

Earnestness

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Earnestness (*Alvor*—noun; *alvorlig*—adjective)

From the Old Norse *alvara*, the Danish *Alvor* was originally composed of *al*, “all,” and an adjective meaning “true,” as the German *wahr*. Its lexical meaning in Danish is an expression of one’s true opinion or sincere feeling. The term is closely associated with open devotion and honest portrayal of one’s convictions and can connote severity or even gravity; but it mainly indicates that one takes a vital matter, issue, or task seriously or with the importance it deserves. Thus it has the secondary meaning of following through on one’s intentions, keeping one’s commitments, making a genuine effort. It also has the tertiary adverbial sense of “really” or “truly,” for example, meaning what one says, or being obvious about one’s views or intentions.¹

“Earnestness” is used throughout Kierkegaard’s writings, from nearly the earliest to the latest, and in both signed and pseudonymous works, major and minor. It is a central concept in his authorship, closely related to senses of “will,” involving striving, pathos, and commitment (in addition to choice). For example, in *Practice in Christianity*, writing under the authoritative pseudonym of Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard contrasts earnestness with jest, noting how they are combined in indirect communication.² Such address seeks to spur the individual to initiative by directing her back to herself, encouraging her nascent loves and capacity for devotion. Anti-Climacus describes a youth inspired by imagination of Christ as one in whom “the earnestness of life” has begun: he accepts that “to live is to be examined” based on earnest commitment kept inwardly in the heart, as opposed to being lost in the “pressure of finitude and busyness with livelihood, job, office, and procreation.”³ Rather, “the earnestness of life is to *will to be*, to will to express the perfection (ideality) in dailyness of actuality”⁴—a formula we also find in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*’s descriptions of willing the absolute (unlosable)

¹ *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, vols. 1–28, published by the Society for Danish Language and Literature, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1918–56, vol. 1, columns 501–4.

² SKS 12, 130 / PC, 125.

³ SKS 12, 188–9 / PC, 189–90.

⁴ Ibid. The Shakespearean phrase “will to be” also resonates directly with several of Judge William’s statements about the “choice” to become an ethical chooser in *Either/Or* Part Two. Anti-Climacus repeats it in describing the “second immediacy” of faith as the “*will to preserve youth’s enthusiasm, rescued in all its original character, to will to struggle to the end*” (SKS 12, 191 / PC, 192; Kierkegaard’s italics)—a formula for the infinite resignation component of faith. Earnestness as genuine willing is a crucial aspect of all these phenomena.

good at every moment to govern pursuit of finite ends in everyday life.⁵ It means that an earnest person wills the good “in truth,” or is genuinely devoted to an ethical ideal that requires dedication, sacrifice, and perseverance over time, subordinating pursuit of other finite goods to this eternal standard.

It is crucial that the values to which an earnest agent is devoted, or the ideal the agent serves throughout devotion to more particular ends, must have an *authority* that is independent of his or her own choices; otherwise it cannot provide a stable basis for self-determining decision. Thus Judge William argues in his letter on marriage that earnest erotic lovers turn to an outside authority to make their oath binding.⁶ By contrast, Anti-Climacus describes one form of despair in which the agent seeks to “bestow infinite interest and significance upon his enterprises” simply by choosing them.⁷ This orientation solely by way of one’s own “imaginary constructions” is not genuine commitment, “however perseveringly pursued. It recognizes no power [authority] over itself; therefore it basically lacks earnestness.”⁸ For a created will cannot be absolutely committed to something without finding infinite value in it.⁹

For Kierkegaard, the best form of such an ideal is the perfectionist demand of Christian agapic ethics; but earnestness refers to the subjective devotion that defines one’s volitional identity through caring in general, whether it presently aims at an aesthetic, ethical, or religious good. Thus in *Either/Or*, Judge William refers to “esthetic earnestness” as choice (on non-ethical grounds) among one’s various natural potentials: “Like all earnestness, even esthetic earnestness is beneficial for a person, but it can never rescue him entirely”—because it is not choice on the stable basis of “the difference between good and evil.”¹⁰

