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The Humanity of Faith: Kierkegaard's Secularization of Christianity

René Rosfort

Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen, DK-2300 Copenhagen, Denmark; rer@teol.ku.dk

Abstract: The nature and practice of Christianity is a major, if not the primary, topic in Kierkegaard's authorship. What it means to live a Christian life is a persistent topic in many of his major works, and yet, he spends most of his authorship criticizing traditional ways of practicing Christianity. While his critique of institutionalized Christianity and merciless unmasking of the hypocrisy of self-proclaimed Christians is rather clear, namely that they are not actually Christian, it is more difficult to get a clear idea of Kierkegaard's alternative. What is a true and sincere Christian life for Kierkegaard? The argument of this article is that Kierkegaard's famous existential approach to Christianity amounts to a secularization of Christianity and as such can be seen as a critical development of and not a rejection of the Enlightenment critique of religion. The article uses Kant as an advocate of the Enlightenment critique of religion that Kierkegaard inherits and develops critically, and after having examined Kierkegaard's existential dialectics, an outline of Kant's transcendental approach is, presented against which Kierkegaard's existential alternative is examined in more detail. Kierkegaard's existential approach is radical with its insistence on "that single individual" and on the existential challenges of human freedom that Kant banned from his analysis of both morality and faith. While Kant presents us with the transcendental possibility of faith, Kierkegaard is concerned with the existential reality of faith. It is argued that Kierkegaard's existential analysis of faith helps us to find the connection between radical individual choice and the rational morality that is not always evident in Enlightenment—and especially Kantian—accounts of morality.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; enlightenment; Kant; religion; morality; secularity; subjectivity

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1. Introduction

The nature of Kierkegaard's Christianity is still an open question after almost two hundred years. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard is a deeply Christian thinker, and the existential philosophy for which he is most famous is motivated, informed, and structured by Christian themes and concepts. What it means to live a Christian life is a persistent topic in many of his major works, and yet, he spills a lot of ink criticizing traditional ways of practicing Christianity. The primary target of his critique is the conflation of bourgeois lifestyles with a Christian conviction, culminating in the ferocious attack on the Danish Church in the final years of his short life. While his critique of institutionalized Christianity and unmasking of the hypocrisy of self-proclaimed Christians is rather clear, namely that they are not really Christian, it is more difficult to get a hold on Kierkegaard's alternative. What is a true and sincere Christian life for Kierkegaard?

The argument of this article is that the reason for the vagueness of Kierkegaard's account of a Christian life is that being a Christian is both too concrete and too individual to be captured conceptually or put forward as an objective ethical ideal. To live a Christian life is not something one person can learn from another or from being a devout member of a human institution such as the church. Rather, it is the constant effort to become "that single individual" that one already is. I herein argue that Kierkegaard's famous existential approach to Christianity amounts to a secularization of Christianity and as such can be seen as a critical development of and not a rejection of the Enlightenment critique of religion.

His ethical–religious conception of human life is as much an ethical transformation of the religious as it is a religious transformation of ethics. This means that to live religiously is not to follow a specific set of ethical rules, to organize one's life in a certain way, or to be part of a particular community.

A Christian life is therefore not necessarily different from a non-Christian or atheist life. One can be a good mother, friend, citizen, teacher, and human being without being religious. In fact, to be a true Christian, one needs to learn how to be a good mother, friend, citizen, and human being in the particular secular context that one is situated in. And yet, through faith, everything becomes radically different or, as Kierkegaard calls it, completely new. It is, to use another key Kierkegaardian formulation, not a change in *what* a person is doing but a change in *how* that person is doing what she is doing. Human beings struggle with despair, and we spend much of our lives trying to anxiously and desperately find ways to live with ourselves in a world in which everybody hurts and too many people suffer from injustices, contingencies, and human evil. Faith is a belief in the goodness of the world in spite of what we feel, see, and understand. Faith does not necessarily change the world, but it changes the way I live with myself. I am the same, and the world is the same, but both I and the world are completely new when I am not in despair, that is, when I believe in the good.

Before I venture into the details of my argument, it might be of help to clarify what I mean by secularization. When I claim that Kierkegaard is secularizing Christianity, I am not arguing that Kierkegaard is an atheist or wants to reject Christian faith. I want to show that Kierkegaard is part of the long list of theologians and philosophers who, in the wake of the Enlightenment critique of religion, want to find a way to think about and live with Christian faith in a social and intellectual context that begins to seriously question the authority of the church and the intellectual validity of traditional Christian dogmas. Kierkegaard's critique of the church, theology, and the official expression of Christianity of his time finds important inspiration in the Christian mystics and the Pietist tradition. My argument is, however, that Kierkegaard's critique is more inspired by the Enlightenment emphasis on autonomy and reason than is the case with other religious reactions to the Enlightenment critique of religion.

His vehement critique of reason and his famous argument for a leap of faith can at times overshadow the fact that Kierkegaard is not a fideist and that he develops his "unreasonable", "absurd", or "paradoxical" concept of faith out of a sustained critique of reason as well as a critique of religion. In order words, his concept of faith is not a rejection of reason but a critical development of the Enlightenment and idealist explorations of the tensions—and sometimes conflict—between faith and reason. My argument is that Kierkegaard's contribution to this tradition is to be found in his peculiar existential development of the dialectical vein of this tradition. Contrary to the Hegelian tradition that formed his immediate intellectual and religious context, Kierkegaard insists on the existential impossibility of combining faith and reason. Faith can never become reasonable, nor can reason help us live a life of faith. At the same time, we cannot live a good life without resorting both to reason and to faith. Kierkegaard does not want to return to pre-modern religious life or to the life of the monastery that wants to abstract from the existential challenges of life ([1], pp. 319–320, 401/SKS 7, pp. 291, 365)[1]. Kierkegaard's religious life is to be lived in a secular context structured by reason and informed by the budding sciences of modernity. We need faith, on Kierkegaard's account, to live a good life with the existential limits of reason, while our existential needs, interests, and desires that make up our concrete and individual life secularize faith by—literally—transposing faith from a traditional religious context (e.g., dogmas, scripture, monastery, congregation, and church) to the busy streets of Copenhagen, to the pastry shop, the theater, the nursery, the market square, the salon, and the other bustling and confusing locations of modernity that form the backdrop of Kierkegaard's reflections on Christian faith. We can, so the argument goes, only make sense of faith in terms of the individual secular challenges that each and every one of us struggles with in our existence.

