

*International Kierkegaard
Commentary*

Stages on Life's Way



edited by
Robert L. Perkins

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Contents

International Kierkegaard Commentary
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Acknowledgments vii
 In Memoriam viii
 Sigla ix
 Introduction 1

1. *Stages on the Wrong Way: Love and the Other in Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way and Works of Love* 9
 Amy Laura Hall

2. *Recollection and Two Banquets: Plato's and Kierkegaard's* 49
 Robert E. Wood

3. *Does Love Cure the Tragic? Kierkegaardian Variations on a Platonic Theme* 69
 Adriaan van Heerden

4. *The Equivocal Judge William: Comparing the Ethical in Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way and Either/Or* 91
 Paul Martens

5. *The Importance of Being Earnest: Coming to Terms with Judge William's Seriousness* 113
 George Connell

6. *Morning and Melancholia in "Quidam's Diary"* 149
 Vincent McCarthy

7. *Suspended Reflections: The Dialectic of Self-Enclosure in Kierkegaard's "Guilty?"/"Not Guilty?"* 173
 Dario González

8. *Living the Possibility of a Religious Existence: Quidam of Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way* 189
 Louise Carroll Keeley

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*The Ethical and Religious Significance
of Taciturnus's Letter
in Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way*

John J. Davenport

And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from it in horror. But it did not drive me back or turn me from my purpose: it merely left me hanging in suspense.¹

“ ‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’: A Story of Suffering” or Quidam’s Diary, as it has come to be called, is the central piece in *Stages on Life’s Way*. Frater Taciturnus, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, begins by telling us how he accidentally retrieved the diary from a box lost in “the depths” of Søborg Lake: “The box was locked, and when I forced it open the key was on the inside: inclosing reserve is always turned inward in that way” (SLW, 189).² Taciturnus proceeds as if this Diary were a true story, but he indicates at the end of his introduction that it is really an “imaginary psychological construction” that is supposed to facilitate study of a particular kind of “passion carried to its extreme,” which is not found in “the many inadequate manifestations of the psychical states that actuality offers” (SLW, 191). Thus the Diary is mainly an exercise in what Kierkegaard calls experimental psychology: it is meant to explore what states of thought and passion are possible for human beings, which in turn depends on the ontological relation between the categories of aesthetic, ethical, and religious existence.

¹St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961) viii.11.175.

²Compare this to C. S. Lewis’s view in *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collier/Macmillan, 1986) “that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside” (127).

But while the Diary itself is a work of endless richness (and many riddles) it is Taciturnus's subsequent "Letter to the Reader" that deals directly with the philosophical themes motivating Kierkegaard in the Diary. In fact, Taciturnus's "Letter" is as important for understanding Kierkegaard's conception of the existential categories as anything he wrote.³ Of the many topics treated in Taciturnus's reflections, I will consider a few of the most important: what they imply about the structure of human volition and character; what they say about religious consciousness, repentance, and their relation to ethical resolve; and what they tell us about the limits of philosophical study of these matters. I will leave almost entirely out of this account how the story in the Diary and the commentary in the "Letter to the Reader" may reflect the circumstances of Kierkegaard's own relationship with Regine Olsen.⁴

³Yet commentary on the "Letter" is scanty in the secondary literature. Gregor Malantschuk, one of the greatest Kierkegaard scholars, says that Taciturnus only "has an auxiliary function with respect to Quidam," and gives him half a page: see Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971) 278.

⁴In his introduction to the first English translation of *Stages on Life's Way* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967; reprinted from the Princeton University Press 1940 original) Walter Lowrie wrote that "Quidam's Diary is in every detail the story of S.K.'s unhappy love," and he is angry with Kierkegaard for writing it (13). The Diary and the Letter undoubtedly do hint at the problems that led Kierkegaard to believe he could not marry Regine, in fairness to her, and they reflect his own personal and continuing distress over this decision. Taciturnus at one point even says: "He does not love. For he lacks the immediacy in which there is the first basis of the erotic. If he could have become hers, he still would have become a spirit who wants to do everything to indulge her—but not a lover" (SLW, 436). I question Lowrie's judgment that Quidam's story was meant to parallel Kierkegaard's in every detail, if only because the commentary in the Letter makes it abundantly clear that too close a parallel would not be at all complimentary to Regine (which would not be in accord with the love for the girl that Quidam professes). In any case, Taciturnus stresses again and again that what matters is not whether the story is "true" in the historical sense (SLW, 440), but whether it reflects what is possible for finite existing persons. If somebody asks "whether my imaginary construction is a real-life story, whether it is based on something actual," then he responds, "Yes, certainly, it is based on something actual, namely, on the categories" (SLW, 445). This seems to be Kierkegaard's way of telling critics to focus on what the imaginary construction shows about existential ontology (which is my aim), and not on whether it is autobiographical to any significant extent. I am willing to listen to others who will nevertheless argue, doubtless with some justification, that

*I. Passion versus Consequentialism:
Kierkegaard, Williams, and Frankfurt*

Taciturnus begins by telling us that we should pay attention to Quidam, difficult as he is to understand, "because one is able to study the normal in the aberration;" Quidam's state of despairing tension is an aberrant form of religiousness, or a case of someone on the brink of "normal" religiousness, who thereby sheds light on the true structure of faith and the paradox that "it is the most difficult of all, even though absolutely accessible and absolutely enough for everyone" (SLW, 398). In particular, we are told that Quidam's love for the girl is "unhappy" not in the aesthetic but in the religious sense.

What does this mean? Romantic love cannot be unhappy in the aesthetic sense for Kierkegaard unless first it is absolute in the sense of being *the* love of one's life, the one love to which one is prepared to devote oneself entirely, because it can last a lifetime. When this kind of romantic love is blocked by contingent circumstances, then we have unhappy love in the purest aesthetic sense. "Unhappy love implies that love is assumed and that there is a power that prevents it from expressing itself happily in the lovers' union" (SLW, 405). If we consider famous cases of unhappy love, such as Abelard and Héloïse, "we shall promptly see that the passion is immediate and that the contradiction is from the outside" (SLW, 407). This is the same in other passions that can be celebrated in poetry:

In his enthusiasm for his native land, the patriotic hero does not relate himself to himself, or the enthusiasm does not relate itself to itself, but relates itself to a surrounding world and therein also to a relationship of erotic love, to a relationship of veneration. This is how poetry must understand it. The esthetic hero must have his opposition outside himself, not in himself. (SLW, 407)

Without this kind of pure immediacy, there is no aesthetic *heroism* and we sink from poetry into the lowest kind of attitude, in which there is no pure passion for anything intrinsically valuable in the world, but only a base "commensensuality" (SLW, 406), an impure consequentialism that cares for nothing but the total quantity of goods it can get. Thus an age that disbe-

Kierkegaard still meant (and perhaps could not help but mean) to reveal something about himself to literary codebreakers among his audience. In this, perhaps, he was not entirely true to his own principles. But this aspect of the text, even if it is legitimate territory, is both beyond my competence and not my current interest.

believes in erotic love “as an absolute passion” (SLW, 405), preferring the kind of romanticism portrayed in “The Seducer’s Diary,” cannot believe that an earnest unhappy love is possible (SLW, 401). Such a sophisticated generation cannot appreciate the pure romance of *Romeo and Juliet*: “the grocer boy, a matter-of-fact philosopher, a pawnbroker, or whatever other representative of common sense one would use” will regard the play from an ironic distance (SLW, 407-408). Kierkegaard’s disgust at a utilitarian public that cares for nothing unconditionally—or in a way that might demand sacrifices in quantitative results—is especially clear here:

What, then, can be the consequence when people reject poetry and yet have no higher passion? This, of course—that people go astray with half-baked ideas and are made happy in fancies and self-delusions, and this generation becomes the most expeditious but not the most judicious, the promising and prevaricating generation without parallel. (SLW, 408)

A short digression into contemporary moral psychology will help clarify the ethical significance of Kierkegaard’s distinctions here. What Taciturnus means by a “higher passion” of the unconditional kind required for good poetry is similar to what Bernard Williams, in one of his best essays, has called “ground projects.”⁵ Williams explains the notion as follows:

Some desires are admittedly contingent on the prospect of one’s being alive, but not all desires can be in that sense conditional, since it is possible to imagine a person rationally contemplating suicide, in the face of some predicted evil, and if he decides to go on in life, then he is propelled forward into it by some desire (however general or inchoate) which cannot operate conditionally on his being alive, since it settles the question of whether he is going to be alive. Such a desire we may call a categorical desire.⁶

A man’s “ground projects” in this sense will “to a significant degree give a meaning to his life,” but they need not “be very evident to consciousness,” and they certainly do not have to be as reflectively ordered, consistent, and rational as a Rawlsian “life-plan.”⁷ They can be “immediate” in Kier

⁵See Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” *Moral Luck* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 1-19.

