuckle. Just listen to the jest in which Kierkegaard tenderly and half kidding, tethers the gods (religion), laughter, and life.

Something marvelous has happened to me. I was transported to the seventh heaven. There sat all the gods assembled. As a special dispensation, I was granted the favor of making a wish. “What do you want,” asked Mer-

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cury. . . . “Choose—but only one thing.” For a moment I was bewildered; then I addressed the gods, saying: My esteemed contemporaries, I choose one thing—that I may always have the laughter on my side. Not one of the gods said a word; instead, all of them began to laugh. From that I concluded that my wish was granted and decided that the gods knew how to express themselves with good taste, for it would indeed have been inappropriate to reply solemnly: It is granted to you. (EO,1, pp. 42–43)

The line with our author addressing the gods as “my esteemed contemporaries” is just delicious. It almost goes without saying that irony, humor, wit, belly laughter, and jest are serious matters for Kierkegaard. Just the same, Kierkegaard was not jesting when he repeatedly insisted that we turn into, not away from, the self-concern that is for him the ethereal embodiment of earnestness. As I confessed in the introduction, I came to Kierkegaard desperately seeking life guidance. Many of the branches that I have clipped from the tree of wisdom that is Kierkegaard’s writings are measured not for their cleverness, but against Kierkegaard’s criterion, “Only the truth that edifies is the truth for Thee.”