

Kierkegaard on the transformative power of art

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Abstract: Kierkegaard seeks to inspire transformations. His aim is to get us to devote our lives to God or the Good rather than our own personal enjoyment—to abandon the aesthetic life in favour of the ethical or religious one. Drawing on Laurie Paul and Agnes Callard’s recent work, I maintain that two obstacles stand in Kierkegaard’s way. First, transformations involve adopting a new perspective on the world, one we cannot fully grasp ahead of time. Second, transformations also involve coming to care about something we do not yet care about. On my interpretation, Kierkegaard sees art, especially literature, as central to overcoming both obstacles. Good stories afford us a glimpse into what it would look and feel like to live in ways other than we currently do. In addition, they have the power to attract us to points of view we would ordinarily reject.

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1. Kierkegaard’s therapeutic project

Kierkegaard’s project is first and foremost a therapeutic one. Although he makes theological points and defends philosophical theses, he is not primarily a theologian or philosopher.¹ Instead, he is a ‘physician of the soul’ (SUD 23–24/SKS 11:139–40). He aims to help us get better, existentially speaking—to cure us of our spiritual ills. What Kierkegaard thinks we need to overcome our anxiety and despair is a transformation. In particular, we have to turn our backs on the goal of self-gratification. We must devote our lives to God or the Good rather than just our

¹ Although it is common to acknowledge his therapeutic goals, many commentators read Kierkegaard primarily as a philosopher or theologian. (See Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, vii; Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 20.) I do not mean to dismiss these readings. After all, Kierkegaard does call himself a philosopher (JP 3:158/Pap. IX B 63; JP 5:447/SKS 20:364; JP 6:62/Pap. X-6 B 41). My intention here is to foreground the therapeutic project that his theological and philosophical reflections serve. For further discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, 183–203.

own personal enjoyment. In sum, Kierkegaard's prescription for our existential ailments is that we leave behind 'the aesthetic life' and head in an ethical or religious direction (PV 5–20/SKS 13:11–27).²

The question facing Kierkegaard is thus a practical one. How can he inspire such transformations? How can he get his readers to change who they are at a fundamental level? Following Ryan Kemp and Walter Wietzke, I will argue that reason is not the proper tool for the task.³ No mere argument, even if cogent or sound, can move people in the way Kierkegaard wants to move them. Yet, I will maintain that where reason fails, art can succeed. Indeed, to the

² Kierkegaard sometimes frames his project in other ways. In *Sickness Unto Death*, for instance, it is about helping readers overcome despair and acquire faith (SUD 49/SKS 11:164). But this alternative description of Kierkegaard's project is broadly consistent with one that I have provided, namely encouraging readers to leave behind the aesthetic life in favor of the religious one. For it is possible to map the different versions of the aesthetic life onto different kinds of despair. Still, it is worth acknowledging that despair is a more expansive phenomenon than the aesthetic life. For discussion of this issue, see Hannay, 'Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair'; Lindland, 'Kierkegaard on Self-Deception'.

³ Kemp, 'Kierkegaard's "A", the Aesthete'; Kemp, 'The Role of Imagination'; Wietzke, 'The Single Individual and the Normative Question'; see also Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*. Kierkegaard is often regarded as an anti-rationalist or a-rationalist. Thus, my thesis may seem unsurprising to some readers. However, a number of scholars have argued that Kierkegaard thinks there is a rational basis for becoming religious. See, for example, Adams, 'Kierkegaard's Arguments'; Emmanuel, 'Kierkegaard's Pragmatist Faith'; McCombs, *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*; Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*. Other scholars have argued that Kierkegaard thinks there is a rational basis for becoming ethical. See, for example, Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*; Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative*. For discussion of this general issue, see Buben, 'Neither Irrationalist Nor Apologist'; Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*; Piety, *Ways of Knowing*.

degree that Kierkegaard ever inspires transformations, it is in virtue of the beauty of his words and the aesthetic appeal of his stories rather than the force of his logic.