I develop my argument in three steps. In the following section, I argue that Kierkegaard's authorship revolves around a dialectical core that he himself calls "existential dialectic". My argument is that Kierkegaard develops his peculiar existential form of dialectic in order to deal with the ambiguity between reason and faith that he has inherited from the Enlightenment and the German idealism of his day. As opposed to his predecessors, Kierkegaard is interested in the existential dimension of this ambiguity in the form of the concrete and individual challenges of human autonomy and in particular the paradox that human subjectivity is both truth and untruth. The human being is faced with the ethical challenge of becoming herself, that is, the single individual that she is, and yet, she cannot become herself without acknowledging the existential limits of her freedom. In Section 3, I then delve into the Kantian background of Kierkegaard's secularization of faith, trying to show how Kierkegaard's existential dialectic is a development of Kant's transcendental dialectic. I here use Alasdair McIntyre's famous categorization of Kierkegaard as a faithful Kantian as the springboard for my examination. I agree with MacIntyre's characterization of Kierkegaard as a Kantian thinker but criticize MacIntyre's rejection of Kierkegaard's approach as a "criterionless fundamental choice", pointing out that MacIntyre's reading fails to take into account the religious dimensions of Kierkegaard's ethics. I show how MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard's *Either-Or* is limited by his unwillingness to take into account the third part of the book called "Ultimatum", which gives an early impression of the religious foundation of Kierkegaard's philosophical authorship. I argue that MacIntyre fails to grasp that Kierkegaard's most prominent contribution to the Enlightenment critique of religion was his insistence on the existential entanglement of reason and faith. In Section 4, I develop my critique of MacIntyre, arguing that whereas religious faith is a consequence of Kant's ethics (i.e., we need faith to become happy, but not to be ethically good) but not a necessary part of his transcendental ethics, for Kierkegaard, we need faith to be ethically good. Kierkegaard's secularization of faith therefore still insists on a religious transformation of ethics that was foreign to Kant and the subsequent German idealists. The pivotal point of Kierkegaard's argument is that we experience an existential need of an eternal good that transcends the finite goods that we see, feel, and touch. We cannot explain this "ethical-religious" good objectively, that is, empirically, rationally, or even practically. We need to make sense of it through the existential needs, interest, desires, ideas, and hopes that constitute our individually unique lives. I conclude by explaining the title of the article, subsuming the argument of the three previous sections under Kierkegaard's ambiguous notion of humanity (*Menneskelighed*) that refers to both our human individuality (*Menneske-lighed*) and to a radical demand of human equality (*Menneske-lighed*). The humanity of faith consists in the ambiguity of the secularizing drive of Kierkegaard's notion of faith—we need to take faith out of its traditional religious context, understanding it in and through our individual existence—and his insistence on the religious foundation of human life that makes it known through an "ethical-religious" demand of an all-encompassing or eternal love that is not limited by our finite human individuality.

2. Existential Dialectic

My argument is structured around two key passages. The first one is from one of Kierkegaard's most dense books, written by his whimsical philosopher, Johannes Climacus, under the playfully serious title *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* from 1846. The passage is more precisely from the beginning of the second part of the book that deals with the subjective problem of becoming a Christian, which is a telling 15 times longer than the first part dealing with the objective problem of the truth of Christianity. Climacus writes the following:

> The world has perhaps always had a lack of what could be called authentic individualities [*egentlige Individualiteter*], decisive subjectivities, those artistically permeated with reflection, the independent thinkers who differ from the bellowers and the didacticizers. The more objective the world and subjectivities become, the more difficult it becomes with the religious categories, which are precisely in

> the sphere of subjectivity. That is why it is almost an irreligious exaggeration to want to be world-historical, scholarly-scientific, and objective with regard to the religious. ([1], p. 66/SKS 7, pp. 67–68; translation modified)

The second piece is taken from the posthumous work *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, which consists of various texts about the authorship written primarily between late 1846 to early 1849 but only published by his brother four years after Kierkegaard's death in 1859. The passage that I want to draw attention to is from the preface to the two texts collected under the title "That Single Individual: Two 'Notes' Concerning my Work as an Author". The preface is difficult to date precisely, but it probably stems from late 1848 or the beginning of 1849, seeing that it is a (critical) comment on the sociopolitical turmoil after the March Revolution in 1848[2]. It reads as follows:

> If perfect equality should be achieved, then "worldliness" [*Verdslighed*] would have to be completely eradicated, and when perfect equality is achieved, worldliness ceases to be. But is it not, then, like an obsession that worldliness has gotten the idea of wanting to force perfect equality [*fuldkommen Lighed*] and to force it in a worldly way—in worldliness! Only the religious can with the help of eternity ultimately accomplish human equality [*Menneske-Lighed*], the godly, the essential, the not-worldly, the true, the only possible human equality; and this is also why—be it said to its glorification—the religious is the true humanity [*Menneskelighed*]. ([3], p. 104/SKS 16, p. 84; translation modified)

I consider the two passages central to what Kierkegaard defines as the aim of his authorship or, as he puts it himself, "the category for my whole work as an author regarded as a totality", namely "Without authority *to make aware of* the religious, the Christian" ([3], p. 12/SKS 13, p. 19; translation modified) and "to introduce Christianity again—into Christendom" ([3], p. 42/SKS 16, p. 24). The quotes expose what I will argue is the dialectical core of the authorship. This dialectic is between the secular drive animating the authorship—the religious is subjective—and the Christian foundation of the authorship that the religious is the true humanity. I will look more at this dialectic between the secular and the religious and the Enlightenment background for this dialectic in the next sections. For now, I will try to show the interplay between the secular and the religious not only structures the content of Kierkegaard's thought but is also at play in his unique dialectical method.

