Puritans, to Jonathan Edwards, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Abraham Lincoln.

(Revised, October 26, 1959)

Notes
4. The Federalist, #1.
6. e.g., Francis Trollop, Domestic Manners of the Americans.
7. Nevins, Ordeal, I, p. 35.
9. Finney, Lectures on Systematic Theology, Oberlin, 1847, p. 205
16. See e.g., Tyler, Freedom's Fervor, p. 355.
17. See e.g., Symmes and Clement, Rebel America.

Schindler's List:
A Personal Kierkegaardian Reflection on the Nature of the Ethical
by John J. Davenport

I could have got more out.
I could have got more. I don't know, if I just...
I could have got more, f*ck.
If I'd made more money,
Oh, I threw away so much money,
You have no idea!
If I just... I didn't do enough.
This car. Gert would have bought this car.
Why did I keep the car? Ten people, right there.
Ten people.
This pen, two people. This is gold: two more people.
He would have given me two for it... at least one.
He would have given me one more.
One more person. A person died for that.
I could have got one more person, and I didn't!

Several years after first seeing Spielberg's movie, this final scene of Schindler's List still haunts me. Its power lies in this: Schindler's poignant remorse shows us the truth of our own relationship to moral responsibility. We encounter here in concrete terms what Kierkegaard meant by "the infinite requirement of the ethical." In Schindler's extraordinary apotheosis of grief and self-clarity, we witness a man learning for the first time that our responsibility of neighbor-love is without any limits that could be specified in quantitative terms. This is not
to say that the agape expected from us is without any conceptual or emotional bounds at all, but that in reality we are never in a position to be "love enough," that we have satisfied everything the Ethical demands. In these last moments, Schindler discovers what the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has tried to teach us in different terms: namely, that our very identity as individuals depends on an original, pre-contractual, and inexhaustible responsibility for others. If we set out on this journey, we can never return to ourselves.

It takes Schindler a long time to let himself realize that there is no way to conclude our particular responsibility he has accepted for his neighbors: the Ethical in Kierkegaard's and Levinas's radical senses is overwhelming, and eventually it swells away all pretense that there can be any plan or method or measurable threshold for having finished with it, in order then to have "leisure time" left over for indulgence. At any given level of achievement, there is always "one more" that we could have saved if only we had had a little more resolve, or exercised a little more foresight, or cared a little less for our own ego. In the realm of responsibility, this marginal "one more" extends indefinitely out before us, forming a transcendental horizon of expectation, a never ending purpose, an overflowing fullness that, if we enter into it wholeheartedly without reservation, must finally burst the bounds of our little life. And yet as Levinas also urged, this infinity of the Ethical, becomming from the Face of the Other—the "one more" who always remains—which takes us out of the narcissistic circle of an ego absorbed with itself and its objects, is not an oppression but freedom. The infinite singularity of responsibility in moral devotion is the only reality that truly transfigures us, taking us out of our finitude and lifting us up to what is eternal.

This experience of the Ethical forces us to reconceive authenticity. We had perhaps thought that a serious commitment to our duties could raise us above the numbing particularity of our animal existence, or bring us back to ourselves from out of the superficialities of consumption and ordinary affairs, without a transformation that is potentially total. We assumed that we could just do our nicely delimited part, participate for a few scheduled hours a day in the Ethical, and then return to our customary identity. In this transaction with the ethical, we think: of course I'll really still be the businessman, counselor, student, teacher, worker, artist, or friend (etc.) that I know myself to be in everyday existence. We took for granted, in other words, that we could just dabble a little in the Ethical, just play the Good Samaritan now and then, without getting drawn into anything too serious that might alter our very sense of who we are, or that might (with a kind of unaccountability) leave us almost unrecognizable to ourselves, lost in an infinitely open horizon of others to whom we are related—even given over—in moral need. We need this illusion so badly, because the Ethical in its genuine infinity is terrifying—perhaps too terrifying to face fully without a gradual introduction, an apprenticeship—and yet this terror is the only passage to freedom.