Before turning to my argument, however, two clarifications are in order. First, as many scholars have observed, Kierkegaard talks about aesthetics in two ways.⁴ On the one hand, ‘the aesthetic’ is a lifeview or sphere of existence. In particular, it picks out the way of life devoted to enjoyment (CUP 1:288/SKS 7:262; EO 2:179/SKS 3:175). On the other hand, ‘aesthetics’ refers to the branch of philosophy devoted to art, beauty, and the like. Thus, confusion may arise when I say that Kierkegaard relies on *aesthetics* to inspire readers to leave behind the *aesthetic*. What I mean is that he uses aesthetics in the sense of art and beauty to inspire readers to leave behind aesthetics in the sense of the life of enjoyment.

Second, Kierkegaard’s therapeutic project has many intertwining parts, and I will not be able to address all of them here. For instance, Kierkegaard believes many of his readers suffer from ‘illusions’ (PV 41–44/SKS 16:23–27). They are confused about the kind of life they actually lead and the kind of people they actually are. Kierkegaard thinks such illusions must be cleared away prior to beginning the transformation process, and he believes art can play a role at this preliminary step (PV 54/16:35). A comprehensive account of Kierkegaard’s use of art for therapeutic ends would include a discussion of this point. But I will set it aside in this paper.⁵ I

⁴ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 14–16; Jothen, *Kierkegaard, Aesthetics, and Selfhood*, 11–27; McDonald, ‘Aesthetic/Aesthetics’; Pattison, ‘Kierkegaard’; Rocca, ‘Kierkegaard’s Second Aesthetics’; Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard*, 5–19.

⁵ I have discussed Kierkegaard’s use of art to remove illusions elsewhere. See Aumann, ‘Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication’; ‘A Moral Problem for Difficult Art’. See also Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, ‘Kierkegaard on Existential Kenosis and the Power of the Image’.

will restrict my focus to the part of Kierkegaard's project that has to do with inspiring readers to make the transition from the aesthetic life (the life of personal enjoyment) to the ethical or religious life (the life of devotion to God or the Good).

2. Transformational change

To appreciate the challenge facing Kierkegaard, we need to understand the kind of change he wants to effect. His goal is to inspire 'qualitative changes' (CUP 1:553–54/SKS 7:503) that are as dramatic as 'changing water into wine' (JP 1:32/SKS 25:421).⁶ In Johannes Climacus's words, each of us needs to become 'a different person...a person of a different quality or, as we can also call it, a *new* person' (PF 18/SKS 4:227; emphasis in original).

Philosophers today refer to this kind of change as a 'transformation'. On Laurie Paul's account, transformations have two key features.⁷ First, they involve a shift in our desires, preferences, and values. In a transformation, we come to care about things we did not care about before. Second, transformations involve a shift in our epistemic standpoint. In a transformation, we enter a new way of seeing the world, one we did not understand beforehand. Classic examples of transformations include getting married, deciding to become a parent, starting a new

⁶ For other references to the transition between stages of existence as a 'qualitative change' or similar, see BA 134/SKS 15:287; CUP 1:11–12, 95, 103, 272, 338, 380, 436, 443, 501, 554n, 562/SKS 7:21, 94, 100, 246, 309, 347, 397, 403, 454, 503n, 511; JP 1:32/SKS 25:421; JP 1:32/SKS 26:23; JP 1:110/Pap. IV C 80; JP 1:352/SKS 18:304; JP 3:22/SKS 22:40; JP 3:199/SKS 24:59; JP 3:416/JP 26:250; JP 3:725/SKS 26:429; WA 93/SKS 11:97.

⁷ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 2014, 10–18; Paul, 'Transformative Experience', 2015, 801; see also Callard, 'Proleptic Reasons'; Callard, *Aspiration*.

career, or enlisting in the military. But Paul identifies religious conversions as paradigm cases as well, a point I will develop below.⁸

Now many of the changes we make in our lives have obvious justifications. They serve goals we already embrace or provide benefits we already desire. We might give up social work to become a lawyer, for instance, because we want to make enough money to buy our dream house. Or we might start volunteering at the local food pantry because we want to impress college admissions committees.

Transformations are different in this regard; they resist obvious justifications. There are two reasons why. First, because transformations involve a shift in our epistemic standpoint, we do not know what we are getting ourselves into prior to making them. The world will look different on the other side of the change. We will see details and make connections we currently cannot. We will also recognize and engage with values that are opaque to us at present. As a result, it is impossible to know what it will look and feel like for us to embody this new way of life. Thus, it is impossible to know ahead of time whether it will appeal to us. I will call this *the cognitive obstacle* to motivating transformations.