Kierkegaard is known to be a slippery author. Perhaps even more than what is usual with great thinkers, his writings resist labeling, making it difficult for us to categorize his thinking (is it philosophy, literature, psychology, or theology?), and still—as we have just seen—he explicitly avows that his authorship only wants to accomplish one thing, namely to make the reader aware of the Christian. The textual ambiguities have spawned countless and often conflicting ways of reading the authorship. Here, I will only identify three of the most common ones. There are those who read Kierkegaard primarily as a modern or even postmodern author *avant la lettre* who wants to deconstruct stale and oppressive philosophical and theological accounts of what it means to be human [4–6]; there are also those who read Kierkegaard as primarily a philosopher who must be read in the context of the Western philosophical tradition, especially the German Idealism that dominated his immediate environment and the subsequent phenomenological, existential, and hermeneutical traditions in the first half of twentieth century [7–9]; and then there are those who read him as an unwavering religious author who wants to make the reader aware of the Christian [10–12].

Although I am partial to the philosophical approach, I believe that all three approaches, which seem to more or less align with Kierkegaard's three famous spheres of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—are necessary to understand Kierkegaard's authorship. Attempts to reduce the multifarious dimensions to one dimension may produce important contributions to the specific debates that the respective interpreters are engaged with, but they rarely draw a representative picture of Kierkegaard's authorship or convey the depth and richness of his thought.

I do not presume to be able to draw a satisfactory picture of Kierkegaard's authorship or capture the essence of his thought. My intention is another. I want to uncover what I consider to be the dialectical core of the productive tension between these three approaches to the authorship that I believe are captured by the two quotes above: the radical insistence on subjectivity in the form of the single individual and the argument that a Christian or religious way of life[3] is our true humanity. I do not think that we can make sense of the authorship without acknowledging and taking seriously into account these two dimensions of Kierkegaard's thought. Nor do I believe that we can conflate the two dimensions, producing either a purely secular or an exclusively religious account of Kierkegaard's authorship. Kierkegaard's authorship is produced in and through the tension or conflictual interplay between a secularizing drive and a religious foundation.

This tension is at work everywhere in Kierkegaard's writings. We find the tension manifested most obviously in dualistic oppositions such as the subjective and the objective, the individual and the universal, the visible and the invisible, the outer and the inner, the necessary and the possible, the temporal and the eternal, the body and the soul, and the finite and the infinite. Kierkegaard is not a dualist, though. On the contrary, he appears to work hard at keeping these dimensions distinct without separating or conflating them. His point is rather that human beings are fragile beings because of the heterogeneous and often conflicting dimensions that are at play in a human life ([13], p. 9). This tension runs through the authorship as a destabilizing force informing and shaping his mischievous, dialectical form of writing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of the content or aim of his authorship without taking into consideration the unique character of his writing.

Here, we think about his peculiar combination of Socratic and Hegelian dialectics. From Socrates, he inherits an ironic dialectics that deconstructs convention, habits, and dogmatic pretensions of truth ([14,15], pp. 135–157), while from Hegel, he adopts a phenomenological dialectics that brings out types of experiences, existential movements, or figures of consciousness that can help us make sense of human life ([9], (pp. 236–254, [16])). There are numerous interpretations of Kierkegaard's dialectics [17–19]. Here is not the place to go into the exciting terrain of competing interpretations of Kierkegaard's dialectics. For the purpose of the present argument, a rudimentary account suffices.

Dialectics saturates the authorship, working, as mentioned, as a subterranean reflective force that most of the time only surfaces negatively as volcanic eruptions of criticisms of others for lacking a dialectical sense or a sense for dialectics or as more gentle reminders that the reader must read his texts dialectically. Due to its ubiquitous and amorphous nature, it is difficult to provide a clear or solid account of his concept and use of dialectics. When he describes his dialectics, he often does so in opposition to a Hegelian dialectics. Whereas Hegel's dialectics produces an impersonal system without an ethics, as he repeats several times over the authorship, Kierkegaard's dialectics works to disclose the ethical texture of reality. As Climacus argues in the *Postscript*, "Whereas the Hegelian system in absentmindedness goes ahead and becomes a system of existence, and what is more, is finished—without having an ethics (the very home of existence), that other simpler philosophy, presented by an existing individual for existing individuals, is especially intent upon advancing the ethical" ([1], p. 121/SKS 7, p. 116)[4].

He typically describes his dialectics as a "qualitative dialectics" ([1], e.g., pp. 388, 436, 561/SKS 7, pp. 353, 429, 511), an "inverted dialectics" ([22], pp. 292–293/SKS 20, pp. 292–293), or even an "existential dialectics" but that last one only indirectly and as yet another critique of Hegel ([20], p. 288/SKS 15, p. 235; translation modified). He gives perhaps the most cogent expression of his mature conception of dialectics at the conclusion of a journal entry from 1847 entitled "inverted dialectics": "Every such loss, if you believe that you will gain everything, is a gain. If you even lost your sense of sound judgment over these odd conclusions, [lost] all sense for this ambiguous good—if you believe that you gain everything, then this loss will also be a gain. Hence, to lose is to gain. In the straightforward sense, to lose is to lose; in the inverted sense, to lose is to gain" ([22], p. 293/SKS 20, pp. 292–293). The keyword here is "ambiguous good". Human life is

ambiguous because human beings are ambiguous beings. We are "intermediate beings", whose lives are caught between possibility and reality; what we can do, want to do, or should do; and what we are actually doing ([23], p. 49/SKS 4, pp. 354–355). Moreover, we are temporal and eternal beings caught between becoming and being. We *are* who we are by *becoming* ourselves ([24], pp. 29–30/SKS 11, p. 146).

