I. Introduction: The First Generation in America

Many thanks to everyone who has organized this celebration. My task, to say something useful about the progress of Kierkegaard scholarship in the United States in recent decades, is almost impossible – especially if I should include the Anglophone world more broadly. The reason is simply that there has been such an explosion of work on Kierkegaard in theology, philosophy, and even literary studies since what I would call the first generation of critical reception when some of Kierkegaard's more famous works began to be widely taught at US, Canadian, and British universities and college in the 1960s and 70s. Let me briefly indicate here who the first generation was, before I move on to more recent developments. Beyond early translators such as Swenson, Lowrie, and Dru, this era included pathbreaking scholars such as Arbaugh, Croxall, Collins, Union Seminary's Reinhold Niebuhr, John Elrod, the influential Louis Mackey, Calvin Schrag, George Stack, Jerry Gil, George Schrader (who was my teacher), and three other Yale professors – Brand Blanshard, Maurice Natanson, and Louis Dupré. In fact, along with certain Catholic colleges where existential philosophy came to supplement tradition neo-Thomist curricula, and Lutheran seminaries and colleges such as St. Olaf Yale University seems to have been a kind of wellspring for Kierkegaardian thought in the United States. Quite a few of the greatest scholars in the second-generation, such as C.S. Evans, my retired colleague Merold Westphal, and William McBride did graduate work at Yale, where some Divinity school teachers such as Paul Holmer and Gene Outka also maintained a lively interest in Kierkegaard. Apparently Holmer's somewhat Wittgensteinian interpretations of SK were quite influential, and some of his work has recently been gathered and republished by Society members. Outka, of course, is known for his work on agapic ethics and the
problem of reciprocity. Harvard theology should be acknowledged for Richard Reinhold Niebuhr's work as well though.

Without this ground laid by this first generation, the progress of the last thirty-three years would have been impossible. Nevertheless, despite their brilliance and insights, several of these early English-speaking Kierkegaard scholars were hampered by a common focus on only a few of the more famous works, such as *Fear and Trembling* and the *Concept of Anxiety*, less knowledge of the later religious works and *Upbuilding Discourses*, and a tendency (natural enough given the fads in American higher education at the time) to link Kierkegaard directly with other existential thinkers from Nietzsche to Jaspers, Heidegger, and especially Sartre, who was so popular in the post-war and civil rights era. It is a safe bet that in the late 60s and 1970s especially, many American students got their first view of Kierkegaard through the lens of Walter Kaufmann's angry Nietzschean contempt for anything religious in Kierkgaard's thought, leaving only what Kaufmann thought were valuable contributions about the angst related to freedom and the need for self-definition: thus in some of his books, Kierkegaard was little more than a stepping stone on the way from Shakespeare to Sartre. This proved to fateful for common understanding of Kierkegaard's concepts of ethical choice and the leap of faith, and it has taken a lot of effort by second and third-generation scholars to correct the erroneous impressions that derived from this Kierkegaard-Sartre link in the literate or generally college-educated American mind. It also seems to have been prevalent in Britain, and perhaps in certain neo-Marxist critiques of Kierkegaard, given Alasdair MacIntyre's quickness to read Kierkegaard as recommending radical and arbitrary choice (both in his early *Short History of Ethics* and in his mid-career masterpiece, *After Virtue*).

II. The Second Generation from 1980s to the turn of the century

If you will pardon the rather artificial nature of my distinction, I would describe the second generation who made Kierkegaard scholarship more rigorous and broadened it considerably in the Anglophone world as reaping the benefits of two large editorial projects. The first was the Hongs' new translations of Kierkegaard's Works, published by Princeton University Press starting in 1978 which succeeded the prior Swenson and Lowrie translations. This was a monumental work, transcended in scope only by the new Danish critical edition, the *Skrifter*, now completed under
the leadership of Niels Jørgen Cappelørn. It was the Hong editions that enabled students like me to study Kierkegaard in English during the 1980s with the benefit of scholarly introductions and some relevant journal passages. And we were then aided by the parallel volumes of the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* series, edited by Robert Perkins, early volumes of which collected work by some of the best scholars from the 1970s and early 80s, and proceeded on to showcase analyses by second-generation scholars. The critical essays in these volumes did much to raise work on Kierkegaard to a new level of rigor, offering careful analyses with historical context that made it impossible to ignore subtleties in the pseudonymous works or their connections to other signed works. Nor did they assimilate Kierkegaard’s ideas to the terms or rhetoric of other thinkers or intellectual fashions. Indeed, most of the essays in these books are so clear and helpful that as a graduate student in the 1990s, my only worry about them was that I’d come too late to submit to the volume on *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*: I feared that this series of commentary volumes would be so canonical as to leave room for little else!