Second, suppose we could see what life would be like for us on the other side of the transformation. Suppose we could identify the benefits the new way of life had to offer. This is still not enough to motivate us to change our lives. For, in addition to being able to identify the benefits of the new way of life, we have to care about them. They have to matter to us as we are currently constituted. In other words, to be motivated to adopt the new way of life, its benefits have to speak to the concerns and desires we possess prior to adopting it. This does not happen in the case of transformations. When it comes to transformations, the benefits of the new way of

⁸ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 2014, 16.

life speak to cares and desires we do not yet possess. They appeal to a value system we have not yet embraced. This is *the conative obstacle* to motivating transformations.

To illustrate, consider the case of Marge, a music appreciation teacher who wants to inspire her students to love classical music.⁹ At present, she is frustrated. Most of her students do not do their homework. Or, if they do, it is for the wrong reasons. They complete their lessons to earn good grades and not because they care about the music for its own sake. Part of the problem is that classical music is complicated. It takes a lot of training to understand counterpoint. Thus, Marge can talk about how rewarding it is to listen to classical music, but novices, such as her students, are not in position to perceive these rewards for themselves. Another part of the problem is that her students' preferences point in the wrong direction. Because of their upbringing or the influence of their friends, they only like rock or rap. So, even if Marge could teach them to hear what is enjoyable about classical music, it would not appeal to them at present. Making clear the value of classical music would not be enough to get them to do their homework for its own sake.

3. The transition between spheres of existence

Kierkegaard's doctrine of the spheres of existence is controversial (SLW 476/SKS 6:439; CUP 1:501–2/SKS 7:455), and there are many ways to interpret it.¹⁰ But, on one plausible view, each sphere is identified in terms of its ultimate aim or telos. The aesthetic life aims at enjoyment (CUP 1:288/SKS 7:262; EO 2:179/SKS 3:175). By contrast, the ethical life aims at the Good and

⁹ I adapt this example from Callard, 'Proleptic Reasons', 129–30.

¹⁰ For an overview of Kierkegaard's doctrine of the spheres, see Evans, *Kierkegaard's 'Fragments' and 'Postscript'*, 33–36; Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 68–70.

the religious life aims at devotion to God (UDVS 24/SKS 8:139; CD 81–91/SKS 10:89–98). On this interpretation, it is possible to occupy the aesthetic sphere and still care about morality or religion. But one will care about these things only insofar as doing so is necessary for or contributes to the enjoyment of life. Similarly, entering into the ethical or religious sphere does not require leaving behind all desire for enjoyment. But the drive to enjoy life must become secondary or ancillary to these other ends.¹¹

Given this setup, it follows that the transition between Kierkegaard's spheres of existence—especially the movement from the aesthetic to the ethical or religious life—has the structure of a transformation.¹² That is to say, it has both of the features Paul attributes to transformations. First, it involves a radical shift in our core desires, preferences, and values. Entering into the ethical or religious life is a matter of coming to care about God and the Good rather than just our own personal enjoyment. Moreover, it is a matter of coming to care about God and the Good for their own sake and not just for the instrumental benefits they have to offer. For instance, Climacus writes, 'All relative willing is distinguished by willing something for something else, but the highest telos [pursuit of God or the Good] must be willed for its own

¹¹ This picture is complicated by the fact that Kierkegaard may be a eudaemonist. He may hold that willing the Good or devoting oneself to God is the highest form of enjoyment. If this is true, then the goal of the aesthetic life is preserved within the ethical and religious ways of life. Thus, there is no radical break or 'qualitative difference' between the aesthetic life and the ethical or religious life. I concede that some passages suggest this interpretation. But on balance Kierkegaard seems to reject eudaimonism and accept the idea of a radical break between the spheres. For discussion, see Fremstedal, 'Søren Kierkegaard (on Eudaimonism and Autonomy)'; Webb, 'Kierkegaard's Critique of Eudaimonism'.