This tension between possibility and reality, between *becoming* and *being*, is at work from the beginning, and around the middle of his career, in the *Postscript*, he decides to name this ineradicable tension in human life "existence", which will go on to become his most influential concept. His reasoning is simple: "Existing is a somewhat intermediate state like that, something that is suitable for an intermediate being such as a human being is" ([1], p. 329/SKS 7, p. 301). I am not merely who I think I am, nor can I simply become who I want to be. And vice versa, I am not simply who I am or who I think I am becoming. There is more to being human than merely being and thinking about being, and existence—to stand out—is that peculiar concept that captures that single individual synthesis of being and thinking that I am: "Existence is always the particular; the abstract does not exist" ([1], p. 330/SKS 7, p. 301). I have no other access to myself, other people, and the world than my particular experience, and yet, I cannot trust my particular—immediate and reflective—experience of my self, other people, and the world. My reality is inescapably subjective—"subjectivity is truth"—and yet, there is more to reality than my subjective experience of reality—"subjectivity is untruth" ([1], pp. 202–209, 207/SKS 7, pp. 185–193). The pivotal role that the concept of existence plays both in Kierkegaard's mature authorship and in the subsequent reception of his work makes me prefer to characterize his peculiar dialectics as an "existential dialectics", even though Kierkegaard himself uses this term only once and indirectly.

Existential dialectics captures both the epistemological (what can I know?), ontological (what is reality?), and ethical (what should I do?) ambiguities at work in the authorship while emphasizing the personal urgency of his writings. He writes about and for the personal upbuilding of "that single individual" who reads his books and not for promotion of the sciences, philosophy, theology, or knowledge in general. This does mean that Kierkegaard does not rely upon or contribute to the collective accruement of knowledge that these disciplines represent. He is part of the Western tradition of knowledge, but his authorship sits uneasily in this tradition. He "existentializes" this tradition, as Michael Theunissen calls it ([25], pp. 496–498), by insisting on the dialectics between this body of knowledge and the particular experience of the single individual. The individual definitely learns from the tradition in which she lives her life, but her particular life cannot be subjected to that tradition or the universal or objective truths promulgated by that tradition. Kierkegaard's existential approach is so radical that he lets Climacus claim that "the individual's own ethical reality is the only reality" ([1], p. 327/SKS 7, p. 298). The knowledge that we learn from the tradition only becomes real when the individual appropriates it or put it to use in her struggle with concrete existential challenges of her life, that is, in her subjective attempts to become who she is.

It is this insistence on the autonomy of the individual as *both* truth *and* untruth with respect to Christianity, which, on my reading, constitutes the dialectics of the secular and the religious, that makes his existential approach a critical development of the Enlightenment critique of religion.

3. Reasonable Faith

The critique of religion is one of the most famous ingredients of the Enlightenment project, and yet—as Ernest Cassirer notes in his seminal book on the Enlightenment—"when one tries to measure this conventional view against the concrete historical facts, however, strong concerns and reservations emerge" ([26], p. 140). Even Voltaire, one of the most ferocious critics of religion, argued that his critique was "not leveled at faith, but superstition, and not at religion, but the church" ([26], p. 140). We find perhaps the most subtle account of the complexity of the Enlightenment critique of religion in Kant's *Religion within*

the Boundaries of Mere Reason. At the end of the third section of the book, he captures the ambiguous core of this critique:

> Every faith which, as historical, bases itself on books, needs for guarantee a *learned public* in whom it can be controlled, as it were, through writers who were the contemporaries of the faith's first propagators yet in no way suspect of special collusion with them, and whose connection with our present authors has remained unbroken. The pure faith of reason [*Der reine Vernunftglaube*], on the contrary, does not need any such documentation but is its own proof [. . .] Should one now ask, Which period of the entire church history in our ken up to now is the best? I reply without hesitation, *The present*. I say this because one need only allow the seed of the true religious faith now being sown in Christianity—by only a few, to be sure, yet in the open—to grow unhindered, to expect from it a continuous approximation to that church, ever uniting all human beings, which constitutes the visible representation (the schema) of the invisible Kingdom of God on earth. In matters which ought to be moral and soul improving by nature, reason has wrest itself free from the burden of a faith constantly exposed to the arbitrariness of its interpreters, and, in all the lands on our part of the world, universally among those who truly revere religion (though not everywhere openly), it has accepted, in the first place, the principle of reasonable modesty [*billigen Bescheidenheit*] in claims concerning anything that goes by the name of revelation. ([27], p. 157–159/AK 6, pp. 129–132; translation modified)[5] This is a critique of religion that wants to retain the moral power of religion while not being bound by a reverence for textual traditions, religious institutions, or the mind-blinding authority of revelation. It is not a rejection of religion or faith but rather a critical appropriation of those border phenomena of human reasoning. Faith is a belief in that which cannot be known, while religion is the institutional practice or visible "schema" that helps us to realize "the invisible Kingdom of God on earth". Religious phenomena cannot be simply rejected because reason, as Kant had shown in the paralogisms and antinomies of reason, which constitute the bulk of the "transcendental dialectics" in his *Critique of Pure Reason* ([30], pp. 411–550/A341–567/B399–595), pushes itself beyond the terra firma of objectively ratified knowledge and into the "broad and stormy ocean" of that which cannot be known—to use Kant's own maritime metaphor ([30], p. 354/A235–236/B294–295).