⁶Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” 11.

⁷Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” 12. Williams’s language also suggests that the motivation involved in ground projects must be teleological, in the sense that the agent feels pulled towards the desired end, as in appetitive *conatus*—

kegaard's sense. As Williams explains, the nexus of such projects grounds our life-meaning because these are the projects we would be willing to die for:

There is no contradiction in the idea of a man's dying for a ground project—quite the reverse, since if death really is necessary for the project, then to live would be to live with it unsatisfied, something which, if it is really his ground project, he has no reason to do.⁸

For Williams, the meaningfulness of human lives depends on having such absolute purposes, and this becomes central to his account of what is wrong with utilitarianism. Williams argues that in order for a direct utilitarian who wants to maximize desirable outcomes to begin, he or she must first have other “first-order projects” in terms of which desirable outcomes will, in part, be defined.⁹ These will often include “the obvious kinds of desires for things for oneself, one's family, one's friends, including basic necessities of life, and in more relaxed circumstances, objects of taste. Or there may be pursuits and interests of an intellectual, cultural, and creative character.”¹⁰ First-order desires of these kinds may not always constitute ground projects; perhaps they usually do not, since one cannot coherently care about too many things in the absolute way. We can even imagine a person whose *only* project is that of maximizing happiness in himself and others. This would be a peculiarly empty person, one with no passion for other first-order goals at all.¹¹ But most people are not like this:

but this is not essential to the notion of a ground project. In defining this notion, we need not assume a neo-Humean theory of motivation. It might very well be possible for us to *give ourselves* ground projects in a more active way, or to posit ground projects for ourselves, on grounds whose recognition by the agent does not itself constitute a sense of *conatus*.

⁸Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” 13.

⁹Note that the term “first-order” as Williams uses it refers to the end or *telos* desired: a project is first-order if its defining aim is something other than the satisfaction of desires themselves, or the cultivation of desires, or anything else that mentions first-order desires in its description.

¹⁰J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: for and against* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 110.

¹¹This individual could allow that others' happiness would be measured in part by the pursuit and satisfaction of their first-order projects, but his own happiness would have no other cause than success in maximizing happiness in general, and thus he has no first-order satisfactions that could enter into the determination of what states of affairs would maximize overall happiness. Such a being would be

instead they are “taken up or involved in any of a vast range of projects” aimed at things other than happiness *per se*.¹²

There are different basic kinds of “projects” to be distinguished, corresponding to how fundamental a role they play in our lives. Williams uses the term “commitment” for one broad species of project, namely “those with which one is more deeply and extensively involved and identified.”¹³ Commitments are lasting pursuits that give intelligible shape to a sustained course of activity requiring some perseverance, which provide much of the personal meaning our lives have for us: “It may even be that . . . many of those with commitments, who have really identified themselves with objects outside themselves, who are thoroughly involved with other persons, institutions, or activities or causes, are actually happier than those whose projects and wants are not like that.”¹⁴ “Commitment” in this sense is quite similar to what Harry Frankfurt has called “caring,” by which he means a volitional attitude that guides our actions and endows us with stable purposes over an extended period, giving narrative shape to a life that would otherwise be “merely a succession of different moments.”¹⁵ Frankfurt writes:

A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced. . . . Insofar as the person’s life is in whole or part *devoted* to anything, rather than being merely a sequence of events whose themes and structures he makes no effort to fashion, it is devoted to this.¹⁶

altruistic in so pure a way (involving a kind of total self-emptying) that he would no longer look like an altruistic *person* at all, but rather like a kind of mechanism.

¹²Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 112. Williams adds that commitments “can make sense to a man (can make sense to his life) without his supposing that it will make him *happy*,” and this seems right. For even if having commitments is conducive to happiness, it may be that the sort of commitments most conducive to happiness will not themselves be commitments to the pursuit of one’s own happiness, but to other things. On this topic, see Joel Feinberg’s discussion of psychological egoism in *Reason and Responsibility*, 4th ed. (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1978).

¹³Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 116.

¹⁴Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 113-14.

¹⁵Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 80-94, 83.

¹⁶Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” 83.

Like Williams on commitments, Frankfurt thinks cares need not arise from distinctively moral judgments; they can be entirely *aesthetic* in Kierkegaard's broad sense of that term. Significantly, Frankfurt also relates caring in his sense to love. Among different modes of caring, he writes, "the most notable . . . are perhaps the several varieties of love."¹⁷ At other points, even closer to Kierkegaard, Frankfurt uses the language of "love" as a stand-in for every mode of "caring" or committed dedication.¹⁸

An ability to be committed or to care in these senses will be essential for many of the most meaningful and fulfilling activities open to us in human life. Engaging in what Alasdair MacIntyre has called "practices" requires this kind of devotion,¹⁹ and as Charles Taylor has similarly argued, developing intimate human relationships of friendship and conjugal love requires the staying power of noninstrumental care for the other.²⁰

Given this gloss on caring or commitment in general, we may think of "ground projects" as one species of commitment, i.e. an especially profound kind that involves our basic reasons for living. Thus ground projects are manifested in what Kierkegaard would call "infinite" passion, and this puts some limits on the type of goals one can pursue as ground projects: as Taciturnus says, "It is a contradiction to be willing to sacrifice one's life for a finite goal" (SLW, 410).²¹ Ground projects will also help determine what other less central or fundamental commitments are volitionally possible for a person. But a person need not have clearly articulated her ground projects in a self-conscious manner: thus it is possible to live them in what Kierke-

¹⁷Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," 85.

¹⁸Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," 89-90. He also speaks of "the varieties of being concerned or dedicated, and of loving" (93). Also see Frankfurt's papers "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love" and "On Caring" in his new book, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁹See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Ed. (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) chap. 14.

²⁰See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 52-53.

²¹Paul Tillich argues similarly that although it is possible to have idolatrous "unconditional concern" for an object, goal, or ideal that objectively lacks unconditional value, eventually the inadequacy of such an object of concern will tend to undermine unconditional concern for it: see Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 64, 96-98.

gaard calls immediacy, and he thinks infinite passion will first arise in this form.

Whether they are pursued in pure immediacy or involve reflective evaluation, however, the infinite commitment of the will that characterizes ground projects is incompatible with a utilitarian attitude towards one's subjective ends. As Williams argues, a man's "decisions as a utilitarian agent are a function of all the satisfactions which he can affect from where he is: and this means that the projects of others, to an indeterminately great extent, determine his decision."²² Of course sometimes our projects do have to give way when they conflict with the more important projects of others, and we have to be sensitive to this. But loyalty to our deepest commitments cannot vary with every change in the social context that may alter the net effects that are likely to follow from our pursuing them, given how others may react. As Williams asks,

[H]ow can a man, as a utilitarian agent, come to regard as one satisfaction among others, and a dispensable one, a project or attitude around which he has built his life, just because someone's else's projects have so structured the causal scene that this is how the utilitarian sum comes out?²³

To expect someone to abandon his ground projects for such reasons would, as Williams says, be "to alienate him in a real sense from his action and the source of his actions in his own convictions."²⁴ The point here is not that a morally responsible agent can never recognize reasons to change his or her ground projects, or be open to changing them,²⁵ nor that his or her ground projects require the agent to ignore all possible consequences of actions,²⁶

²²Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 115.

²³Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 116.

²⁴Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 116.

²⁵Such an agent, whose ground projects are completely unresponsive to reasons (including considerations about consequences), would be a fanatic in the serious sense of that term. Fanatics are a proper subset of those who display infinite passion in Kierkegaard's sense, but it is possible to display such passion without being fanatical as well (so displaying such passion does not entail fanaticism).

²⁶On the contrary, ground projects and other existentially less fundamental cares or commitments almost always guide action *in part* through determining the relevance and importance that different kinds of consequences should have in our considerations, or through guiding our sense of how to make this determination. And as Williams points out, principles can be nonconsequentialist without requiring us to do certain things or pursue certain causes "whatever the consequences,"

but rather that a human life cannot have a narrative structure without some commitments that are regarded as worthwhile for their own sake, along with related principles that will direct one's attention to more particular sorts of outcomes than total or average happiness.