¹² For further support, see Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*, 147; Kemp, 'The Role of Imagination'; Kemp 'Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Aesthetic Depression'; Wietzke, 'Practical Reason and the Imagination'.

sake' (CUP 1:394/SKS 7:358–59). Kierkegaard makes a similar point in his journals when he talks about virtues. He says 'virtue must be desired for its own sake' (JP 4:234/SKS 19:403) and, when it comes to willing the good, there can be 'no considerations of ends-in-view' (JP 4:514/SKS 25:66; see also UDVS 36–37/SKS 8:148–50).¹³

Second, the transition to the ethical or religious life involves embracing a new point of view, one that is inaccessible to us beforehand. This reflects a general truth about human existence for Kierkegaard: only someone who has embraced a given perspective can comprehend it. Like is understood only by like, as he repeatedly says (CUP 1:52/SKS 7:56; CD 223–24/SKS 10:231–32; WL 16/SKS 9:24; PF 25/SKS 4:232).¹⁴ Kierkegaard emphasizes this point when it comes to religion. He writes in his journals that things look different through the eyes of faith. The believer sees things that others cannot (JP 1:5–6/SKS 23:176–77). Thus, he adds elsewhere, the Christian worldview is incomprehensible to outsiders (CD 17, 31/SKS 10:29, 42).

It follows that Kierkegaard faces the same obstacles as Marge. For simplicity, we can focus on the religious side of the story. Because Kierkegaard's readers are not yet religious, they do not know what it would be like to be religious. Kierkegaard can sing the praises of the God-relationship all he wants. He can talk about how knights of faith experience peace and comfort in their ability to find God everywhere (CD 13–91/SKS 10:25–98).¹⁵ But Kierkegaard's readers are not in a position to see these purported benefits first-hand. Thus, they cannot know whether they would find the religious life as appealing as Kierkegaard does if they experienced it for themselves. This is the *cognitive obstacle* to motivating religious conversions.

¹³ For support, see Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good*, 82, 96, 106, 113, 218.

¹⁴ For discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, pp. 92–95.

¹⁵ See Krishek and Furtak, 'A Cure for Worry?'

In addition, even if Kierkegaard could get his readers to see for themselves the value of the religious life, it would not be enough to motivate them to become religious. For, at present, they lack an affinity for spiritual goods. Their tastes are rather for earthly pleasures. In other words, as both Kierkegaard and Climacus maintain, their problem is not just a lack of knowledge.¹⁶ It is not just that they do not know what they are missing. It is also that their desires or preferences are not oriented in the right way: they do not want what the religious life has to offer. Climacus puts this point by saying that people lack the relevant kind of passion, inwardness, or subjectivity (CUP 1:33/SKS 7:39). This is the *conative obstacle* to motivating religious conversions.

To summarize, the problem facing Kierkegaard is not that there are no reasons to embrace the religious life. It is rather that the reasons arrive ‘too late’. They are only available and only compelling to people who have already transitioned to the ethical or religious life. The convert is able to point to the joy of God’s presence. The devotee can appeal to faith’s ability to cure worry. But the religious outsider neither sees these benefits clearly enough nor cares about them deeply enough to find them motivating. This is what Kemp and Wietzke mean when they say the aesthete lacks an ‘internal reason’ to become religious.¹⁷

¹⁶ For the notion that our problem is a lack of passion, not a lack of knowledge, see CUP 1:21–22, 242, 249–50, 568, 606–7/SKS 7:29–30, 220–21, 226–27, 516, 550; TA 77, 104–5/SKS 8:74, 99.

¹⁷ Kemp, ‘Kierkegaard’s “A”, the Aesthete’; ‘The Role of Imagination’; Wietzke, ‘Practical Reason and the Imagination’. For further discussion, see Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*; Evans, ‘The Epistemological Significance of Transformative Religious Experiences’; Söderquist, ‘On Faith and Reason(s)’.

4. Three interpretations of Kierkegaard

4.1. MacIntyre's interpretation

The forgoing considerations have led commentators in a couple of different directions. One response has been to follow Alasdair MacIntyre and interpret Kierkegaard as saying the transition to the religious sphere requires an irrational or a-rational leap.¹⁸ Through sheer force of will, we must make ourselves believe what we lack reason to believe.

MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard has received much criticism.¹⁹ But some texts do seem to support his view. In his journals, Kierkegaard states that all qualitative transitions involve 'a leap' (JP 3:17/SKS 27:275). In *Postscript*, we read that leaps are made 'by virtue of the absurd' (CUP 1:100/SKS 7:98; see also FT 35/SKS 4:131). Moreover, it is a theme in *Postscript* that religious conversion is a matter of passion rather than understanding.²⁰ Again in his journals, Kierkegaard declares that unconditional commitments to God cannot be based on reasons.