This makes earnest passion a basic precondition for advance from one basic “stage” or existence-sphere to another. For example, romantic devotion is not yet choice guided by ethical ideals, but it is a spiritual training that awakens the capacities of will or spirit by inspiring risk and sacrifice for something greater than ourselves. It quickens conscience or prepares us to appreciate our individual responsibility, to understand (even if inchoately rather than in explicit reflection) that no one else can play our role or do our most important work for us. The call of religious revelation is singularizing in this way, appealing to a capacity for conviction that is inward, impossible for others to know with certainty. Recognizing this is “earnestness, the only thing, if you do not have faith, that can lead you to having it; the only

⁵ This is the main theme in the “Initial Expression of Existential Pathos” section, introduced in its full title: “Simultaneously to Relate Oneself Absolutely to One’s Absolute τέλος and Relatively to Relative Ends.” *SKS* 7, 352 / *CUP1*, 387. Compare the “Purity of Heart” on “slowness of the good” and patience in daily reaffirmation of the good over many years: *SKS* 8, 170–3 / *UD*, 62–3.

⁶ *SKS* 3, 63 / *EO2*, 55–6.

⁷ *SKS* 11, 182–3 / *SUD*, 68–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This is closely connected to Kierkegaard’s argument in his discourse on “Purity of Heart” that only “the good” in a perfectionist sense can be the object of an absolutely unified will: see John Davenport, *Narrative Autonomy, Identity, and Mortality*, New York: Routledge 2012, Chapter 4.

¹⁰ *SKS* 3, 216–17 / *EO2*, 225–6.

thing, if you have faith, that can keep you in it.”¹¹ Earnestness is a necessary though not sufficient condition for faith just as ethical willing is, and is closely related to the latter. While earnestness plays a role in every existence-sphere, the kind of volition that Kierkegaard develops the ordinary concept of *Alvor* to signify is most distinctively related to the choice that defines his “ethical” stage.

In particular, earnestness is essential to “the ethical” not in the sense of *Sittlichkeit* or cultural practices but in the sense of willing that is qualified by “the absolute ethical distinction between good and evil”¹² in one’s intentions and striving, even if they have no outward effect or “world-historical” significance.¹³ In that sense, even “willing evil with diabolical callousness” or demonic defiance is earnest, though in a deficient way compared to “willing the good to the utmost” of one’s strength.¹⁴ At least the evil individual thereby acquires a distinctive character that is clear to him or her, as opposed to the “ambiguity and equivocation” of an age in which “the distinction between good and evil is enervated” by heroic commitment going out of fashion.¹⁵ This sense of ethics is closer to Kant’s in focusing on the quality of motivation or reasons for one’s choice: “True ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost of one’s capability, but also, uplifted in divine jest, in never thinking whether one thereby achieves something.”¹⁶

This “jest” is associated with earnestness throughout the authorship. In its religious form, it consists in understanding that any “result” of one’s efforts is from God; one’s freedom controls only the choice and striving. Thus “a truly enthusiastic ethical individuality, moved in earnestness,” could accept the “holy jest” that he is created with great talents yet proves unable to succeed in helping others; he says, “Yet I shall with utmost strenuousness will the ethical, this is earnestness.”¹⁷ In this form of purified will, earnestness is characterized by what Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms call “infinite resignation.”¹⁸ Thus in his diary, Quidam writes that “true

¹¹ SKS 10, 245 / CD, 238.

¹² SKS 7, 125–6 / CUP1, 134.

¹³ Ibid. Compare Judge William’s argument that marriage is earnest only if chosen for the sake of love’s infinite value (SKS 3, 72 / EO2, 63–4) and so involves “resignation” or striving that is not pursued (solely or primarily) for the sake of external results.

¹⁴ SKS 7, 125–6 / CUP1, 134. Compare Anti-Climacus’ argument that the category of “sin” is earnest, because it only applies to the single individual as acting and choosing agent (SKS 11, 231 / SUD, 119–20). Existentially, we could say that the forms of despair constituted by spiritlessness lack earnestness and thus are not sin in the full sense, though dogmatically all despair is categorized as sin.