Finally, this implies a subtler point of even more general significance: to have ground projects is generally to care about something in a manner that cannot be explained simply in terms of optimizing results or bringing about the best states of affairs; to care is generally to be constrained in *the way* results may be pursued, and even more importantly, to see intrinsic value in certain types of action, attitude, attentiveness and determination in pursuing our ground project. This is especially clear if the ground project aims at inward ends, such as cultivating certain aspects of our own personality, developing talents, or altering our character (whether in desirable or undesirable directions). Ground projects usually direct us towards realizing some state of affairs, but this is hardly all they do: if we could permanently secure that state of affairs simply by pushing a button on a superpowerful machine, then the ground project could not play the role that it does in giving our life narrative shape. But since what consequentialist principles directly enjoin is the maximizing of some state of affairs (S), as opposed to directly enjoining certain forms of action or attitude, consequentialist concerns to maximize S cannot replace a ground project that involves caring about S. As Williams was the first to note, the consequentialist version can even require the agent to do something counter-to-S if this will cause other agents to take steps that will maximize S-states,²⁷ whereas *caring* about S will not usually have this implication.

Instead, genuinely caring about something or someone rules out resorting to strategies of betrayal to benefit them. For example, if someone cares about his children, she will not (unless her judgment is impaired), consider doing them some real harm on the assurance that others will then give them some compensating benefit that greatly outweighs the harm. Beyond a certain point (which only prudence in the classical sense can ascertain), to care is to refuse to calculate consequences any further, to

however extreme: instead, such principles can be limited in scope such that they do not apply in certain sorts of highly bizarre situations (Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 90-91).

²⁷Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 89.

bracket some possible outcomes as irrelevant, and to rule out decisively certain particular ways of producing cared-for outcomes.²⁸

This is most clear with respect to ground projects, as Taciturnus helps us see in contrasting two politicians. The first has only a finite passion for his goal, though (comically) he wants to be heroic, considers himself inspired, and deceives himself into believing that he is willing to sacrifice his life. "But he is sagacious enough to perceive—something that is hidden from the more simple—how important his life is for the state, that if he lives a long time no one is going to be in want, but inspiration this is not" (SLW, 411). The other dies for his cause without trying to calculate the consequences of his absence on the public good.²⁹ It is for lack of such persons, Taciturnus says, that "modern politics does not inspire its devotees to sacrifices" (SLW, 410).³⁰ For

²⁸This helps answer George Connell's complaint that "Judge William's concept of love" is inconsistent with the kind of mature evaluation of potential partners necessary for a viable marriage, and requires an immediacy that is "too fragile to survive in the world of reflection within which every normal, adult human being lives"—see Connell, *To Be One Thing: Personal Unity in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1985) 179. As the Judge insists, commitment or love is compatible with ethical reflection on what or who is worth caring about, and why, as long as the evaluation is not simply consequentialist, but itself starts from some absolute principles or purposes to which one is undialectically devoted. When the Judge speaks of reflection that destroys love, he has in mind the kind of consequentialist calculation that reduces all relationships to contracts for mutual advantage.

²⁹Imagine, to make the point vivid, that Abraham Lincoln had been unwilling to risk assassination by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation because he could foresee that his absence would let extremists on both sides make the Reconstruction into a violent struggle with debilitating social consequences. Or imagine that Nelson Mandela had been unwilling to risk ending his life in obscurity in a forgotten prison because he feared that then no one else would be able to lead the resistance to apartheid. The risk involved in this kind of calculation is the perversion of every pure motive. We cannot remain true to our commitments if we try to factor in accommodations for every possible turn of chance. This does not mean that we should be careless with our lives, fear nothing, or throw them away needlessly (as perhaps Alexander Hamilton did in his duel). But to be willing to die for something means being willing, past a point, not to consider some of the possible consequences of dying for it; in other words, it means restricting the possible consequences to which we will be sensitive in deciding how to act.

³⁰This comment on nineteenth-century Europe cannot but prompt the thought that probably one of the reasons for fascism's quick rise to popularity as an

All inspiration has its source in the passion of infinity, where every Tom, Dick, and Harry, together with all their sagacity, vanish as nonentities. . . . There is no inspiration in faith in oneself, even less in faith in one's bit of shopkeeper shrewdness. All inspiration has its source in one's passion or, deeper, in faith in a providence, which teaches a person that even the death of the greatest man is a jest for a providence that has legions of angels in reserve, and that he therefore should go resolutely to his death and leave his good cause to providence and his posthumous reputation to the poet. Just as one seldom sees an unhappy lover these days, likewise does one seldom see a martyr in the political world. . . . (SLW, 411)

Taciturnus's comments on unhappy love thus rely on this first ethical insight, which is foundational for the rest of his account: living for ground projects implies at minimum the implicit rejection of consequentialism. Thus the critique of calculative practical reasoning found throughout Kierkegaard's work.³¹ What Kierkegaard means by "heroism" or "knighthood" is, furthermore, the infinite passion of absolute commitment to a particular *kind* of ground project, namely one that is perceived by the agent as being *noble* in some sense—whether aesthetic, ethical, or religious.³² But as we will see, aesthetic, ethical, and religious heroes are distinguished not only by the kind of nobility they attribute to their ends, but also in the structure or form taken by their infinite passion for these ends.

ideological movement in the early twentieth century was the fact that its leading exponents at least seemed to evince genuine pathos. When it has been starved of resolute commitment and decisiveness in the state, a people may be too eager to embrace a leader who displays infinite passion without worrying about what exactly his or her goal is—or by tacitly assuming that it must be passion for a noble rather than an ignoble goal. Kierkegaard is sensitive to this kind of error: he recognizes that passion, care, or commitment is a precondition for virtue, but not virtue itself; equivalently, aesthetic heroes need not be ethical heroes.

³¹To cite just one example, later in Taciturnus's Letter we get an extended critique of Börne's suggestion that in big towns like Paris, statistics on crime and poverty will prevent people from viewing crime as sin, because crime is then recognized as an inevitable ailment of the body politic (SLW, 479-80). Taciturnus also praises Copenhagen as being "large enough to be a fair-sized city, small enough so that there is no market price on people," a town that (unlike the hustle of Paris) maintains "the more tranquil temperament that lets the single individual feel that he, too, still has some significance" (SLW, 487).

³²See for comparison Kierkegaard's early discussion of dying for a passion, JP, 5:5100. I am indebted to Robert Perkins for this reference.

II. Forms of Unhappy Love

In light of the foregoing, we can better understand the different levels Kierkegaard distinguishes within the aesthetic sphere of human existence. The baseline level is a life without specific cares or commitments, and thus without any authentic engagements in practices or full self-investment in intimate relationships. Such a life is perhaps most often one of banal materialism. Thus Taciturnus says that “a generation of armchair life-insurance salesmen” will not understand why poetry can’t celebrate their contemporaries (SLW, 412), and he refers to “bourgeois-philistines” who fail to grasp that tragedy lies in the power of external obstacles to prevent the fruition of “the infinity of immediacy” (i.e. an unselfconsciously pure or unconditional commitment) (SLW, 414). But the aestheticism of volitional mediocrity and carelessness can still involve reflection of a sort, namely speculative detachment that prevents involvement and leads one to view all pursuits as bets that should be hedged. Reflection of this kind, which Taciturnus calls “finite reflection” (SLW, 414), resolves all practical questions by a mediation that shuns unqualified commitment to anything—noble or ignoble—in favor of a mixture of half-measures and compromises that neutralize the existential risk of anything disturbing our comfortable complacency. This is what Kierkegaard has in mind when Taciturnus writes, for example, that “The same reflection that corroded love will also corrode the infinite passion of politics” (SLW, 410). As George Pattison says, for Taciturnus, “reflection has corroded the passion of the great lovers of the past” and “when love itself has been drained of passion in favor of prudential self-interest, it can be of no further use to poetry.”³³ The tendency towards such neutralizing reflection was also Kierkegaard’s chief complaint against his culture in his essay on “The Present Age:” it results in “the age’s absence of passion, the short-term nature of its enthusiasm, its calculating prudence, its lack of action and decision, its craving for publicity, its indolence, its mercenary interests. . . . It is an age of envy, idle chatter, and levelling,”³⁴ which domesticates even religious doctrine to the point where

³³George Pattison, “Art in an age of reflection,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 76-100, 97.

³⁴Pattison, “Art in an Age of Reflection,” 96.

it loses all power to rouse the spirit, or to challenge us out of a life of numb but polite vacuity.