'Just as the statement must read: faith cannot be comprehended; the maximum is, it can be comprehended that it cannot be comprehended—so also: reasons cannot be given for an unconditioned [commitment]; the maximum is, reasons can be given for the impossibility of giving reasons for an unconditioned [commitment]'

(JP 4:509/SKS 24:386; see also JP 3:663–64/SKS 22:107–9).

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 36–50.

¹⁹ MacIntyre's position is discussed and criticized in Davenport and Rudd, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*. For recent discussion of irrationalist readings of Kierkegaard, see Buben, 'Neither Irrationalist Nor Apologist'.

²⁰ See note 10.

4.2. *The Calvinist interpretation*

One alternative to MacIntyre has been to interpret Kierkegaard as a kind of Calvinist.²¹ On this view, Kierkegaard holds that the religious life is not something we choose; it is something God chooses for us. We do not transform ourselves; we are transformed by his power. As such, we do not need to be given a rational justification for becoming religious. We do not need to be informed about the benefits of the religious life or persuaded to care about those benefits. Motivational tactics are irrelevant to the process of transformation.

This second interpretation also enjoys textual support. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus paints a picture of Christianity according to which God does everything for the believer (PF 13–18/SKS 4:222–27). Moreover, the idea that we can do nothing without God is a refrain in Kierkegaard’s writings (EUD 321–22/SKS 5:312–13; CUP 460–61/SKS 418–19; CD 63–65, 298–300/SKS 10:72–74, 323–25). Thus, it is no surprise when we read in Kierkegaard’s journals that spiritual transformations are miracles (JP 3.199/SKS 24:59).

4.3. *Ferreira’s interpretation*

I do not wish to dismiss either of these two responses to the question of how Kierkegaard thinks transformations occur. Each captures an aspect of Kierkegaard’s authorship—an authorship we may not be able to wrangle into a coherent system. Moreover, it is possible to develop more nuanced and thus more attractive versions of these responses. According to some scholars, for instance, Kierkegaard thinks reason can carry us part of the way through the transformation process. It can justify adopting a version of the religious life, just not the specifically Christian

²¹ For further support, see Evans, ‘Does Kierkegaard Think Beliefs Can Be Directly Willed?’, 182; Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 140; Kemp, ‘The Role of Imagination’; Nason, ‘Contingency, Necessity, and Causation’.

version.²² Other commentators maintain that, for Kierkegaard, divine grace does not operate alone. Rather, God's grace cooperates with human free will to bring about a transformation.²³

Rather than develop the Calvinist or MacIntyrean reading of Kierkegaard further, I wish to focus on a third approach. It is one that was initially proposed by Jamie Ferreira but that has subsequently gained traction with a number of other scholars.²⁴ The defining feature of this third approach is that it assigns a central role to the imagination. The appeal of this way of going is easy to see. According to *Sickness Unto Death*, the function of our imaginations is to supply us with images of our higher selves (SUD 31/SKS 11:147). And it is natural to think visions of our higher selves might draw us to these higher selves. Seeing who we can become might motivate us to take the steps needed to actualize these higher possibilities. In fact, this is exactly what Anti-Climacus asserts in *Practice in Christianity*. 'With his imagination [the youth] perceives some image of perfection (ideal)... To this image...the youth is now drawn by his imagination, or his imagination draws this image to him' (PC 186–87/SKS 12:186).²⁵ The role for Kierkegaard in this process is obvious. His task is to inspire our imaginations. He must use the

²² Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*.

²³ Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, 'Kierkegaard on Existential Kenosis and the Power of the Image'.

²⁴ Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*; 'Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap'. See also Gouwens, 'Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination'; Helms, 'Imagination and Belief'; Kemp, 'Kierkegaard's "A", the Aesthete'; 'The Role of Imagination'; Strelis, 'The Intimacy between Reason and Emotion'; Söderquist, *Kierkegaard on Dialogical Education*; Wietzke, 'Practical Reason and the Imagination'.

²⁵ This passage comes from Part III of *Practice in Christianity*, which discusses how God draws people to himself. Thus, Anti-Climacus may see the agency of God as lying behind the power of the image. For discussion of this point, see Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, 'Kierkegaard on Existential Kenosis and the Power of the Image'.

resources at his disposal, such as his artistic or literary talents, to help us envision our higher, transformed selves.