But this fear was quite unnecessary. Instead, excellent monographs and edited collections on Kierkegaard began appearing with greater frequency over time. Though there are too many to name even a fair cross-section, I will mention a few. Mark Taylor's *Journeys to Selfhood* began the 1980s, and was soon followed by Steve Evans’ book on the *Fragments and Postscript*, Louis Pojman’s books on subjective belief and faith, George Connell's *To Be One Thing*, Westphal on *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* and his somewhat harrowing *God, Guilt, and Death*, Nielsen's book on the *Fragments*, and the unsurpassed single-volume analysis of Kierkegaard's major work by Alastair Hannay. Mackey belongs here too given his 1986 book, *Points of View*. Arnold Come's two monographs in the 90s on *Kierkegaard as Humanist* and *Kierkegaard as Theologian* also offered a very rich analysis of the main themes in the pseudonymous and signed religious literature. The Hongs, together with Bob Perkins and his wife Sylvia Walsh, had inspired many to join the growing reconsideration of Kierkegaard as thinker worthy of being taken seriously on many topics in moral psychology, philosophy of religion, ethics and epistemology, and theology, rather than simply as polemicist useful for scandalizing sophomores. Articles on Kierkegaard began to appear more regularly in better journals, and the Kierkegaard Society of the US was formed to organize sessions at conferences, such as the American Academy of Religion.
So Kierkegaard's worst fear had come true: he had become an industry!

Yet this was for good reason: his many works speak to some of the most profound and pervasive questions about human nature, the powers of our will, conditions of a meaningful life, how we can shape and become deeply responsible for character, and the inescapable religious challenges that face us once we commit ourselves to ethical tasks that always exceed our powers. Where Kant leaves us to postulate a consolation, Kierkegaard shows us that we are called to exist "before God," and makes us feel again what this means with a poignancy that cuts through the banalities of everyday social life with which we placate ourselves and pacify our background sense that we ought to be doing better. The scholars writing in English who clarified his central themes and thereby raised the still-widespread undergraduate teaching of Kierkegaard to a higher level did this out of a sense of responsibility to make sure that the full riches of his work could be more widely appreciated. This meant tackling hard conceptual problems, the apparent conundra left to us by Kierkegaard's penchant for paradoxes, and demonstrating Kierkegaard's relevance to ongoing debates in other areas of philosophy, even as ethics returned to being a serious subject in analytic philosophy and it became permissible again to discuss religious issues in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy – that is, in the post-positivist era, despite its naturalizing biases.

Thus works more focused on conceptual problems and connections appeared in the 1990s. In a paper I delivered here just a few months into this century, I tried to divide this recent work roughly into four genres, which I called the "broadly Calvinist" supporters who found some fairly strong type of divine command ethics in Kierkegaard; "neo-Aristotelian critics" such as MacIntyre who see his work as voluntarist, Fichtean, and even proto-Sartrean; "synthesizers" who found Lutheran, Kantian, Aristotelian and Hegelian themes in his work and defended it as a basis for a viable religious form of existential personalism that is not dogmatic or extreme; and broadly post-structuralist readers who either saw problematic rifts in Kierkegaard's thought or who interpreted much of his work as anticipating themes in Derrida and Levinas's alterity ethics. While I still think there is something to this four-fold division, the lines quickly become blurred on closer inspection.