As this suggests, the baseline or lowest-level aestheticism need not be (even if it often is) an especially *hedonistic* existence, concerned only with one's own material pleasures; it need not even be egoistic or aimed (in decision-theoretic terms) at maximizing the satisfaction of one's own subjective preferences. As long as it is existentially uncommitted, or lacking in absolute devotions that could conflict with the habit of consequentialist maximizing, one's life will lack narrative unity.³⁵ Such a life may have no ground project other than the tacit and unrecognized hope never actively to form any ground projects, or never to face honestly the question of what is worth dying for.³⁶ For example, referring to the section on "The Rotation Method" in *Either/Or* Volume I, Malantschuk aptly describes "that caricature of human life who makes his appearance when one no longer

³⁵Lewis's imaginary senior devil, Screwtape, writes that a vague feeling of half-conscious guilt, experienced as a "dim uneasiness," can tempt a human being into bad faith, into fleeing from the source of the discomfort and losing himself in distractions. If properly cultivated, Screwtape says, this leads the patient not to a life of indulgent hedonism, which still requires some real pleasures, however inordinately pursued, but rather to a state of listless numbness and timewasting: "All the healthy and outgoing activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and *nothing* given in return, so that at last he may say, as one of my own patients said on his arrival down here, 'I now see that I spent most of my life in doing *neither* what I ought *nor* what I liked.' The Christians describe the Enemy as one 'without whom Nothing is strong.' And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half-aware of them." See C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (London: William Collins Sons, 1979) letter #12, 56. Kierkegaard would regard this state of complete self-dissolution as the nadir of aestheticism, the polar opposite of nobility within the aesthetic category, lacking not only goodness, but also the greatness which amoral heroes can sometimes attain.

³⁶This is how I characterized aestheticism in my earlier essay, "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice between the Aesthetic and the Ethical," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 11/2 (August 1995): 73-108. I compared the state of the aesthete to Frankfurt's "wanton" who lacks higher-order volition and thus lacks resolute cares. I am now modifying that description to take into account the possibility of aesthetic heroism, which is a limiting form of aestheticism approaching the ethical. Aesthetic heroes reject consequentialism in their passionate attitude, but have not embraced the ethical demands which alone can provide a firm foundation for lasting commitment of the will.

believes in anything permanent and therefore ventures nothing for his convictions. One gets along in life by shrewd calculations. Prudence teaches one never to tie oneself seriously to anyone; doing so may bring difficulties and hinder the serious enjoyment of life."³⁷

Relative to such unheroic mediocrity, "fully definitive pathos" (SLW, 408) for an end whose value is not (at least initially) understood in terms of its ethical nobility will be a higher form of aesthetic existence. Pure erotic love is the paradigm case. Even in its heroic infinitude, however, this kind of love or devotion remains within the aesthetic sphere for Kierkegaard primarily because the passion *itself* is not reflexive, unlike some commitments that involve the agent taking a deliberate attitude towards her own projects. Because of its *immediacy* or undialectical structure, then, erotic love cannot encounter any opposition from within the agent's own psychology or operative motives. The immediacy of aesthetic pathos is thus not simply naive: it too is "not entirely without reflection; as poetry sees it, it has relative reflection by having its opposition outside itself" (SLW, 412). The lovers can reflect on each other, on the prospects for their relation, on external factors keeping them apart, but not on their devotion itself. Similarly, earnest unhappy love is classified as aesthetic because the collision is between pure eros and uncongenial external circumstances.

This also helps to distinguish unhappy aesthetic love from another sort of "unhappy love" in which the hero does not directly and primarily care for his beloved, but perversely enjoys the feeling of strong passions that can be heightened by outward frustrations, allowing him to revel in his lamentations.³⁸ We find this attitude in the imaginary author of "The Seducer's

³⁷Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, trans. Mary Michelsen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 32.

³⁸Thus Lewis's *Screw-tape* writes: "[I]f you had been trying to damn your man by the Romantic method—by making him a kind of Childe Harold or Werther submerged in self-pity for imaginary distresses—you would try to protect him at all costs from any real pain; because, of course, five minutes' genuine toothache would reveal all the romantic sorrows for the nonsense they were and unmask your whole stratagem" (*Screw-tape Letters*, letter #13, 59). By contrast, Kierkegaard conceives earnest unhappy love in a way that implies the possibility of a different kind of romanticism which, while it remains aesthetic, is still the expression of unselfish and ordinate passion. Quidam is different than both of these: he is neither a Madame Bovary nor a Romeo. It is important to realize that when Taciturnus contrasts Quidam's state with genuinely tragic unhappy love, he does not thereby mean to place him in the category of perverse romanticism. The perverse romantic

Diary" in *Either/Or* Vol.I, which is the foil for Quidam's Diary. In quite a different way, Quidam is also mad enough "to want to be an unhappy lover, although he may not even be one" (SLW, 401-402). This shows that Quidam's state cannot be that envisioned in the aesthetic paradigm of unhappy love, which requires that "it must not be in love's power to remove the obstacle" (SLW, 405). From the aesthetic perspective, to *want* to be in unhappy love is a pragmatic contradiction: it would amount to wanting one's love to be frustrated by external events, which is incompatible with infinite passion for the beloved, i.e. the precondition for any kind of unhappy love. The problem is how Quidam can love in earnest (as opposed to the perverse simulacrum of eros) yet simultaneously want this genuine romantic love to be unhappy.

Taciturnus suggests that this is possible only if what prevents the fulfillment of Quidam's love is an inward condition that coexists with romantic eros towards his beloved. But not just any sort of inward obstacle will do here. Harry Frankfurt has argued that it is possible for persons, in virtue of their capacity for what he calls "higher-order will," to be volitionally opposed to various desires on which they may nevertheless compulsively act.³⁹ For example, the "unwilling addict" is a person who acts on a compulsive desire for some drug (e.g. heroin) while nevertheless authoritatively (or in her true self) willing *not* to act on this desire.⁴⁰ Such an addict has in one sense a strong passion for her drug of choice, but this compulsion does not constitute caring for the drug in Frankfurt's sense, or a commitment to taking it in Williams's sense. Although she might feel like dying if deprived of it, and although she may spend her waking hours doing nothing but pursuing it, this is against her true wishes: she seeks a life without the drug, and thus dependency on it is not her ground project, not what makes

and Quidam are both beyond the aesthetic type of unhappy love, but in different ways.

³⁹Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68/1 (January 1971); repr.: *The Importance of What We Care About*, 11-25.

⁴⁰Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will," 17-18. In this paper, Frankfurt describes the higher-order attitude that represents the true self simply as a second-order desire not to act on the desire for the drug, but he modifies this account in later papers to make clear that the authoritative higher-order attitude may require a more complex description. Debate about this description still continues in contemporary theories of autonomy, but for our present purposes what is important is the idea that one can identify with or reject first-order motives, not simply in the sense of evaluating them negatively or positively, but in the sense of being *resolved* for or against them.

her life worth living, but precisely the opposite.⁴¹ An agent's commitments or cares, including the existentially fundamental ones that rank as ground projects, may be quite unreflective or immediate in Kierkegaard's sense, but they presuppose at least tacit consent from the higher-order will. Thus Quidam's inward obstacle cannot be an inward unwillingness to be in love with his beloved, for love cannot remain an infinite passion if alienated from the agent's self. If Quidam viewed his eros simply as an addiction to be overcome, as a random *conatus* alien to his inner self (as might someone who had earnestly vowed celibacy) then it would not be romantic love at all in the sense that Kierkegaard means: it would not involve any authoritative or identity-defining commitment to physical, emotional, and spiritual bonding with the beloved.

Nor can Quidam's problem be the inverse case in which the agent is firmly resolved to pursue his romantic love for his beloved, but finds himself overcome by other conflicting desires that he earnestly but futilely tries to resist (e.g. alcohol or gambling). In this case, the factors that interfere with the lovers' ability to consummate their love in lasting union happen to be internal to one (or both) of their psyches, but *qua* interfering factors they are analogous to external impediments such as a jealous ex-lover, an unfriendly authority, separation by geographic distance, and so on. For by hypothesis, the psychological obstacles to romantic love envisioned here are in the *volitional* sense just as "external" to the lovers' agency as the more familiar outward factors that conspire to keep true lovers apart: for the compulsions and bad habits frustrate their efforts to requite their love in just the same way as would a disease. The infinite passion of immediate and unsullied erotic love can be real despite being made "unhappy" by psychological problems in the lover, but only if the lover is an unwilling victim of these problems (and striving unsuccessfully against them) in a way analogous to Frankfurt's unwilling addict. If this were Quidam's state, then he would be in unhappy love, but he could not be said to *want* it to be unhappy: rather the love would be unhappy only because it was blocked by some psychic state of his that he most adamantly did *not* want, or (in Frankfurt's language) with which he did not identify.