Human beings ask questions that cannot be answered by human reason, which is why, as Kant puts it at the end of the *Prolegomena*, the idea that "the human mind would someday entirely give up metaphysical investigations is just as little to be expected, as that we would someday gladly stop all breathing so as never to take in impure air" ([30], p. 156/AK 4, p. 367). The Enlightenment critique of religion epitomized by Kant considers itself a necessary air cleaner of the religious atmosphere of its time, imposing a critical secular filter to stop superstitious, fanatical, oppressive, ridiculous, habitual, traditional particles polluting the moral purity of faith.

It is in this tradition that I situate Kierkegaard's work. By characterizing Kierkegaard's work as a critical development of this Enlightenment, I intend to counter the idea that Kierkegaard somehow rejects the project of the Enlightenment ([10], (pp. 52–60, [31])). I am here inspired by the influential interpretation of Alasdair Macintyre, who reads Kierkegaard's *Either-Or* as "at once the outcome and epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification of morality" ([32], p. 39). MacIntyre situates Kierkegaard solidly in Kant's footsteps only to contrast his "criterionless fundamental choice" with Kant's rational vindication of morality. Kierkegaard's position is, according to MacIntyre, fraught by a "deep incoherence" that is not due to a fault exclusively on Kierkegaard's part, but rather "the logical outcome of the Enlightenment's project to provide a rational foundation for and justification of morality" ([32], p. 43).

This incoherence resides in the fact that Kierkegaard wants somehow to combine a rather traditional conception of morality with the innovative idea of radical choice.

I agree with MacIntyre that Kierkegaard adopts Kant's and the Enlightenment's insistence on autonomy while rejecting that reason can provide us with a universal justification of living a good life. I do not believe, though, that this amounts to an inconsistency on Kierkegaard's part (or on part of the Enlightenment), nor do I believe that the concept of radical choice heralds the end of the Enlightenment. I consider Kierkegaard's insistence on radical choice or the ultimate legitimacy of "that single individual"—*hiin Enkelte*—to be a critical development of the Enlightenment's insistence on autonomy and that his existential dialectics can be interpreted as a highly original way of solving the conflict between radical choice and the rational justification of morality that MacIntyre's theorizes as the end of the Enlightenment. I believe that one of the primary reasons why MacIntyre sees this conflict as a failure of both the Enlightenment project and of Kierkegaard's position in *Either-Or* is that the question of faith does not play any significant role in his account of either the Enlightenment or Kierkegaard.

In his reading of *Either-Or*, MacIntyre does not mention the concluding pages of the book named "Ultimatum". The conclusion represents the religious dimension of "a fragment of a life"—the subtitle of the book—that the book wants to bring to life. McIntyre focuses on the famous tension between the aesthete A and the ethical voice of B, Judge William, constituting the first and the second part of the book, and which, on MacIntyre's account, leaves the reader with the radical choice of choosing either the aesthetical or the ethical way of life. MacIntyre explains that Kierkegaard or the pseudonymous editor of *Either-Or*, Victor Eremita, makes it clear that there is "no *reason* for preferring one to the other" ([32], p. 40) while still arguing that "the ethical is to have authority over us" ([32], p. 42). Kierkegaard—like his Enlightenment predecessors—wants it both ways. He wants the radical autonomy of "criterionless fundamental choice" and a good life secured by universal ethical norms.

This is "the incoherence at the heart of Kierkegaard's position" that, according to MacIntyre, spells the end of the Enlightenment project that at the same time underpins and undermines the philosophical foundation of *Either-Or*. This reading of the book—and of the Enlightenment project—is only possible because of an approach blind or at least philosophically insensitive to the religious dimensions central to both the Enlightenment debate about morality—epitomized by Kant—and to Kierkegaard's authorship. Although the religious dimension becomes more dominant as Kierkegaard's authorship progresses, religious phenomena saturate his philosophical arguments from the outset. This becomes evident when taking a closer look at those concluding pages of *Either-Or* that are—conveniently or accidentally—left out of MacIntyre's account.

"Ultimatum" consists of a sermon that Judge William encloses in a letter to his young aesthete friend. The sermon is by an older friend of William who works as a pastor on the heath in Jylland far from hectic Copenhagen. William surprisingly argues that this prayer of 10 pages expresses better the ethical position that he has tried to convey to his young friend in his two long letters that arrive at almost 300 pages. "Ultimatum" can be read as Kierkegaard's first upbuilding discourse, and it is a reflection on "The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong". The gist of the argument is that the world is an unjust place, the innocent share the same fate as the guilty, and instead of the trying to explain or justify the injustice of the world, we should use its "power to make everything else unexplainable, even the explainable" ([21], p. 343/SKS 3, p. 323). The inexplicability of the world should not be a cause for anxiety and concern, lamenting the meaninglessness or fragility of human life. On the contrary, the pastor argues—as Kierkegaard will be doing in the rest of his authorship—that we should use this inexplicability to accept that we are always wrong when we try to make sense of God's intention with the world and that this acceptance liberates us from rather than subjecting us to the injustice of the world.

As we saw with Kant above, Kierkegaard here uses reason's acceptance of its own limits to push itself beyond itself and out upon the "70,000 fathoms of waters" of faith ([33], p. 444/SKS 6, 411). This is not a faith contrary to reason but a faith that is the outcome of doubts and concerns that reason cannot answer. This is not an argument invented by Kant and Kierkegaard. We find similar arguments throughout the history of theology and philosophy. What is new with the approach to faith in Kant and Kierkegaard is their insistence on subjectivity and autonomy in their examination of the limits of reason. While Kant shows us the rational necessity of going beyond reason, arguing that our experience of the world and ourselves is haunted by "an unknown something" or a "noumenon" that functions as "a boundary concept" revealing the limits of our understanding of ourselves and the world ([30], pp. 350–351/A255–256/B310–312). For Kant, reason does not only push itself beyond itself for "objectively valid" theoretical reasons. There are also practical reasons for reason to go beyond itself. My freedom needs an objective "unknown something" to liberate itself from the deterministic causality of nature. There are no objective reasons for setting out on the waters of faith. We have no rational or empirical proof of God. It is, as argued by Giovanni Ferretti, "subjective motives that push us to such an act" ([34], p. 175).