Without any pretense of doing justice to the range found in English-language work in the 1990s, I can just mention a few notables, starting with Edward Mooney's *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, the first American monograph on *Fear and Trembling*, which he followed with a
collection of essays drawing fascinating connections with ideas in Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Harry Frankfurt among others. My own work is enormously indebted to Mooney's bridge-building and sustained conceptual analysis. Ronald Green added a couple essays on *Fear and Trembling* that still deserve mention, though several other serious articles challenging older dismissive or voluntarist interpretations of Kierkegaardian faith began to appear. We also got Westphal's *Becoming a Self* (now recently reprinted), the only English-language monograph I know of on the *Postscript*; Jamie Ferreira's *Transforming Vision* on imagination and the stage-transitions (followed early this century with her monograph on *Works of Love*); Anthony Rudd's first book on the stage-transitions and narrative; and a series of tour-de-force works by George Pattison bringing more careful attention to aesthetic and religious categories and cultural context. Sylvia Walsh's *Living Poetically* also advanced this new focus, and John Lippitt's early work on irony and humor likewise brought nuance to under-appreciated themes, while Bruce Kimmase's work also raised historical consciousness of English-speaking readers to a new level and offered conceptual clarifications in light of the historical setting for Kierkegaard's thought. More systematic efforts were also made to grapple with implications of Kierkegaard's thought for theology, beyond ideas of first generation writers like Paul Tillich who were loosely inspired by a number of Kierkegaardian ideas. David Gouwens published the wide-ranging book *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, which among other things showed, contra famous critiques by Buber and Adorno, that Kierkegaard's conceptions of faith, inwardness, individuality, and the anonymous "public" do not rule out the possibility of authentic religious community. Steven Emmanuel wrote on Kierkegaard's conception of revelation, while he and Tim Jackson (followed by many others) wrote on the relation of faith and reason in Kierkegaard thought, and Murray Rae tacked perhaps the hardest problem of all – the Incarnation! At the same time, more literary and deconstructive readings, along with some influenced by alterity ethics, began to appear. Roger Poole and John Caputo brought Kierkegaard to Derrida (while some of Derrida's own commentary on Kierkegaard was also being translated into English); James Conant brought Wittgenstein to the *Postscript*, and especially focused on its Declaration and revocation; Holmes Hartshorne interpreted the pseudonyms as a method of godly deception; Vanessa Rumble reminded us of Kierkegaard's debts to Fichte and German idealism more generally (a theme that Michelle Kosch has developed
further), and she forced us to confront real tensions in his thought; Michael Strawser brought to Kierkegaard to Levinas' version of agapic ethics, with its debts to Buber's dialogical thought. We also got the Westphal and Matustik collection on *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* showcasing this developing theme.

At the same time, more papers in English began to appear in *Kierkegaardiana* and the *Kierkegaard Yearbooks* deriving from August seminars at the Centre here in Copenhagen, and American scholars made more of an effort to communicate with European counterparts. As summers and conferences at St. Olaf College brought a new generation of north American and other English-speaking scholars together, and increasingly brought in scholars from further afield as well, the stage was set by that point for a kind of golden age in Kierkegaard scholarship that could not have been thought possible a mere 30 years ago. In the 13 years since the turn of the new century, it has become hard to keep up with all the innovative work on Kierkegaard appearing in English. As one of my old mentors used to say, when a field is really getting hot, we are eventually reduced to keeping lists of things to read. The only difference is that now, at least some of the list can be online, and the Kierkegaard Society USA has put together a website trying to list most of the major monographs and edited collections from 2006 until now.

### III. The Third Generation: An Expanding Plethora

This brings us to the third generation of English-speaking Kierkegaard scholars, by whom I mean roughly those who "came on the scene" after the turn of the century. I'm just old enough that my first publication on SK predated this, but in 2001, Anthony Rudd and I published an edited collection that gathered some published and new work from more analytic-style American authors who defended Kierkegaard as a valuable source of ideas in ethics and moral psychology. And this trend has continued in much other work since that time. Because this generation has taken the pace and number of publications up another notch, I cannot begin to do justice to all the major contributions here. Hopefully it will be enough to note that most of the main approaches begun in the 1980s and 90s have continued, but developed to a new level of rigor and sophistication now comparable to the best historical work on any other major figure in western philosophy. Yet in addition to historical care, this recent work still applies and develops Kierkegaardian themes to

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contemporary issues in aesthetics, ethics, moral psychology, epistemology, and philosophy of religion. Consider just four clusters of 21st century work in English.