It was this illusion of finite morality to which Schindler clung, and initially it allowed him to think that he could simply do some good turns without compromising his tightly held resolve to be an aesthete in precisely Kierkegaard's sense: a bourgeois living for his own profit and pleasure "without care" for the character which constitutes his inward being. And yet this defense-mechanism allowed him to make progress, to go a little ways into a dimension of spirit that was unfamiliar and forbidding. As the film portrays him, for a long time Schindler did not identify wholeheartedly with the altruistic motives rising within him; on the contrary, he was positively angry with himself for them, outwardly fearing that they exposed him to retribution from the Nazis, but inwardly fearing (perhaps like Nietzsche) that his pity for the Nazis' victims was weakness, that his horror at their shocking mistreatment might ultimately cost him his whole sense of who he was, or where he stood in the world. His fear of these new moral feelings was prescient: the spiritual child within sensed that these promptings would inevitably destroy his comfortable world of immature aestheticism. But he did not close his eyes to the atrocities: the moral meaning he encountered for the first time in them was too significant. Instead, drawing on the illusion ideal of a readily limited ethical duty, he made a deal with himself, a compromise according to which he would help his Jewish workers and reduce his agony over their suffering, but only because he de-
satisfied on them for profit in his business. In other words, he told himself that these newly discovered motivations and actions were simply the intentions and conduct of a businessman, and nothing more.

Perhaps we all initiate ourselves into the ethical this way: we include our moral feelings in a story about ourselves that we can accept. But once it is inside, the Ethical starts to change the narrative in terms of which we understand ourselves. Through such a bargain, Schindler kept the Ethical at arm's length, warding off its potential to transform him inwardly, while nevertheless starting to act for the sake of the Ethical rather than for capitalist goals more and more often, and without clearly recognizing it. He did not want to recognize how deeply he was starting to care about others, or how deeply he was becoming involved in their fate. In the end, it was the gratitude of the very people he had saved that pierced his pretense. In the face of their honest and completely open thankfulness, he could not longer maintain the illusion that preserved his inner contradiction. For he sensed the irony and incongruity in this gratitude—outwardly he deserved it, but inwardly he knew instead that he was guilty. Not only could he have done so much more, but even worse: no precisely defined or circumscribed additional amount of sacrifice would have sufficed to discharge his responsibility. In short, he saw that the infinite was not in his debt, but he in its, that he was not a hero but a sinner and in need of a forgiveness which neither those he had helped nor those he had failed could ever provide, the death of which their grateful kindness only made all the more clear to him. Indeed, his inadequacy was so great that only an infinite forgiveness could ever answer it.

Perhaps this interpretation is colored by my Christian background. In any case, it is certainly a personal response to the movie's story—the response of a single individual. But there is no other authentic kind of response to such a film. For me, Schindler's List cuts through our common illusions to the real nature of the Ethical. To let the truth about moral responsibility touch us undiminished and without the disguises of ordinary life is to let something alien or Wholly Other penetrate us to our very core and implant there an inexhaustible and undying unsatisfaction with how things are and with what we personally have done, an unquenchable sorrow for how far both the world, and we ourselves, fall short of the Good. We can call this existential restlessness or unquiet as a tragic sense of the world—as long as we are careful not to read anything melodramatic into this word "tragic," e.g. thinking of ourselves as paladins of righteousness or suffering victims of cosmic unfairness. There is nothing aesthetic in this pure sense of tragedy: it refers instead to a purely moral emotion that can never be completely contained or "at home" in this life. Kant was therefore correct when he argued in the Groundwork that moral commitment has nothing to do with making its agent happy. On the contrary, allegiance to the Ethical is an existential sorrow that can find no consolation in any pretense of its own "tragic" beauty. A few authors have tried to give voice to this sorrow—perhaps Unamuno and Tolkien have come closest to it—but it contains something inexpressible, lying between indiguation at evil and suffering, a feeling of helplessness to respond adequately to them, and yet a burning determination to try even when the fight seems virtually futile. Yet at the bottom of this tragic resolve and "infinite resignation," as Kierkegaard called it in Fear and Trembling, lies a vast need for hope, a desire for a consolation that restores the possibility of the Good despite its human impossibility. The only consolation which could ever answer to this infinite need of the Ethical is an eschatological promise of final justice.