Kant thus indicates a subjective need for a "metaphysics" of freedom that finds its ultimate rational justification in our need to believe in something beyond what we can understand: "The expression of faith [*Glaube*] is in such cases an expression of modesty from an *objective* point of view, but at the same time of the firmness of confidence in a *subjective*" ([30], p. 688/A827/B855; translation modified). His concept of faith remains, however, a silhouette working its regulative power behind the clarity of reason, and his rational account of religion is haunted by what Gordon E. Michalson calls an irony that renders "the world a spiritual wasteland. . .a world we cannot really live in" ([35], p. 125). Kierkegaard's contribution to the rational religion that Kant and many advocates of the enlightenment tried to establish is to imbue the secular and disenchanted world with a religious meaning without reverting to the pre-modern metaphysics of more traditional versions of Christianity. Like other Enlightenment thinkers before him, Kierkegaard also wants to show how faith and reason can coexist, and to do so, he delves into the "subjective motives" that Kant relegated to the margins of his transcendental project. Kierkegaard is not interested in the transcendental *possibility* of faith in a reasonable world but in the existential reality of faith as this manifests itself in the humdrum of everyday life. This existential insistence on the reality of faith makes Kierkegaard's conception of reason less pure and his concept of subjectivity fuller.

4. Individual Faith or Becoming Subjective

Subjectivity and the subjective co-constitution of reality is fundamental to Kant's critical project, but he is not particularly interested in exploring the subjective reality of subjectivity. Even when he wants to say something about "the interior" of human beings, he does not seem to want to get beneath the pragmatic surface of human life. A clear example of this is his rejection of the relevance of "unconscious representations" for human action. While he in his pragmatic anthropology acknowledges that "the field of obscure representations is the largest in the human being", he immediately adds, "but because this field can only be perceived in his passive side as a play of sensations, the theory of obscure representations belongs only to physiological anthropology, not to pragmatic anthropology, and so it is properly disregarded here" ([36], p. 247/AK 7, p. 136). Physiology or the embodied conditions of human subjectivity that complicate human feeling, thought, and behavior are jettisoned from the examination of ethical, pragmatic, and religious exploration of human life and relegated to the humanely irrelevant field of physiology. This abstraction from the concrete life of embodied and situated subjectivity means that Kant's concept of the self becomes no less of a silhouette than his concept of faith. His transcendental obsession with purity makes him cleanse his conception of subjectivity of psychological, physiological, emotional, and historical complications, just as he in good

Enlightenment spirit effectuates a much needed spring-cleaning of the historical, textual, and ritual characteristics of the Christian religion of his time (and place).

Kierkegaard is not satisfied with "the spiritual wasteland" of Kant's rational religion or with the transcendental possibility of human subjectivity offered by his critical philosophy. He dedicates his authorship to exploring the concrete existential task of becoming "that single individual" who I am. And it is in this exploration of how to live a human life that he finds the existential reality of Christian faith, or dialectically, it is with his exploration of Christian faith that he finds an answer to his existential concern with how to live a human life. Climacus makes this intrinsic relationship between Christianity and subjectivity abundantly–and repetitively—clear in the *Postscript*, writing, for example, "Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, that is, truly to become a subject", which is "the highest task assigned to every human being, just as the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective person or, more correctly, comes into existence for the one who becomes subjective" ([1], p. 131, 163/SKS 7, pp. 123, 151–152).

Kant also acknowledges that reason demands happiness and that there exists an intrinsic connection between happiness, the moral good, and God, but he observes with his unfailing critical cynicism that "there is not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of a being belonging to the world as part of it and hence dependent upon it" ([37], p. 240/AK 5, p. 124). Human reality is a cruel place not only marked by brute physical causality but also haunted by the "radical evil" that is "woven into human nature" ([27], p. 78/AK 6, p. 30), and we cannot reasonably expect that our good deeds will bring about happiness for us or for other people. This is another formulation of what MacIntyre identified as the inconsistency between radical choice and the rational justification of morality. What possible rational reasons can there be for me to *want* to choose to do the morally good when my good deeds do not secure a happy life for me or other people? Kant's answer is prompt and unwavering: I must do the good out of reverence (*Achtung*) for the moral law that makes freedom—my own and that of others—possible. He has no patience, as many commentators have decried[6], for the psychological, physiological, historical, or cultural complications of my freedom.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, develops his existential approach as an in-depth exploration of the complications of freedom. His work shows us that what may appear as an incoherence of radical choice and rational morality on the part of Kant and the Enlightenment project is actually just a result of the fact that Kant only presents us with the transcendental or formal possibility of subjectivity. The existential reality of subjectivity that Kierkegaard brings out provides us with the explanatory tissue connecting radical choice with rational morality. Autonomy reveals the limits of reason in that I can, as MacIntyre argues, rationally decide not to accept any "criterion"—rational, religious, or legal—for my choice. This is the challenge at the heart of the Enlightenment project that Kant pushes to the extreme. How can I live rationally—that is, good and happily—in a disenchanted world? This simple question pushes reason beyond reason and, for both Kant and Kierkegaard, into the realm of faith.