Yet, how does this story work? How can our imaginations—aided by Kierkegaard or otherwise—do what reason cannot? How can they overcome the cognitive and conative obstacles that stand in the way of transformational change? In what follows, I will provide my own answers to these questions.

5. The cognitive obstacle to transformation

I mentioned earlier that Kierkegaard posits a qualitative divide between the spheres of existence. At first blush, this seems to entail that only someone who occupies a given sphere can know what it is like to occupy that sphere. Only the Christian can know what it is like to be a Christian and *mutatis mutandis* for every stage on life's way. Climacus says as much in the following lines: 'That one can know what Christianity is without being a Christian must, then, be answered in the affirmative. Whether one can know what it is to be a Christian without being one is something else, and it must be answered in the negative' (CUP 372/SKS 7:337–39).

Taken at face value, the 'like is only known by like' thesis spells disaster for Kierkegaard's project. If I cannot know what it would be like for me to be religious prior to becoming religious, then I cannot know what I am getting myself into by choosing the religious life. And if I cannot know what I am getting myself into by choosing the religious life, then I cannot take ownership over this choice. I cannot self-consciously endorse it as reflecting my own subjective values and beliefs. In short, making an autonomous choice requires being able to imagine the option I am choosing.

This is one of Paul's central claims in her work on transformations.²⁶ It is also what Anti-Climacus is getting at when he writes, 'As a rule, imagination...is the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]. When all is said and done, whatever of...willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has' (SUD 30–31/SKS 11:146–47). He reiterates the point elsewhere: 'Every human possess the imagination, which is the first condition for what becomes of a person, for the will is the second and in the ultimate sense the decisive condition' (PC 186/SKS 12:186).²⁷ In sum, Kierkegaard's view appears to be that we are capable of willing something in the sense of deliberately choosing it only if we are capable of imagining it. Thus, if he thinks the religious life is something we can deliberately choose or 'will', then he must allow that we can imagine it.²⁸

Of course, to say we can imagine what it would be like for us to be religious prior to becoming religious is not to say we can do so either perfectly or without assistance. Our imaginations will always come up short in some way (PC 187–88/SKS 12:187–88). This qualification allows us to accommodate Kierkegaard's claim that there is a qualitative divide between spheres of existence. We can interpret him as holding that if we are not religious ourselves, we will need help from the other side.²⁹ We will need someone who already embraces the religious life to describe it for us—or God to reveal it to us.³⁰ In addition, even with

²⁶ Paul, 'Transformative Experience', 2015, 806–13.

²⁷ For discussion, see Kemp, 'The Role of Imagination', 211.

²⁸ For discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, 91–95.

²⁹ For support, see Kemp, 'The Role of Imagination', 209.

³⁰ In the language of *Philosophical Fragments*, the truth does not already lie within us. It must come to us from the outside (PF 13, 15/SKS 4:222, 224).

assistance, we can at best see the religious life ‘as through a glass darkly’.³¹ Until we become religious ourselves, our grasp of the religious life will not be perfectly accurate or perfectly comprehensive. We will overlook some things and misunderstand others.

Nevertheless, we find here one role for Kierkegaard the existential therapist. As someone who has already made the religious leap, Kierkegaard can tell us what it is like on the other side. Indeed, this is what his literary writings do. They give us pictures of religious inwardness (CUP 1:251–300/SKS 7:228–73). They supply us with descriptions of what it looks and feels like to occupy the religious sphere of existence (PV 129/SKS 16:111). Herein lies the value of *Fear and Trembling*, for instance. Reading it affords us a glimpse into the mental life of Abraham, the father of faith. We witness Abraham’s inner struggle to trust God when doing so seems absurd and to believe in God’s promises even though they appear impossible. We also learn what it is like for Abraham to follow God’s commands in the face of society’s disapproval and to be incapable of explaining his chosen path to the people around him.

6. The Socratic question about virtue and knowledge

Overcoming the cognitive obstacle is no easy task, and there is much more to say about it.³² Still, I wish to set the matter aside for now. I want to turn instead to the question of whether overcoming the cognitive obstacle is enough. Is there more Kierkegaard must do if he wants to motivate readers to undergo transformational changes? If his goal is to inspire us to leave behind the aesthetic life in favour of the religious life, does he have to do something besides making these possibilities clear to us?