Something in us obscurely senses such dangers in the Ethical, which is why we shy away from it. We do not want to experience its infinite sorrow, nor to find ourselves so desperately in need of eschatological hope in the face of the inadequacies of human responses to evil. Something in us obscurely fears this final loss of self-control. And this is why Schindler shied away, and told himself "well, I'll just do this one thing, and then my conscience will be assuaged, and things can go back to being just the way they were before, without the disturbance of guilt." Almost desperate to hang onto the illusion that some compromise can be made with the Ethical—some bargain that will let us keep a little aesthetic space for ourselves transformed by its touch—he kept telling himself, "just this one
thing more, and that will be it; they can’t expect anything more than that from me! But the Ethical always expects more. Though at first his attitude towards Jews was primarily opportunist, new possibilities of inward character were dawning in Schindler after he witnessed the slaughter of the Ghetto. Their potential proved too tempting for him (to the aesthetic, as Kierkegaard says, the Ethical must first be experienced as a temptation); the experience of caring for others, however weak it was at first, held too much promise of meaning for him to simply turn his back on it, or refuse to take the next step. Thus by attraction and desire, the Ethical wore away Schindler’s defenses, stripped him of his cherished illusion of being “just a businessman,” until at last he had to stand naked before it and let it break him, let it shatter the Schindler-who-was-between-the-avails-of-finite-and-the-hammer-of-infinite-responsibility.

The Ethical, then, is not a list of household chores: it is a bottomless well, an infinity wall of uncountable height. To recognize it is to acknowledge the infinity of being guilty. As Kierkegaard notes, even not being the party responsible for a wrong on a given occasion or having done “what one could” in some accident still presupposes that one is essentially subject to the Ethical as a category, and therefore also inadequate: To him who is essentially innocent it can never occur to cast guilt away from him, for the innocent man [or “aesthetic”] has nothing to do with the determinent we call guilt. Therefore when in a particular case he casts from him the blame and thinks he is without guilt, at that very instant he makes the concession that on the whole he is one who is essentially guilty, only possibly in this particular case not guilty. In everyday life the total guilt, as a thing which is generally presupposed, is gradually so taken for granted that it is forgotten. And yet it is the totality of guilt which makes it possible that in the particular instance one can be guilty or not guilty."

Against this stark claim, the usual slippery-slope objections will arise. It will doubtless be objected from many quarters that if agape or the duty of neighbor-love is as infinite as I have described it, it has all sorts of absurd implications, such as that we should kill ourselves so that our organs could be used to save others, etc. For it will be protested, in the style of philosophers like Bernard Williams, that such an agapetic ethic takes no account of the individual or her need to have a life, and makes her of no value in comparison to others, so that her need for happiness must again and again be sacrificed for theirs. But these are errors, confusions and analytic digressions. Such objections confuse the duty of agape with utilitarian optimization, or with a conception of benevolence as a comparison preferring the greater quantitative “good” of others to the lesser quantitative “good” of the individual. But the Kierkegardian demand of agape is not “infinite” in any such mathematical sense: it is not a consequentialist calculation implying that our sacrifice should continue as long as it will help raise the average of human well-being, or even the concrete happiness of particular others. On the contrary, as Kierkegaard says, “The priority of the total guilt is not to be determined empirically, is no cæsum summum; for no determination of totality ever results from numerical computation.” The objections that Williams and others have raised against the quantitatively “endless” demands implicit in utilitarianism do not apply to the infinity of the Ethical, because the transcendence of its agapetic demand only implies unsatisfiability by any concrete, finite list of acts performed. It does not rob us of the “right” to develop ourselves and pursue a life, but rather furnishes the only basis on which we can have such an authentic self-development, as opposed to a mere “career” defined in quantitative terms.