¹⁵ SKS 8, 75 / TA, 78. By contrast, the age of revolution is sincere, because it is “a manifestation of energy that is unquestionably a definite something,” openly committed to a cause; and so it can become “either good or evil” (SKS 8, 64 / TA, 66).

¹⁶ SKS 7, 126 / CUP1, 135. This does not mean that earnest willing is not *trying* to accomplish any good outcomes. Kierkegaard affirms that “it is indeed earnestness to will this,” but earnestness requires understanding that the moral worth of one’s “eternal willing” (or infinite commitment) is the same whether one accomplishes much or “seemingly nothing at all” in external temporal affairs (SKS 8, 194 / UD, 89).

¹⁷ SKS 7, 128–9 / CUP1, 137.

¹⁸ Ibid.

earnestness is the unity of jest and earnestness,” because earnest willing must be free of needing any “external support” from contingent events (which enables a comic attitude towards results in the external world).¹⁹ But in its Christian form, this earnestness of an ethically resigned person is deepened by accepting “the jest” that even that person’s inner striving, like its outer results, is dependent on divine grace.²⁰

Importantly, Kierkegaard also uses this relation of jest with earnestness in inner being to stress that earnestness rightly understood is not emotional gravity or “a gloomy frame of mind, the ill humor of a worldly worried heart....”²¹ Earnestness is a volitional phenomenon, not primarily an emotional state; and it is certainly not a morose or bitter mood. An earnest person is able to enjoy the finite goods of earthly life, balancing them with infinite devotion to eternal ideals and accepting it as divine jest if sincere effort comes to naught—again linking earnestness with the suffering of resignation.²² Of course, full joy in the finite world of temporality ultimately requires faith beyond resignation in Kierkegaard’s view, and so we are not completely earnest without such faith. For him, the highest sense of earnestness applies to the promise of final judgment and eternal salvation that is the consolation of a purified ethical will.²³

Taking these points together, it is clear that Kierkegaard’s use of *Alvor* links common notions of sincerity with a kind of volitional commitment that (in his view) underlies sincerity and explains why it is crucial for spiritual development. In this way, Kierkegaard’s volitional interpretation of earnestness is the main inspiration and basis for later existential analyses of “authenticity” as a kind of proto-virtue or precondition for having any character that can be evaluated as morally good or evil. For example, like Heidegger after him, Kierkegaard links earnestness closely with “conscience” understood not as a threatening superego or a *daimon* that checks us but as a reflexive power by which a question is posed as if we had to ask it of ourselves in private inwardness.²⁴ He writes:

¹⁹ SKS 6, 339–40 / *SLW*, 365–6. This independence of earthly results is related to the (moderate) sense of *autonomy* that is always involved in ethical earnestness, in contrast to motives such as fear of punishment (see SKS 8, 162–3/ *UD*, 51–2). The good to which the ethical will responds is never an enticement, a threat, or cruel; we can recognize our spiritual capacity as fit for it, in agreement with it.

²⁰ SKS 7, 130 / *CUPI*, 139.

²¹ SKS 20, 343, NB4:117 / *CD*, Supplement, 365.

²² Thus “religious earnestness” involves an element beyond serious devotion to family, business, and social affairs on the basis of ethical requirement; it also requires ability to take joy in the pleasures of earthly life, without which ethical earnestness can lapse into austere “ill humor” (SKS 7, 449 / *CUPI*, 499).

²³ For example, note the relation between earnestness and final judgment in Kierkegaard’s discourse on “The Expectancy of an Eternal Salvation” (SKS 5, 255 / *EUD*, 258). Similarly, in the discourse on the teaching that “There Will Be A Resurrection of the Dead,” Kierkegaard stresses that the separation according to the “difference between right and wrong,” which is essential to the eternity of the hereafter, is the gravest question to each individual posed in the first-person (SKS 10, 218 / *CD*, 209).

²⁴ SKS 10, 242 / *CD*, 235.