While Kant's concept of faith retains its moral purity as an empty possibility, Kierkegaard enmeshes faith in the impure realities of concrete human life, showing how faith satisfies the existential need of reason to live with its own limits. We need faith to escape the shadow of nihilism that is, as Vigilius Haufniensis argues, "freedom's showing-itself-for-itself in the anxiety of possibility, or in the nothing of possibility, or in the nothing of anxiety" ([23], pp. 76–77/SKS 4, p. 380), which every one of us experiences as the looming threat of a life-destroying despair. Faith allows us to live a flourishing human life not by ignoring the blatant injustice of the world but by finding a new or "a second ethics", ethics that uses faith to go beyond traditional philosophical ethics that stands on the sinful—inhuman and meaningless—realities of life ([9], pp. 568–577). It is a religious ethics that "does not ignore sin, and it does not have its ideality in making ideal demands; rather, it has its ideality in the penetrating consciousness of reality, of the reality of sin" ([23], p. 20/SKS 4, p. 328).

And at the same time, Kierkegaard secularizes the traditional concept of sin by existentially reformulating it as despair, or as Anti-Climacus cogently writes, "Sin is: before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself" ([24], p. 77/SKS 11, 191). Reformulating sin as despair allows Kierkegaard to show that faith dialectically opens up space for an "ethical-religious" sphere or dimension of reality that dialectically allows the individual to work themselves out of the despair that disturbs and destroys human life by believing in that which they cannot see, understand, or bring about themselves. Taking the lead from Paul's letter to the Romans—"For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14: 23)—Anti-Climacus argues that "one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity—that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith" ([24], p. 82/SKS 11, 196). I do not escape the throes of despair by doing the good that I know, but by believing in a good that I do not know and that I cannot feel, think, or understand.

This dialectics between sin and faith is the apex of Kierkegaard's existential dialectics that the good pastor from *Either-Or* already hints at towards the end of his sermon: "Therefore this thought, that in relation to God we are always in the wrong, is an upbuilding thought; it is upbuilding that we are in the wrong, upbuilding that we are always in the wrong. It manifests its upbuilding power in a twofold way, partly by putting an end to doubt and calming the concern of doubt [*Tvivlens Bekymring*], partly by encouraging action [*opmuntrer til Handling*]" ([21], p. 351/SKS 3, p. 330). Faith provides us with the rational vindication of ethics that reason cannot find. Believing in the good calms our doubts, our concerns, our anxieties, and our fears while simultaneously giving us reason to do the good. Doing good and feeling good are intrinsically connected in faith, just as they, for MacIntyre, are fundamentally separated by reason. The criterion that MacIntyre could not find for choosing the morally good becomes, for Kierkegaard, existence; that is, the good satisfies our existential need to live a fulfilling life. Kierkegaard makes the Enlightenment ideal of freedom as autonomy, or what Judge William calls "true, positive freedom" ([21], p. 174/SKS 3, p. 169), concrete with his existential approach to the difficulties of freedom. Kierkegaard finds that that the privilege of freedom that the Enlightenment thinkers fought so hard for begets the existential challenge of how to live with the freedom that I have won.

Kierkegaard's answer is simple in all of its complexity. We need the good to live with ourselves. We experience an existential need to believe in the good in an otherwise disenchanted and unjust world. According to Kierkegaard, we simply cannot live a human life without believing that I am better than I am and that the world is better than we experience it to be. It is impossible not to despair, or as Anti-Climacus notes, "if one really knew human beings one had to say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little" ([24], p. 22/SKS 11, p. 138; translation modified]), and it is in and through our despair—our sin—that we discovery the rational need for faith. We need God to live in the world such as it is, that is, an inhuman world where human beings suffer because of a seemingly random and purposeless nature (e.g., disabilities, sickness, and death) and due to the blatant injustice of sinful creatures who are selfish and exposed to the selfishness of other human beings. How can one live in a world like this without believing that our reasonable appraisal of the world and human beings is mistaken and that there is another and life-giving meaning along with the inevitable suffering that haunts and all too often destroys human life? We need the eternal good to live with the burden of time, history, and our own limitations.

The challenge is that we are finite beings who cannot see, understand, or appropriate the good except through the inevitable mistakes of our sinful life: "In the consciousness of sin, the individual becomes aware of himself in his difference from the universally human, which in itself is only an awareness of what it means to exist qua human" ([1], p. 584/SKS 7, p. 531]). We experience ourselves as individual selves, and Kierkegaard uses his existential dialectics to make sense of our individual experience of the good. What the eternal good *is* can only *become* reality through the existential realities of temporality. This means that the eternal good is phenomenologically vague, ambiguous, and constantly changing. It is

experienced in "ethical-religious" phenomena that differ significantly from time to time, society to society, and not least from person to person because, as Kierkegaard writes in *An Occasional Discourse*, "the good can truly require the most different things of different people" ([38], p. 97/SKS 8, p. 185; translation modified). The good is eternal but does not *exist* objectively, and it can only be experienced and realized subjectively in and through our individual effort to become who we are.

I would argue that this is what Kierkegaard wants to arrive at with his radical claim that the religious categories belong to the sphere of subjectivity and that the religious is the true humanity. I have argued that these two claims structure the argument of this article that Kierkegaard's existential approach to faith is both a secularization of Christianity and a religious transformation of ethics. The secularizing drive of Kierkegaard's existential approach is an intensification of the Enlightenment insistence on human autonomy that articulates the subjective challenges of human self-determination to show how "religious categories" such as faith, sin, and salvation find their existential reality in our becoming subjective, that is, becoming the individual self that each of us is.