⁴¹Indeed, if her "unwillingness" to be an addict is strong enough, then reliable evidence that she will never be able to break the cycle of addiction may even motivate suicide as the one way to escape a life of addiction, viewed as a life not worth living. Of course Kierkegaard would not say this, but see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 161-62.

This is clearly not what Taciturnus means when he says that Quidam's love "has its obstacle within itself" (SLW, 413). Rather,

Simultaneously he holds on firmly to his love, and he has no obstacles from the outside; on the contrary, everything smiles favorably and threatens to be changed to terror if he does not follow his wish, threatens him with a certain loss of his honor, with the death of his beloved—thus he simultaneously holds on firmly to his love and maintains that despite everything he will not, cannot make it concrete. (SLW, 414-15)

In Quidam, unlike Frankfurt's unwilling addict, there is a conflict *between ground projects* themselves: he "identifies" in Frankfurt's sense with both of his projects, despite their incompatibility. In other words, Quidam is in the state which Frankfurt calls volitional "ambiguity."⁴² His love is an unqualified commitment, which remains irrevocable even after breaking the engagement, but it conflicts with another hidden commitment that he cannot avoid. As Pattison says, "He realizes that he cannot go through with the marriage for reasons that never become clear but concern a secret guilt that involves his father."⁴³ The precise content of the commitment motivated by this guilt is not directly revealed in the Diary, but it is an obstacle to the requital of love because it commits the agent to a kind of secrecy incompatible with the complete opening of self to the other sought in marriage. It suffices here to note that the general form of this problem does not require that the hidden commitment itself be *religious* in the sense of being a commitment to God (for in most cases such a commitment is not incompatible with the commitment of conjugal love).⁴⁴ It could be a conflict with another aesthetic or ethical project that inwardly blocks the fulfillment of happy love. As Taciturnus says, the tension arises because of "a higher

⁴²See Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions*, ed. Ferdinand David Schoeman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About*.

⁴³George Pattison, "Art in an Age of Reflection," 88.

⁴⁴And Taciturnus even says that love can "happily" undergo infinite reflection and become religious (SLW, 414). In Kierkegaard's own case, of course, the conflicting commitment may have been a religious one, i.e. not to involve Regine in a family he believed was cursed for his father's sin, or to follow a divine will that he believed barred him from marriage. But I do not think Kierkegaard's considered conviction is that only such a more unusual sort of religious commitment requiring solitude or spiritual privacy could be behind the tension in inwardly unhappy love (although he sometimes seems to write this way).

passion” than the infinite but immediate pathos known by poetry, which makes one’s passion itself dialectical:

Admittedly, unhappy love . . . has its dialectic, but it has it outside itself, not in itself. That which is intrinsically dialectical in itself contains the contradiction in itself. . . . In poetry, therefore, love does not relate to itself but it relates to the world, and this relationship determines whether it becomes unhappy. Therefore as soon as passion’s sonority ceases to sound from the one, as soon as there is a conflict in passion itself—indeed, even if a higher passion announces itself in a new sonority—as soon as the concurrent sound of doubleness is detected in it, the poet cannot become involved with it. (SLW, 406)

The conflict is thus between two infinite or unqualified passions themselves, and this produces a different kind of reflection in the agent, which Taciturnus calls “infinite reflection” (SLW, 412-14). In Quidam’s story, “the difficulties do not arise because love collides with the world but because love must reflect itself in the individuality” of the agent (SLW, 413). In contrast to the “finite reflection” of the lowest-level prudential aestheticism, the passionate reflection motivated by the inward conflict of pure commitments is “infinitely higher than immediacy, and in it, immediacy relates itself to itself in the idea. But this ‘in the idea’ signifies a God-relationship of the widest scope, and within this scope there is a multiplicity of more specific determinants” (SLW, 414). In other words, inwardly unhappy love tends towards religious consciousness.

III. From Aesthetic to Religious Pathos: Disentangling Taciturnus’s Logic

But if my analysis of Quidam’s inward form of unhappy love has been accurate, it may be hard to see why this should necessarily bring him towards religious consciousness. Why cannot he simply subsist in an inwardly conflicted volitional state? That he can continue in such a state for any time of course already indicates something fundamental about the structure of the human spirit, even though spirit is still only emergent in the aesthetic stage of existence. In part, I think the answer lies in the fact that such a conflict awakens what we might call *deep freedom* in the agent, i.e. not freedom to form this or that particular intention to perform a finely individuated action (abstracted out of the subjective narrative of which it is part), but rather freedom with respect to ground projects, or in Frankfurtian terms, with respect to the higher-order will that commits us authoritatively

to some set of ends and to the motives and reasons for action involved in such caring. In immediacy, this freedom is not self-conscious, even if it is there nascently or *in potentia*: for this reason, the poetic hero "is not free in his passion" (SLW, 414). By contrast, Quidam discovers his freedom in the deep sense, not just with respect to outward action in the world, but with respect to his own pathos, his own cares, and the volitional character they compose. Thus his anguish: either way he goes, he apparently will have failed to be true to the values that define his self.

Hamlet's predicament is similar to Quidam's in this sense. Hamlet is not an aesthetic hero, since he lacks external obstacles to his goal of exacting just vengeance, but he does not pursue that goal decisively. This could be explained by assuming that Hamlet is a coward falling *below* aesthetic heroism and lacking an infinite passion for justice, and this could be in either of two ways: "if the plan remains fixed, Hamlet is essentially a loiterer who does not know how to act; if the plan does not remain fixed, he is a self-torturer who torments himself for and with wanting to be something great. Neither of these involves the tragic" (SLW, 453). The only other alternative is that Hamlet's passion for justice is genuine, but stymied by an inward conflict with a higher passion, in which case he transcends aesthetic heroism. Taciturnus suggests that the higher pathos behind his misgivings may be religious, leading him to repent of the plan even before carrying it out (SLW, 453-54).⁴⁵ The religious man becomes heroic not through any external success but through his invisible "relation with God" (SLW, 459), "in the interior being" (SLW, 454). If he suffers in this relation, it is because of obstacles internal to his will.

But it is still not entirely clear why Taciturnus believes that such an inward conflict will cause the individual to "become more and more religiously absorbed in himself," or why it should put him into "the state of suspension in which the religious has to consolidate itself" (SLW, 426). He says that Quidam's problem is that he remains in this suspension, ostensibly because he does not know if his beloved will recover permanently and

⁴⁵Notice the structural parallel between this portrayal of Hamlet and the portrayal of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham cannot simply be a tragic ethical hero; either he is a murderer (and thus unethical) or he is a religious hero, who remains ethical only through his faith in a divine dispensation. Likewise, Hamlet cannot be an aesthetic hero: either he is "essentially a vacillator" (SLW, 453), below any heroism, or he is a religious figure whose authentic passion is checked by "religious doubts" (SLW, 454).

completely from his rejection, but inwardly because “he cannot find rest in the ultimate religious resolution” (SLW, 426) which alone Taciturnus thinks can heal such an inward conflict: “there is no healing for him except religiously within himself” (SLW, 428). He has broken the engagement and thus chosen the commitment opposed to the erotic (while nevertheless still loving his beloved), but he cannot fully accept or be completely reconciled to this decision until he knows its outward result on his beloved. He remains in this “demonic” unreconciled state because he hangs on to the idea that he might be “less guilty” if only “she came out of all this all right” (SLW, 427). This hesitation on the brink of religious consciousness is one possible form of what Taciturnus calls “inclosing reserve.” In Quidam’s case this is a ‘defense mechanism,’ a way in bad faith of preventing the emergence of religious consciousness: he is “depressed in his reserve,” but it is so inclosing that it conceals the source of the depression: “he does not and cannot say what is making him reserved” (SLW, 428).