There, where there is *no one* who asks and where there nevertheless is a personal question, an invisible one is there, the questioner; there in the deepest sense *you* are involved with yourself, and this is the relationship of conscience...when someone asks you a question, you can manage to deceive him if it does not please you to answer him... but here—here it is no one!²⁵

In other words, in the relation of conscience we are necessarily sincere, and so to enter into this sort of inwardness is a basis for earnestness: at this level, we cannot lie about our true commitments. Thus as the edifying discourse on “Purity of Heart” says, a basic earnestness is involved in being able to face the eternal question of what we truly will, what matters to us most. Even if our will remains partly ambiguous or “double minded” (as we always are to some extent), to be able to hear and “answer this question earnestly, a person must already have chosen in life, chosen the invisible, the internal” and be able to withdraw occasionally from the hustle and noise of social life to collect his thoughts with himself.²⁶ Thus earnestness is associated throughout the authorship with silence, singularity, quiet attentiveness to what really matters, the tranquility necessary to understand oneself²⁷—the state in which we can hear “the voice of conscience”²⁸ and receive scriptural teaching as directed to us personally.²⁹

In the section of *Works of Love* titled “Love is a Matter of Conscience,” Kierkegaard argues that in the apostolic command that love “must be out of a pure heart and out of a good conscience and out of a sincere faith,” the middle clause concerning conscience “essentially contains the other two.”³⁰ This means that volitional devotion informed by the perfectionist agapic ideal (the striving for which constitutes purity of heart) involves the “hidden being of inwardness” in which the individual’s self-relation is “directed towards the God-relationship” (faith).³¹ Kierkegaard implies here that the kind of willing that makes derivative forms of sincerity possible depends on a singularizing ethical ideal that gives each of us unique importance. Although erotic love can appear earnest in its immediate

²⁵ SKS 10, 243 / CD, 236; compare SKS 8, 224 / UD, 124. In a paragraph prior to this, we are told that “the most earnest question is the one of which it must be said: There is no one who is asking the question, and yet there is a question—and a question to you personally. If that is the case, then it is the conscience that is asking the question” (SKS 10, 243 / CD, 236). Kierkegaard uses “conscience” for an anxious reflexive relation in which it seems to be our self who is asking, yet our self in our very essence, at such a depth that the source seems mysteriously ‘other.’ This reflexive relation with alterity within us parallels the self-relation in *The Sickness unto Death* in which the self is said to be constituted by a spiritual relation to its own body–mind composite that draws its capacity for free striving from *another*. Thus Kierkegaard’s conception of “conscience” reflects this sense of dependence on God; it requires earnest willing before God, whereby we make something of our finite particulars.

²⁶ SKS 8, 227 / UD, 126–7.

²⁷ SKS 8, 176 / UD, 67.

²⁸ SKS 8, 228–9 / UD, 128–9.

²⁹ SKS 13, 62–3 / FSE, 36.

³⁰ SKS 9, 139 / WL, 137.

³¹ SKS 9, 141 / WL, 139. Again, compare being “before God” in *The Sickness unto Death*.

spontaneity—especially in contrast to dissolute shrewdness—all loves of particular others can endure as earnest devotion over time only if based on the “eternal foundation” of ethical love.³² Thus “inwardness, for the sake of earnestness” infuses all real forms of love, although they appear distinct in external relations.³³ This suggests, for example, that I should see my beloved or spouse first as my neighbor if my love for her is to last or be willable even to the point of infinite resignation: a “pure heart” is “in the deepest sense a bound heart,” committed not only to a particular beloved but at the root of this devotion also “bound to God.”³⁴ This demanding test is a strengthened version of the thesis that earnestness in any project or relationship requires an authoritative ethical basis.

However, even if someone thinks this religious standard is too demanding, she may yet agree with Kierkegaard that all loves properly speaking are sincere, because “to love falsely is to hate.”³⁵ The category of earnestness is helpful in clarifying that certain action-terms such as loving, caring, deciding, and striving have a strict sense that is incompatible with deception or refusal to express them openly (at least to oneself, but normally also to others): as the Judge puts it, “Only the ethical individual gives himself an account of himself in earnest and is therefore honest with himself.”³⁶ In this sense, aesthetic earnestness is incomplete because it is liable to lapse into an insincerity as the aesthete tries to be enigmatic and thereby cultivates an “artificial” persona.³⁷ Ethically earnest commitment is inward and in that sense hidden, but it can never be a mere means to maximizing some other end for the sake of which it could also be given up or misrepresented to others—as Peter finally understood when the rooster crowed after he denied Christ. It is essential to these states of agency to be non-instrumental in this way: we do not really love if we regard our love as a mere means (even to serving what or who we love).