Nor should we say that the infinite responsibility placed on us by the duty of agape violates the “ought-implies-can” principle. For the way in which this duty always reaches beyond us is fully in accord with this Kantian principle: it is not the ridiculous or impossible, but always something that we in fact could have done which the Ethical makes compulsory as unfulfilled. Schindler obviously could not single-handedly defeat Hitler or unmake the slaughter of the Jewish ghetto, but these feats conceived in abstract speculation are not what the Ethical demanded of him either. They were not the cause of his anguish. Rather, the Ethical demanded only that he save
one more, which he certainly could have done—though it does not require us to be sausages. Schmidlin learned better; there is no such thing as a sausage. In any event, concerning the affrontive context of the Ethical is no point of argument, because it does not demand anything that we can discuss as obviously impossible, but in this mood the content is worthy of consideration. We have always been abiding self-contradiction, Schmidlin is of a good mind that it is both possible and yet absurd by us. Here, the attempt to apply a slippery slope argument, to meet the threat of some other illusory perfection is both a false inference and a subterfuge, an unanswerable escape. Schmidlin is not after me. The argument, if it is to have any meaning, is best described as a piece of our own making. Schmidlin's case carries no more weight into the argument than we wish to assign. The argument is intended to be a move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take. The argument is intended to be a move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take.

In other words, the Ethical never demands the move or the content of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take. The argument is intended to be a move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take. In order to satisfy our standards, the Ethical must be in some sense perfectly cognizable. As a rule, the Ethical is an existentially arbitrary entity. Schmidlin's case, the move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, is intended to be a move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take. The argument is intended to be a move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take. In order to satisfy our standards, the Ethical must be in some sense perfectly cognizable. As a rule, the Ethical is an existentially arbitrary entity. Schmidlin's case, the move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, is intended to be a move in the direction of some other illusory perfection, but that is not the direction we wish to take.
for the person who existed only via his ownership of these things was gone, blown away by the infinity of the Ethical. King Lear had to lose everything and stand naked on the hearth to realize that he had "saw too little care" of the suffering of wretches. But for Schindler "losing everything" occurred without in fact losing the car and pen: through them, he had the same revelation as King Lear. Then what he needed most was the solace of the very people he tried to help, and beyond them, a mercy equal to the infinity of the Ethical.

In this respect, Spielberg's film also allows the horror of the Holocaust, the inconceivability of its abomination, to become a metaphor for the infinity at stake in the Ethical. For Schindler's discovery that the Ethical is infinite takes place through his final recognition that the evil of the Holocaust is terrible beyond any measure, so appalling that nothing he could save for himself has any weight when balanced against saving even one more person from its abyss. Facing an evil of transcendent proportions, and seeing it finally in the infinity of its evil, Schindler realized the infinity of the good which opposes this evil, the illimitable extent of the duty to redeem the world from such evil. What a shattering epiphany this must be to any one!—let alone to someone who had formerly been a well-contented aesthete living contentedly in the company of flattering associates. But we should not believe that we are better prepared for it. Against this shock, there are no degrees of preparation; indeed, thinking ourselves to be fine and upstanding individuals who already have some sense of the ethical will only increase our prostration, and the irony of our former pretensions, when we face the truth—the truth, of course, that we could have saved one more, and yet we didn't.

But unlike Schindler, our story is not finished. We still have a chance to act, to answer the evils and injustices of our times with the particular ways open to us. Perhaps as Levinas has suggested, it is this ethical challenge itself which makes us individual persons. If so, then it is worth the terror and the anguish to stand where Schindler stood, and invest everything—our very selves—in pursuit of the Good.