First, although I am not a theologian, my sense is that work on Kierkegaard in Theology has reached a new level of excellence. Consider David Law's impressive body of work, which began in the 1990s but became widely in the last decade; he has just published a new book on *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology*; likewise, Murray Rae continues to set a high standard with his work on Kierkegaard and theology, and Hugh Pyper offers a fascinating account of Kierkegaard as a reader of biblical texts. But we also have book-length contributions by newer voices, such as Phil Brickhouse's work on Kierkegaard's *Critique of Christian Nationalism*, Jason Mahn's *Fortunate Fallibility*, and Glenn Kirkconnell on sin and salvation in *SK*. And connections with other theological sources continue to be developed, e.g. in Brian Gregor's work on Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer. In philosophy of religion, there has been renewed attention to *Fear and Trembling* with John Lippitt's Routledge Guidebook, Clare Carlisle's guidebook from Continuum, Dan Conway's forthcoming Cambridge Guidebook, and several important essays in journals and collections that have tried to move understanding forward considerably on this text. I've contributed to this work in a small way.

Perhaps partly in connection with theology, postmodern readings have also become more subtle, nuanced, and provocative since Elsebet Jegstrup published her collection, *The New Kierkegaard*, in 2002, with Genia Schoenbaumfeld and others offering critical responses in journals. Westphal's book on *Kierkegaard and Levinas*, and his continued efforts to bring Derrida into this mix, have also born fruit: his many students continue this work. A recent collection on *Kierkegaard and Levinas* edited by David Wood and Aaron Simmons represents this trend, and recently Michael Paradiso-Michau published a new study of the ethical in Kierkegaard and Levinas. Simon Podmore's book on *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God* is an excellent example of continental philosophy of religion / phenomenology applied to *SK*.

Third, there is so much good work on Kierkegaard in relation to ethics, epistemology, and psychology that I'm at a loss to decide which to mention. But Steve Evans's 2004 book on Kierkegaard's divine command ethics bears special mention, along with David Roberts' book on *Kierkegaard and Radical Evil*, Marilyn Piety's recent book on Kierkegaard's *Pluralist*
Epistemology, Jeff Hanson's collection on *Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist*, and two recent collections of essays on a wide variety of themes by Ed Mooney. Similarly focused on Kierkegaard's account of interested experience and consciousness is Patrick Stokes' work on *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* – so the Australians are certainly doing their part. The more analytic among English-speaking writers on Kierkegaard also now pay more attention to the late Christian works and Edifying Discourses, as evinced by the essays in the Stokes and Buben collection, *Kierkegaard and Death*. There is also lively debate about the thesis in several essays in the *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* collection that Kierkegaard is offers a narrative conception of self or practical identity that is fruitful for ethical themes and for understanding the stage-transitions. Partly in response to John Lippitt, Anthony Rudd and I have both published new books defending and developing this idea, which links with larger issues in analytic moral psychology today. And a conference was held on this topic in the UK in Nov. 2011.

Finally, debates about Kierkegaard's work on love is thriving after Ferreira's inspiration. Amy Laura Hall published a critical review of this theme throughout several pseudonymous works leading up to *Works of Love*; and recently Sharon Krishek has renewed objections to some of Kierkegaard's views about “preferential loves” in response to Ferreira, who has responded in a couple essays. And this discussion continues now with John Lippitt's new book on self-love and related themes in Kierkegaard, which tries to improve on both Ferreira's and Krishek's preferred resolutions while bringing Kierkegaard's ideas into dialogue with other contemporary work on friendship, love, and forgiveness. Essays planned for a new collection on *Kierkegaard and Frankfurt on Love* will help continue these debates. I cannot stress enough how valuable I think this recent genre of work is, not just in resolving long-standing problems in interpreting Kierkegaard's account of neighbor-love, but perhaps more importantly, in moving us towards a viable agapic ethics in general – a task that has been stalled for many decades and needs to be taken up again as a genuine alternative within normative ethical theory. Tim Jackson's recent work on agape bears mention in this connection to show how Kierkegaard can inspire thematic work that is not specifically about Kierkegaard's texts.