We must beware of a possible misreading at this point. It can seem (especially since Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms themselves were not always clear on this) as if Quidam’s depression or reserve is itself the inward obstacle that makes his love unhappy. Commentators have often suggested this. Pointing out an important parallel, Paul Sponheim says

Repetition takes with the *Stages* the theme of a broken engagement—broken because there is no possibility for the sharing marriage requires. In *Repetition*, it is a young man’s poetic spirit, which renders the beloved’s image more precious than her actuality, which constitutes the obstacle. In the *Stages*, it is the state of melancholy that bars the way to the openness of marriage.⁴⁶

But this is potentially misleading, because the melancholy or inclosing reserve itself results from a prior conflict between erotic love and another unnamed infinite passion in the individual: it is the symptom and not the cause of the problem. Or rather (since it is a form of spirit, not causally determined) inclosing reserve is Quidam’s way of dealing with the more basic clash in his passions, and thus reserve becomes the *form taken by* the dialectic of these passions. In this form, the passion that is an inward obstacle to erotic love is not fully understood or articulated.⁴⁷ “Even if her

⁴⁶Paul Sponheim, introduction, *Stages on Life’s Way* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), ix.

⁴⁷We cannot say that it is “repressed,” for then he would try to proceed with

lightheartedness . . . had been capable of making him a happy married man, this was not what he was supposed to be. But of this he does not dream and merely feels his misery so deeply that he is incapable of being what everyone is capable of—being a married man” (SLW, 430-31). The passion that marks him as not meant for marriage remains unspecified but presupposed in the imaginary construction.

It is clear that the resulting melancholy is not simply depression in our contemporary sense (even though Quidam sometimes implies a comparison between himself and persons we might consider clinically depressed⁴⁸). It is an existential crisis that does not result from any experience of ineffectiveness in pursuit of external affairs and goals. As opposed to the crisis of aesthetic life found in the depression of “poets, artists, and thinkers,” Taciturnus says, “the depression of my character is the crisis prior to the religious” (SLW, 430). But Taciturnus has still not fully clarified why the form of Quidam’s inner conflict should necessarily point towards a religious resolution, whether he resists it or not.

To understand this we must first grasp that for Quidam the inward conflict of his passionate commitments is also experienced as an *ethical* dilemma. A passage deleted from the draft of the “Letter” is clear on this point: “he has in fact established an ethical point of view before he becomes engaged” (SLW, 623; *Pap.* V B 148:34). He began the engagement in earnest response to eros for the girl, but despite being “resolute” in it, he is ethically committed to her honor, and so the love cannot be requited before marriage (SLW, 435). As Taciturnus says, “For a thinker, a girl’s honor is the idea and consistency” (SLW, 432). But his conscience also forbids him to marry her: “He is sure of one thing—that it will be the ruination of the girl to be united with him” (SLW, 435). What this shows is that the hidden passion that forbids marriage, in conflict with his erotic project, is an ethical passion, one the agent pursues because he sees it as an ethical requirement. Yet since this is only dimly articulated, as we see in the Diary he thinks of it like a divine interdiction; in foreboding, he has an obscure dread of the result if he marries her. Therefore for her sake “he breaks the engagement.” But after her response that she “wants to die” (SLW, 434), even if this was

erotic love despite the disturbance of the repressed passion.

⁴⁸For example, in the Diary Quidam says “many a time no one is more cunning at hiding what he wants to hide than a mentally disordered person, and . . . many a word from him contains a wisdom of which the wisest need not be ashamed” (SLW, 279).

not meant seriously, “he is obliged to think that he has crushed her” (SLW, 435). He is guilty of breaking his pledge, of betraying her erotic love, and now potentially guilty of murder, depending on whether or not she recovers (fully and inwardly) from the affair. Although he cannot really understand her aesthetic suffering, his is an essentially ethical suffering: it is “responsibility and guilt” (SLW, 432). Because he began the engagement, the inward conflict of his passions has become an ethical dilemma: apparently whichever way he goes he will be guilty. Even worse, in both directions the exact nature of his violation will remain uncertain: he cannot be sure what will happen to her if he marries her, or if he doesn’t. Therefore if he looks for a religious resolution to his dilemma, he cannot view it in the way that Taciturnus later describes (anticipating the end of the *Postscript*) as the childish view

that sin is something particular, and this particular the forgiveness of sin then takes away. But this is not forgiveness of sin. Thus a child does not know what forgiveness of sin is, for the child, after all, considers himself to be basically a fine child. If only that thing had not happened yesterday, and forgiveness removes it and the child is a fine child. (SLW, 481-82)

The given circumstances of Quidam’s dilemma mitigate against falling into this error and encourage him to see his dilemma not as an accidental and unfortunate conflict of passions that might in other circumstances have harmoniously coexisted, but rather as a symptom of an essential problem, i.e. the radical insufficiency of the unaided human will relative to the demands of absolute ethics. Thus in commenting on the themes of *Repetition* and *Stages on Life’s Way* in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Climacus argues that the proper interpretation recognizes in the broken pledge a “teleological suspension of the ethical,” but unlike the one in *Fear and Trembling* where “the person tested comes back again to exist in the ethical” (CUP, 1: 266). Instead, in Quidam’s narrative,

The teleological suspension of the ethical must have an even more definite religious expression. The ethical is then present at every moment with its infinite requirement, but the individual is not capable of fulfilling it. This powerlessness of the agent must not be seen as an imperfection in the continued endeavor to attain an ideal. . . . The suspension consists in the individual’s finding himself in a state exactly opposite to what the ethical requires. . . . Thus the individual is suspended from the ethical in the most terrifying way, is in the suspension heterogenous with the ethical,

which still has the claim of the infinite upon him and at every moment requires itself of the individual. (CUP, 1:266-67)

This fairly describes the result of Quidam's dilemma: he is pushed towards recognizing that radical "heterogeneity from the ethical," or "sin as a state in a human being," is an unavoidable condition in *his* existence (whether or not he recognizes it in all human lives).

Taciturnus does not emphasize what is stressed in the discussion of sin-consciousness in other pseudonymous works (such as *The Concept of Anxiety*, the *Postscript*, and *Sickness Unto Death*): namely that even recognizing one's state as sinfulness in the categorical sense is itself a leap, which already involves a nascent relationship with a personal divinity, rather than merely becoming aware of one's comprehensive failure in relation to the ethical standards and ideals in terms of which one cannot but judge one's life. The sense of unworthiness that Kierkegaard has in mind is too complete or total for even the most severe ethical guilt; it involves a sense of *interpersonal* alienation from the eternal that one cannot intelligibly have in relation to abstract precepts, universal principles, or ideal paradigms. So although the relationship is radically negative—a feeling of absolute alienation—sinfulness nevertheless thereby acquires the subjective quality of a unique or uniterable relation to something not only eternal but also *personal*.

In fact, from the Christian perspective of the discourse published as the companion to Quidam's Diary (i.e. "On the Occasion of a Confession"), the direct individual relationship with God that constitutes faith must always begin in this negative way. This is the paradox: "without purity no human being can see God and without becoming a sinner no human being can come to know him" (TDIO, 15, cf. 28). This certainly doesn't mean that we have to commit some particular sin to approach God, but rather that our eyes have to be opened to our existential sinfulness. Beyond the first eye-opener, when we come to know good and evil, there is the second eye-opener when we see our nakedness before the divine. Thus "the direct relation is at the outset a broken relation" (TDIO, 19-20). It begins in "the stillness in which every human being becomes guilty," no matter how long or short the list of their particular transgressions (TDIO, 14). Seeking God therefore at first means losing God in a positive way; the seeker first becomes sensible of his infinite distance from Him, before "the seeker himself is changed" so that God can draw near, so near that "he himself can become the place where God in truth is" (TDIO, 23).

Two special features of Quidam's unhappy love push him towards such a beginning of religious consciousness. First, when he discovers that his basic commitments are in inward conflict, he understands these commitments in terms of their ethical significance (and not simply the aesthetic importance or nobility of their goals). This means that their joint unsatisfiability becomes a genuine ethical dilemma not only regarding what to do, but regarding what to care about most. But Taciturnus seems to imply not only that Quidam experiences his inner tension ethically, but that a volitional conflict necessarily tends to be experienced this way. We might ask instead if an agent finding a conflict within himself between two passions that are immediate and infinite in Kierkegaard's sense could not experience this aesthetically, for example, as simply a terrible psychological misfortune. Note, however, that if an agent continues to live this way, this leaves her few viable options:

- (1) she can become psychologically paralyzed by the dilemma and pursue neither commitment;
- (2) she can live with the cognitive dissonance of the dilemma, pursuing both commitments in an alternating and mutually self-defeating sequence; or
- (3) she can try to resolve the conflict by wholeheartedly following one commitment against the other.