The religious transformation of ethics becomes visible in Kierkegaard's insistence on the normative demand inherent in being human. Our true humanity is religious because of the constitutive ambiguity of being human that he finds expressed in the Danish word for humanity, "*Menneskelighed*", which means both human likeness and human equality. This existential dialectics is perhaps most beautifully captured by Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety*: "The human being is *individuum* and as such simultaneously itself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race" ([23], p. 28/SKS 4, p. 335). We are similar to each other in and through the temporal sinfulness that makes us individuals, our radically different beings, and this human similarity demands an eternal equality that we can only achieve through love that is more than human, namely the eternal good of neighborly love that Kierkegaard dedicates a major work to, namely *Works of Love* [39]. It is my "ethical-religious" duty to love the person that I see, and in this love, which is infinitely bigger than my love, I can learn to live together with other people in the world. Faith is not a yearning to discover another world, a "dreamworld", or to want to objectively change the world and other people. As Kierkegaard argues in *Works of Love*, "the task is not to find the lovable object, but the task is to find the once given or chosen object—lovable, and to be able to continue to find him lovable no matter how he is changed" ([39], p. 159, 161/SKS 9, p. 162, 160). The eternal good that I must have faith in does not necessarily transform *what* I feel, see, understand, or do in the world but *how* I feel, see, understand, and act in the world. It is, in other words, how I live my life subjectively or how I become the self that I am.

5. Conclusions

I have argued that Kierkegaard's Christianity is a secularized Christianity that follows and critically develops the Enlightenment critique of religion. This critique of religion is not a rejection of religion but a rational critique of the superstitious, traditional, and dogmatic forms of religion that dominated Western Christianity at the time. Kierkegaard continues this Enlightenment attempt to secularize Christianity, and I have tried to show how his existential approach can be read as a radical development of this secularization. While Kant's transcendental critique of reason gives us the possibility of faith with the noumenal limits of reason and in the subjective need of a connection between freedom and morality that cannot be secured objectively, Kierkegaard's existential dialectics wants to bring out the reality of faith with its exploration of the concrete existential challenges of our freedom. Kierkegaard's radical development of Kant's "pure faith of reason" is to show the individual need of faith. The individual difficulty of freedom—our existential challenges of autonomy—reveals that we need faith to live with the freedom that the Enlightenment has made possible.

It is one thing is to be free; it is another to become free. Freedom, for Kierkegard, is both a fact and a normative demand: "The self is freedom" ([24], p. 29/SKS 11, p. 145).

Kierkegaard's existential approach is an endeavor to explore the empirical, psychological, and historical complexities of freedom that Kant had banned from his transcendental investigation. And Kierkegaard's concept of faith finds its phenomenological richness in this exploration of the existential difficulty of freedom. The subjective need for faith that Kant had disclosed becomes for Kierkegaard the individual reality that I can only truly become myself by believing in the good that I cannot feel, see, or understand. I can only live with the inhumanity that I encounter in the world and in my own ineradicable selfishness with a faith in a humanity (*Menneskelighed*) that proves me and the world wrong. I experience an existential need to believe that I and the world are better than we are, and I need this faith to live as the fallible and fragile individual that I am. Without this faith, I am caught in a despair that destroys my life as well as the life of other living creatures and ultimately the world that we share. This is a faith that does not necessarily change me and the world. I may do exactly what I did before, and the world may be exactly as it was before, but everything is new when I have faith in the primordial goodness of the world that allows me and other human beings to exist as the individual persons that we are.

It is a paradoxical humanity that faith reveals. It promises us to become individually humans—or "that single individual" that each and every one of us is—through a radical human equality that originates in an eternal love beyond our humanity: "Love's hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all life [*Tilværelse*]" ([39], p. 9/SKS 9, p. 17). It is in this paradoxical nonhuman humanity, which connects us with the totality of life, that we find both the secularizing drive and the religious foundation of Kierkegaard's concept of faith. We need to constantly work with our human selfishness—our human limitations, biases, and prejudices—that prevents us from establishing not only "the true humanity" but also from finding ways to live good lives without hurting other creatures and destroying the planet.

This work requires a constant (Enlightenment) critique of religion and religious practices or institutions that are still rooted in normative foundations and power structures that oppress and hurt the lives of individual human beings. Religious faith cannot be allowed to instantiate itself in objective forms that destroy our human endeavor to become subjective. At the same time, the subjective individuality of faith is dangerous with its tendency to transform the eternal and infinite dimension of the religious into an ever-changing normative rollercoaster that tries to satisfy individual needs without securing the communities that religions typically help secure. It is, I would argue, one of the major strengths and the unabated relevance of Kierkegaard's authorship that his existential dialectics allows us to continue exploring the paradoxical tension between secular and religious dimensions of faith, which is one of the most important heirlooms bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment[7].

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Notes

1 I refer to both the standard English translation of Kierkegaard's works published by Princeton University Press and the standard Danish edition published by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre [2]. The page number of the English translation is cited first followed by, after a slanted stroke, the volume and page number of the Danish edition, abbreviated SKS.

2 The preface opens with the critical statement: "In these times everything is politics" [For a critical account of circumstances and possible dates for the various texts, see the accompanying commentary volume to SKS 16: SKS 16K, pp. 27–38.

3 I will later argue that the ambiguity of the religious and the Christian, which might first at first sight seem a parochial and potentially harmful reduction of the religious to the specifically Christian, can and—I will argue—should be read in the opposite

direction as a religious corrective—made possible by the Enlightenment critique of religion—to what has been and is understood as a Christian way of life.

[4] See also [20] (p. 288 [SKS 15, p. 235]), [1] (p. 307 [SKS 7, p. 280]), and [21] (p. 321 [SKS 3, p. 303]).

[5] I refer to both the standard English translation of Immanuel Kant's work published by Cambridge University Press and the standard German edition published by the Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften [28]. The page number of the English translation is cited first followed by, after a slanted stroke, the volume and page number of the German edition, abbreviated AK, except with the Critique of Pure Reason, where, as is standard, the references are to the first and second edition (A/B) [29].

[6] Most famously, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Scheler.

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