In conclusion, Kierkegaard's many rich and challenging ideas are thus an ongoing basis for
contemporary debates, reaching a broader range of audiences in philosophy, theology, and literary studies even than Nietzsche's. It is worth noting, in conclusion, that Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's works are more alive in English-speaking academic disciplines than those of any of other major existential thinkers among those who first became popular in America in the 1960s and 70s. Sartre peaked and declined, and I would say Heidegger is also a much less popular figure than two decades ago; though his work continues to be the focus of a strong line of scholarly work, it is limited to the "intensely continental" scene, and this work has little interest beyond the ivory tower from what I can see – except as an inspiration for environmental theory, which is certainly growing. Sadly, this is true for Hegel as well, who is no longer well known in the world of English-speaking philosophical studies. So Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have had more staying power, and between them, it is only Kierkegaard whose work is now taken seriously by some more analytically inclined philosophers. Of all the German idealist and romantic European philosophers between Kant and the mid-20th century linguistic turn, it seems to be Kierkegaard whose works and ideas have best stood the test of time. They are much more deeply appreciated in the English-speaking world today than they were in the cultural heyday of "existentialism," and they have been revived, explained, defended and developed in work addressed to broader audiences since that time, even though the label of "latest intellectual fad" with its quick appeal to humanities-inclined youth has passed to Derrida, Foucault, and now on to Zizek. And that is okay, because Kierkegaard never wanted a superficial popularity. But I think he would nevertheless be pleased, perhaps in part despite his doubts about academics, to see how seriously scholars around the world are working with his ideas and insights today.

It is difficult to isolate a single category of philosophical and religious issues to which Kierkegaard makes a unique contribution. His *Works of Love* is well-known in religious ethics, and it is currently the subject of much debate in English-language work on Kierkegaard, especially concerning the relation between neighbor-love and "preferential" loves. Following Jamie Ferreira's spirited defense of *Works of Love*, Sharon Krishek has renewed objections that for Kierkegaard, loves involving partiality for particular others are not clearly integrated with agapic regard. Now
John Lippitt’s new book on self-love and related themes in Kierkegaard, which tries to improve on both Ferreira’s and Krishek’s preferred resolutions while bringing Kierkegaard’s ideas into dialogue with other contemporary work on friendship, love, and forgiveness. Essays planned for a new collection on *Kierkegaard and Frankfurt on Love* will help continue these debates. This genre of work may help move us towards a viable agapic ethics and renew interest in this theme.

However, I have personally focused on two other areas in which Kierkegaard’s ideas can make unparalleled contributions to contemporary debate. First, in his interrelated conceptions of ethical self-choice, integration of identity, and “purity of heart” map out a *moderate form of personal autonomy*, in which responsibility for one’s character and self-defining commitments is limited by the importance of objective values outside the self, and ultimately the divine ground of one’s spiritual capacity for free choice and volitional effort. This view of the personal self solves many problems in contemporary moral psychology, arguably providing a better alternative to other theories of autonomy on offer today. As Anthony Rudd has also argued in a recent book, Kierkegaard’s account of “self-formation” and “self-reception” (transcendence and facticity) is also a *narrative* theory, according to which our practical identities have a structure that is analogous in crucial respects to that of a developing character in a story. A life-story on Kierkegaard’s view is not an imaginary construct of autobiographical reflection, but a real structure (which I call a “narravive”) that grows not only as the agent makes plans and forms intentions, but also as thematic connections build up between different aspects of one’s life. Thus Kierkegaard’s ideas help us apply the idea of “narrative unity” to understanding personal autonomy, the conditions of a fully authentic identity (in contrast to shallow aestheticism), and a life full of personal meaning.

Second, Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* provides a basis for distinguishing religion general from ethical ideals and moral principles. In general, the religious is distinguished by *eschatological hope* -- or more precisely trust in revealed promises that, beyond human power to predict or arrange, our highest ethical aspirations can ultimately be fulfilled by divine power. Abraham trusts that he will receive Isaac back, that Isaac will live to father a holy nation, as God has promised; and this reveals the basic structure of all distinctively religious faith. God as absolute, rather than a mere universal ground of being or universal principle (Form of the Good), is a personal God, who makes and keeps eschatological promises. Faith is thus a covenantal
relation that does not violate or destroy ethics, but rather upholds ethical ideals while recognizing the limits of human will. In particular, Christian faith looks forward to a complete fulfillment of the good in the promised hereafter in which the earth shall be renewed with bodily resurrection: in this way, the aesthetic and ethical categories are synthesized in the eschatological good. This insight from Kierkegaard also points towards an understanding of God that is more personal than the divinity of Anselmian greatest-being theology -- a God who risks human freedom, creates alterity, and whose perfection is not a static Platonic eternity but a process of personal interactions.

These are at least three important areas in which Kierkegaard's idea continue to make invaluable contributions to contemporary theology and philosophical thought. There are many more, but these three stand out as especially prominent in recent English-language work.