In Kierkegaard's view, human persons are by nature teleologically oriented towards the last of these alternatives: (1) and (2) will seem unsatisfactory, and cannot be sustained. But once the agent moves towards a resolution in wholeheartedness, the decision between alternatives cannot be made arbitrarily. In searching for criteria to ground such a decision, the agent will reflect on the meaningfulness and value of his or her commitments, both to himself and others. In this process Kierkegaard believes the force of ethical requirements will come to be felt. Though these will not be the only salient considerations, the agent seeking to resolve inward volitional conflict cannot do so effectively in the long run without interpreting his or her cares in terms of their ethical merit and their potential effects on others. This is part of the argument in *Either/Or* Volume II that forming authentic commitments or ground projects will inevitably involve the agent in making choices understood in terms of ethical criteria.⁴⁹ If so, then Quidam's way of taking

⁴⁹Note that this view faces a possible counterargument that nothing prevents the aesthete from continuing to judge his or her commitments and their conflicts

his dilemma is simply a mark of his maturity as an ethical agent. But his ethical consciousness is not yet embedded in a fully religious life-view.

It is the second feature of Quidam's situation that pushes him from the perspective of ethical humanism towards the wider religious perspective: he cannot effectively calculate the guilt that he cannot avoid, nor does he know how to contain it within definite limits. In this sense, his situation is worse than King David's, who can try via a messenger to abort the order sending Uriah to certain death (SLW, 450). But whether or not his messenger arrives in time, King David is guilty of something specific: namely, having intended to murder Uriah, before repenting of it. Quidam's guilt is less determinate, and his case is more comical because it was only good intentions that led to his potential guilt: "Inspired solely by sympathy, he takes an extreme risk, and just look, he has a murder on his conscience, or rather, he enters into dialectical agony" (SLW, 451). Thus Quidam's dilemma becomes an image for a problem that is deeper than any particular and apparently avoidable violation of ethical ideals. If even pure ethical passion can lead to indeterminate guilt, we have not an isolated failure, but a sign that humanity's existential condition is one of essential "heterogeneity" relative to the ethical in general. For the anguish of his unavoidable yet indeterminate guilt to move Quidam towards religious faith, he must therefore "be able to grasp the ethical with primitive passion in order to take offense properly" (SLW, 430), that is, to be offended by the apparent impossibility of escaping guilt, which in turn is the precondition for recognizing sinfulness as a state of radical separation from the eternal.

The story therefore has an ontological point. Taciturnus, like Climacus following him in the *Postscript*, holds that

There are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. The metaphysical is an abstraction, and there is no human being who exists metaphysically [or *sub specie aeterni*]. The metaphysical, the ontological, is, but it does not exist. . . . The ethical sphere is only a transition sphere, and therefore its highest expression is repentance as a negative action. The esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes

only in nonethical terms. This view, which seems to follow from positions defended by Bernard Williams and Nietzsche, requires a more extended answer. I try to give this answer in another essay: see the discussion of "authentic aestheticism" in "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," which will appear in the collection titled *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, ed. Davenport and Rudd (forthcoming, 2001).

bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment, but, please note, not a fulfillment such as when one fills an alms box or a sack with gold, for repentance has specifically created a boundless space (SLW, 476-77)

that is, a space one can never finish traversing in this life. Lest the stories of Abraham and Job give us the wrong impression, Taciturnus emphasizes that the narrative of a religious hero cannot (for us as existing mortals) have a truly final outcome in the same way as the quest of an aesthetic hero. Divine forgiveness is a miraculous reprieve, an absurd (or humanly impossible and incalculable) possibility of reconciliation with the ethical, but it is not as temporally discrete an event as the happy ending of a fairy tale. Religious existence has temporal duration and requires perseverance, just like pathos in the first immediacy, but unlike the latter, faith is not requited or fulfilled in a temporally discrete end point.

Thus Taciturnus can delineate the existence-stages by reference to the different kinds of outcomes towards which they are oriented. "The esthetic result is in the external and can be shown," when the hero succeeds in his quest for some noble end, or dies trying (SLW, 441). By contrast, the ethical demands absolute justice, projecting an ideal of its immediate realization relative to which any temporal process of striving for justice can only be an approximation (SLW, 441). When the eternal ethical ideal is represented in aesthetic fashion as an external achievement in time, "one sees in the total thought of the ethical a world order, a Governance, providence. This result is esthetic-ethical and therefore can be shown in the external to a certain degree" (SLW, 442). But this Kantian ethical teleology, with the cosmic fulfillment of rigid ethical law as its eschatological vanishing point, is only an image for the *inward* synthesis of ethical ideality and immediacy that is the result of religious existence. This result—the justification of the person through repentance and the forgiveness of sins—also produces an agreement between the ideal demand of justice and temporal existence, but only inwardly, and only *after* the recognition of sinfulness has separated the individual from the first immediacy of his passions. The religious fulfillment which puts him back into relation with the ethical is therefore not like the external achievement at the end of an aesthetic hero's quest: the religious is not the "first immediacy" (SLW, 399). Thus "[t]he religious outcome, indifferent towards the external, is assured only in the internal, that is, in faith" (SLW, 442). And because the individual can never take the positive achievement of this inward result for granted, but must strive in faith to maintain it, "the result lies in the internal and . . . is continually postponed"

(SLW, 442). The religious *telos* is thus not a "result" or an "outcome" in the ordinary sense. Religious faith strives towards an ideal synthesis between the ethical and *inward* immediacy (in the existing state of the will).

The repentance in which religious consciousness begins is also not a phase we can move past, or a finite task we can finish and be done with, as in Hegelian theologies (SLW, 451).

But if healing is to begin for the existing person, the moment must come when one lets the act of repentance go. For one single moment this has a deceptive similarity to forgetfulness. But to forget guilt is a new sin. This is the difficulty. To hold firmly to guilt is the passion of repentance . . . [yet] to let go of it, to remove it so it is not just as present at every moment, is necessary for healing. (SLW, 451-52)

Quidam's problem is that he prefers to remain obsessed with his repentance, just in order to avoid fully and wholeheartedly repenting. Rather than accept the essential guilt of human life that is revealed by his dilemma, and that is only resolvable through grace, he clings to the hope of averting his potential guilt with respect to the girl by his own mortal efforts, i.e. by reversing his break with her, or by some other strategy. He focuses on the fact that he is in a kind of "superposition" between being guilty or not guilty for a *particular outcome* (her fate) when instead his spiritual growth depends on seeing the problem in terms of the total guilt essential to the human condition.⁵⁰ Hence "he cannot find rest in repentance, because it seems as if he were continually about to act, to undo everything, if that were possible.—That he gives way to this is the demonic" (SLW, 451). The term "demonic" is used because this state involves rebelliousness,⁵¹ a lingering refusal fully to accept grace. To recognize the absolute need for it, given the human impossibility of fulfilling the universal demands of the absolute ethics (as opposed to the more contextualized demands of a given *sittlichkeit*), requires

⁵⁰This is also what Taciturnus means, as best as I can make out, when he writes that Quidam's "aberration is due to his letting her actuality disturb his integrating of himself in repentance, with the result that he cannot find peace in his repentance because she makes it dialectical for him" (SLW, 436).

⁵¹But it is an unselfconscious rebelliousness, a halting and halfhearted resistance to the required self-surrender before God, a form of spiritual stalling and delaying that tacitly prefers self-torment to submission—as opposed to the absolute and resolute determination to make such rebellion permanent, which is the end point of the demonic taken in the direction of evil, the Nietzschean despair that Anti-Climacus calls "defiance."

a level of horror for which he still isn't prepared, a final despair of spiritual self-sufficiency for which he still lacks the courage: this is what Taciturnus means in saying that "the deep dark night of his soul should become still darker, for then he will recover" (SLW, 424).

We aren't given the final result of this inward struggle with God, and this for two closely connected reasons. First, religious existence for human beings in time must be "negative" in the sense of always remaining an unfinished task, always suffering in the impossibility of assuming that one's salvation is completed "in positive infinity, which usually is reserved for the deity and eternity and the deceased" (SLW, 444). Religious existence "is never finished, at least not in time, nor can it be represented as such without deception" (SLW, 445). Thus a genuine religious speaker must be concerned with his own guilt, rather than with fundamentalist millenarian bombast: "he lets heaven remain closed, in fear and trembling does not feel that he himself is finished" (SLW, 464). Second, for us, each existing person's story can be interpreted only as a fragmentary narrative, and imaginary constructions (as opposed to grand metaphysical systems) should give us no more: "To complete an individuality and put down a summary answer, that is for the great systematic thinkers, who have so much to traverse; to allow it to come into being in all its possibility is what interests one who composes imaginary constructions" (SLW, 436). Taciturnus's sort of ontological psychology thus respects its own limits as a finite endeavor in human self-understanding. Ultimate outcomes are for God, beyond human calculation.