Hence such “earnest authenticity” (as we might call it), with its tendency towards ethically grounded devotions and ultimately to a sense of being answerable to God for one’s self/volitional identity, is clarified by Kierkegaard’s portrayal of its opposite in various psychological phenomena of inauthenticity. For example, again inspiring Heidegger, he contrasts the inward reflexive questioning of conscience with “curiosity” about what others may believe or approve: “it is the nature of faith to ward off all curiosity in order to concentrate the mind on earnestness.”³⁸

In Kierkegaard’s famous polemic on “The Present Age,” this kind of curiosity or polite inquisitiveness that substitutes for genuine inspiration by the heroism of others is associated with idle talk or “chatter” that answers curiosity but cares nothing for the truth of what is said, a “garrulous confiding” that aims only to avoid silence by

³² SKS 9, 142–3 / WL, 141.

³³ SKS 9, 145–6 / WL, 144. Compare SKS 9, 147–8 / WL, 146: “the spirit’s love...can lie at the base of and be present in every other expression of love.”

³⁴ SKS 9, 149–50 / WL, 148.

³⁵ SKS 9, 152 / WL, 151.

³⁶ SKS 3, 249 / EO2, 261; compare the Judge’s point that an ethical individual does not flaunt his values, but he is not afraid of “owning up to his striving” or standing up for ethical commitment: SKS 3, 218 / EO2, 227.

³⁷ SKS 3, 249 / EO2, 261.

³⁸ SKS 10, 244 / CD, 238.

finding “something to chatter about.”³⁹ Both are related to a “superficiality” in which “the hiddenness of inner life” is annulled by a constant effort to conform to the crowd. As a result, the superficial person may write or say much but without expressing any authentic identity; in discussion with others, there is no “personal human discourse” because the interlocutor seems like a machine whose “enthusiasm” is only superficial busyness.⁴⁰ In short, the inauthentic person seems fake, inwardly hollow, or devoid of any lasting identity because he lacks *earnest willing*. His insincerity results from failure to will anything passionately, in the way that can “become either good or evil”—for a commitment that can be judged for ethical worth would necessarily be revealed to others rather than “deceptively change” whenever it is convenient.⁴¹ Instead, listless, envious, detached reflection “holds the will and energy in a kind of captivity” to social relations in which inward spiritual relation to oneself cannot begin.⁴² Because the agent fears negative gossip by envious others “more than death,”⁴³ he is not authentically engaged in any purpose: “The individual does not belong to God, to himself, to his beloved, to his art, to his scholarship.”⁴⁴ He does not earnestly care about excellence of any kind, which would have moved him towards appreciation of ethical values.⁴⁵

This is the situation of most “aesthetes” in Kierkegaard’s range of aesthetic types, aside from those on the way to ethical conversion who do muster heroic devotion to goals taken as objectively valuable in some sense prior to ethical qualification (usually some type of distinction or greatness in the result). For non-heroic aesthetes, like those of the anonymous “public” described in “The Present Age” who are not “essentially engaged in any way,”⁴⁶ it is hard to hear the call of conscience. As we saw above, if a person is not devoted to any ideal for life, excellent end, or principle beyond personal whims or inclinations, that person has not “chosen” in a way that involves any genuine commitment, which is the precondition for taking to heart or properly appreciating the question of whether one wills the good in truth.

At this point, it should be clear that earnestness is a qualification of “will” in a distinctive sense of that concept. Although *Alvor* is frequently associated with decision, the network of other terms to which Kierkegaard links it points to an ongoing direction of efforts, commitment in the sense of staying-power, and thus to a sort of focus and strength that are not connoted by “choice” in the ordinary sense of instantaneous picking among options: earnestness refers to a “decisiveness” that continues itself over time, a process whose motive-power is autonomous. Thus it is starkly contrasted with “doz[ing] off” spiritually “in the habitual routine

³⁹ SKS 8, 92–5 / TA, 97–9.