In summary, Taciturnus's "Letter" maps out Kierkegaard's inner teleology of the human will. On this view, it is our nature to care, to form commitments, and until some of our projects have an unconditional significance for us—or are pursued with infinite passion—we have not willed anything earnestly: "lost in something abstract . . . they actually do not live, but merely waste their lives" (SLW, 659; *JP* VI 6410). Using a metaphor to which Kierkegaard frequently returns, we are afraid to soar and have not used the spiritual wings within us: instead of "lofty flight in willing," we have "won the security of the pedestrian on the highway of mediocrity" (TDIO, 20). But once we establish ourselves through commitments to ends we think are noble in themselves, the highest ethical definition of nobility cannot but take on a dramatic relevance for us. As Harry Frankfurt argues, the caring person inevitably becomes interested in knowing "what conditions must be satisfied if something is to be suitable or worthy as an ideal or an object of love," i.e. *what is worth caring about, and*

why.⁵² In particular, we come to care about criteria and grounds for caring: "if *anything* is worth caring about, then it must be worth caring about what to care about."⁵³ Nor can we intelligibly base our identity on ground projects whose significance is wholly solipsistic.⁵⁴ Kierkegaard holds that as commitment becomes infinite, we cannot fully understand the significance of our ground projects without referring them to the background of absolute ethics, the final or widest existential horizon implicit in all social ethics or *sittlichkeit*. But once this happens, the pressure builds to recognize that our failure to commit ourselves to the infinite good and to follow through on our commitments are not contingent or accidental failures, but a sign of sinfulness. And then the transition to the religious stage through repentance is at hand.

IV. Conclusion: Suffering

This explanation of Taciturnus's analysis is sufficient to show why Kierkegaard sees such a close connection between religious faith and suffering. Lowrie writes, "for S.K., suffering is the religious category—not accidentally (as when suffering occurs in the aesthetic sphere and mars pleasure, or in the ethical sphere and obstructs striving) but essentially, and that not only in the beginning but throughout."⁵⁵ That suffering is *essential* to religious consciousness distinguishes it because "suffering in relation to esthetic and ethical existence is accidental; it can be absent and there can still be an esthetic or ethical existence" (CUP, 1:288). Ethicoreligious life is related to suffering in a number of interrelated ways for Kierkegaard,⁵⁶ but not all suffering has specifically religious significance. Taciturnus takes pains to emphasize that properly religious suffering is not the kind of self-inflicted torment we find in the heroes and heroines of what I have called

⁵²Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," 91.

⁵³Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," 92.

⁵⁴See Charles Taylor's argument that authentic self-definition demands attention to interpersonal standards and ethical criteria without which ground projects cannot make sense: "Inescapable Horizons," *The Ethics of Authenticity*, chap. 4.

⁵⁵Lowrie, translator's introduction to *Stages on Life's Way*, 11. On this distinction, also see the end of the "Speculative Sermon" from the draft of *Stages*: SLW, 640; JP I.625.

⁵⁶See the excellent discussion of this theme in David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 162-72.

perverse romanticism (SLW, 468).⁵⁷ Whereas aesthetic heroes pursue “great and quantitatively conspicuous” aims, and fear the powers of fate that undermine such grand purposes, the religious hero fears guilt, and suffers from the radical guilt required for repentance (SLW, 462). Thus “[t]he suffering is within the individual himself; he is no esthetic hero, and the relationship is with God” (SLW, 459). In Quidam’s “Story of Suffering,” the hero’s anguish approximates to religious suffering, because he suffers from indeterminate guilt, but his suffering is not quite fully religious, since it is partially self-torment (SLW, 472), by which he keeps himself from wholeheartedly repenting.

This suffering signifies the fact that the religious hero lives in “second immediacy,” and because of this, his commitments are not first or primarily to results in the external world: he continues care about his neighbor and to act, but on a different basis than the passions of first immediacy.⁵⁸ As Malantschuk notes, in the third of the *Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard formulates the law: “to relate oneself absolutely to the Eternal and relatively to the temporal. It is hereby decisively affirmed that the goal of human life lies beyond the temporal. . . . He who takes this position in earnest is bound to suffer in this world, and thus suffering becomes the characteristic mark of the religious life.”⁵⁹

Faith may require suffering because it requires continued repentance, dying to immediacy, and being prepared for martyrdom in witnessing to Christ. But there is a further relation between suffering and religious consciousness in Kierkegaard’s interpretation, and it is here that a potential problem becomes apparent. Kierkegaard links Christian existence to a particular theological answer to the problem of evil, namely one version of the Irenaen view that the temporal world is a “vale of soul making,” in John Hick’s famous phrase. By itself this is a theodicy, a metaphysical theory, but

⁵⁷He also suggests that Quidam’s beloved may have fallen into this perversion, since “she . . . exaggerated as much as possible and tormented herself with wanting to be an unhappy lover on the largest possible scale” (SLW, 466).

⁵⁸This is apparently what Kierkegaard means by saying that, while the aesthete’s fault is to live abstractly, and this is condemned by the ethical (which brings one back to concrete responsibilities), the religious hero living in patient expectancy lives in the true abstraction, the right sort of abstraction (SLW, 660; JP VI 6410, Pap XI A 377). In other words, religious abstraction is the opposite of worldliness, but without disengaging from life or ceasing to care, as in aesthetic abstraction.

⁵⁹Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Way to the Truth*, 58.

it motivates the existential response to evil that Kierkegaard makes essential to Christian religiousness: namely, humble submission to the trials and difficulties of mortal life as tests necessary for the growth of spirit, and hence as guided by divine providence, which must be dealing justly with us. This was certainly Kierkegaard's own response to "physical, psychical, and spiritual" problems which made him feel that he was denied the possibility of ordinary married life.⁶⁰ Commenting on the sermon at the end of *Either/Or II*, Malantschuk writes,

In anguish when he was at the point of revolting against God, Kierkegaard consoled himself with these thoughts about man's wrong and man's guilt in relation to God. These reflections may help others in the same situation. There are times and occasions when a man considers himself or others to be suffering innocently in this world. It is also true that in their mutual relationships men can be more guilty or less guilty. But in our relation to God we are always—no matter what happens—unrighteous and guilty. To think otherwise is the same as trying to abolish God or to revolt against him.⁶¹

Kierkegaard seems right that religiousness in general requires a sense of being answerable to "a higher ethic than social morality,"⁶² whose demands we will never perfectly fulfill. He may also be right that transition to the religious requires the leap of sin-consciousness. But in addition, he insists that because of our radical moral inadequacy, the sufferings caused by *all moral and natural evil* are just and for our spiritual good (while still trying to alleviate pain).⁶³ We can be asked to accept this as an unfathomable mystery, but Kierkegaard seems to me instead to regard acceptance of this

⁶⁰Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, 55.

⁶¹Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, 60.

⁶²Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, 60.

⁶³Compare C. S. Lewis's view that "The creature's illusion of self-sufficiency must, for the creature's sake, be shattered; and by trouble or fear of trouble on earth . . . God shatters it, 'unmindful of His glory's diminution' " (*The Problem of Pain*, 97). And "the old Christian doctrine of being made 'perfect through suffering' is not incredible" (105). "If the world is indeed a 'vale of soul making,' it seems on the whole to be doing its work" (108). Yet although there is much merit in the notion of corrective or remedial suffering, and even more in the idea of martyrdom in the struggle to remain true to the highest ideals, Lewis himself came later (after his wife's death) to see that as an explanation for all natural evil, this is quite inadequate.

theodicy as the only existentially adequate medicine for the rebelliousness evinced in the doubts and anger commonly occasioned by experiencing the problem of evil firsthand in our lives.

Here I think Kierkegaard badly erred, and this error infects the analysis of some of the main themes in his authorship(s). In my view, the pathos that arises from the existential problem of evil (the problem *as experienced*, rather than merely contemplated as a conceptual puzzle to be solved by analytic ingenuity) is not in itself rebelliousness, but originally one of the deepest expressions of precisely the ethical volition that is a prerequisite for genuine faith. If this is right, it is possible to reject Irenaen theodicies without being in rebellion against God or cutting oneself off from Christian religiousness. Indeed, at the risk of sounding heretical, I think this may not only be possible but even necessary today. In post-Holocaust historical time, we may have to rethink the notion of divine sovereignty over the world that Kierkegaard took for granted and look for a different theodicy if commitment to Christianity is to remain existentially possible. Or so it seems to this single individual.