⁴⁰ SKS 8, 98–100 / TA, 103–5.

⁴¹ SKS 8, 64 / TA, 66.

⁴² SKS 8, 78–9 / TA, 82–3.

⁴³ SKS 8, 82 / TA, 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ As Kierkegaard writes, echoing Judge William almost exactly, a “rash leap” if it is truly decisive shows that one has “the makings of a man” who can learn from the costs of his choice (SKS 8, 69 / TA, 71).

⁴⁶ SKS 8, 88 / TA, 93.

of sameness....⁴⁷ In “The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress,” we are told that almost everyone succumbs to “the fraud of habit,” by which they deceive themselves that they are unchanged, though in fact they are “as if emaciated in their inner beings” as their love for others has become dull, weak, and “devoid of soul.”⁴⁸ This form of inauthenticity is perhaps the clearest clue that earnestness requires continuity through repeated striving, commitment continually renewed, kept fresh. Thus in Kierkegaard’s most extended statement on earnestness, which is found in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis distinguishes earnestness from “disposition” (*Gemyt*) which he defines following Rosenkranz’s *Psychology* as a tendency involving “the unity of feeling and self-consciousness.”⁴⁹ A “disposition” in this sense is not a blind conatus or drive; it is a habit of acting intentionally in some familiar way, with characteristic feelings. But earnestness is more than this:

Earnestness and disposition correspond to one another in such a way that earnestness is a higher as well as the deepest expression for what disposition is. Disposition is a determinant of immediacy, while earnestness, on the other hand, is the acquired originality of disposition, its originality preserved in the responsibility of freedom and its originality affirmed in the enjoyment of blessedness. In its historical development, the originality of disposition marks precisely the eternal in earnestness, for which reason earnestness can never become habit...habit arises as soon as the eternal disappears from repetition. When the originality in earnestness is acquired and preserved, then there is succession and repetition, but as soon as originality is lacking in repetition, there is habit.⁵⁰

In other words, a disposition is a natural tendency (one can be born with it),⁵¹ whereas earnestness is repeatedly willed—a *volitional* disposition, a spiritual pattern of caring in the will itself, with the novelty of choice keeping it alive by responding again to the eternal value that justifies it, and thereby keeping the motivation strong. Habit is the shell that remains when this kind of caring decays into empty routine, when the outward actions continue but the inward volitional commitment to their original purpose is lost, or the values that initially grounded the whole trajectory are forgotten.

In sum then, earnestness is a synthesis of disposition and choice, involving the continuity of the former and the spontaneity of the latter. Kierkegaard’s treatment of this concept thus offers a particular *conception* of authenticity. Like Heidegger after him, Kierkegaard holds that one must first be earnest about oneself, one’s spiritual potential⁵²—which is the “choice” to be a serious chooser that Judge William

⁴⁷ SKS 10, 268 / CD, 254.

⁴⁸ SKS 14, 101 / CD, 315.

⁴⁹ SKS 4, 447–8 / CA, 147–8.

⁵⁰ SKS 4, 448–9 / CA, 148–9. For more on this aspect of earnestness, see my essay “Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics,” in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, ed. by John Davenport and Anthony Rudd, Chicago: Open Court 2001, pp. 265–83.

⁵¹ SKS 4, 449 / CA, 150.

⁵² SKS 4, 449–50 / CA, 150: the ultimate “object” of earnestness is one that “every human being has, because it is himself.” And this is related to the legitimate agapic form of “self-love.”

celebrates. This does not mean that we can only care earnestly about ourselves; on the contrary, as we saw, earnest willing must be directed away from itself towards something it takes to be infinitely valuable (thus the need for choice to be grounded in an eternal ideal with objective authority). Rather, it means that *in* caring earnestly about anything else, we are *eo ipso* taking it as seriously as it merits, and being sincere about the importance of our own volitional potential for integrity. This self-related consideration is one we have to care earnestly about, if we are to be earnest about anything else. In that sense, Judge William seems to be correct that ethical earnestness is a constitutive condition of autonomous agency.

See also Choice; Conscience; Decision/Resolve; Inwardness/Inward Deepening; Love; Passion/Pathos; Patience; Self; Will.

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