³¹ I Corinthians 13:12. For discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, 91–95.

³² For discussion, see Aumann, ‘Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication’.

In a sense, these are ancient questions. They resemble the ones raised in the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* about the relationship between virtue and knowledge. To say that overcoming the cognitive obstacle is enough—to say that all Kierkegaard needs to do is to get his readers to understand the religious ways of life—is to affirm the Socratic view that virtue is knowledge. It is to posit that people would do the virtuous thing (in this context, choose the religious life) if only they saw it for what it really was. So, if people fail to do the virtuous thing (fail to choose the religious life), it is only because they are ignorant of it.

Although Kierkegaard is a Socratic thinker in many respects, he rejects the Socratic view here. He denies that virtue is knowledge and that sin is ignorance. Consider the following passage:

Socrates says it is impossible for a person really to have understood, grasped, perceived the good and then do the evil—for the proof that one has actually comprehended the good is precisely this, that understanding exercises such power over a person that he does it; otherwise the fact that a person does not do the good demonstrates that he has not understood it. This is pure intellectuality, from which Socrates does not emerge; he does not make room for the will, or room within which the will can stir and move. (JP 3:466/SKS 22:53)³³

These are not throwaway lines. They reflect a position Kierkegaard often adopts. He repeatedly asserts that our problem is not just a lack of knowledge. Indeed, he thinks we can have all the knowledge we need and still come up short. Climacus writes, ‘In our day, it is thought that

³³ Although Kierkegaard typically rejects the Socratic view, he sometimes says it is partly correct. See JP 1:400/SKS 19:419; JP 2:537/SKS 22:163; JP 4.220/SKS 25:489; JP 4:220/SKS 26:12; SUD 87–96/SKS 11:201–8; CI 230n–231n/SKS 1:272n; TDIO 100/SKS 5:467.

knowledge determines the issue and that if one just comes to know the truth, the more concisely and quickly the better, one is helped. But existing is something quite different from knowing' (CUP 1:297/SKS 7:271). Kierkegaard's journals contain similar lines: 'Every person always understands the truth a good deal farther out than he expresses it existentially.... This is something quite different, you see, from that talk about wanting so much to know the truth, along with the notion that if one only understood the truth he would certainly act accordingly' (JP 2:537/SKS 24:324).

7. The conative obstacle to transformation

So, what else do we need besides knowledge? Kierkegaard's answer is that we need passion. Climacus is explicit about this: 'existing...cannot be done without passion' (CUP 1:311/SKS 7:283). In fact, passion rather than knowledge is what tends to be in short supply. Kierkegaard repeatedly complains in *Two Ages* that people are 'devoid of passion' (TA 53, 68, 97, 104/SKS 8:52, 66, 92, 99). He adds in his journals, 'What our age needs is pathos (just as scurvy needs green vegetables)' (JP 3:428/SKS 20:119).

C. Stephen Evans observes that what Kierkegaard means by 'passion' is what we ordinarily mean by 'care' or 'desire'.³⁴ Thus, another way to express Kierkegaard's view is to say what holds us back—what keeps us from making the transformation we need to make—is that our cares and desires are out of whack. We do not want the right kind of things. In particular, we are not favourably disposed to the religious life. The benefits it has to offer do not appeal to us as we are currently constituted. Thus, if Kierkegaard wants to inspire us to become religious,

³⁴ Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 34.

he has to do more than give us an accurate vision of the religious life. He also has to get us to care about or cultivate a passion for the religious life.

As I said earlier, Kierkegaard is in the same situation as Marge. Because Marge's students do not already care about the value of classical music, showing them the value of classical music will not be enough to get them to do their homework. Marge has to do something more; she has to bring something else into play. Agnes Callard addresses this problem in her writings on transformation, and she concludes that only something extrinsic to classical music will do the trick.³⁵ Only the promise of some reward (such as good grades) or the fear of some punishment (such as verbal criticism) will motivate the students. Moreover, the extrinsic motivation must speak to the students' current cares and desires. It cannot presuppose more developed tastes than they already possess.

Yet, extrinsic motivations are not enough. By themselves, they will not carry the students all the way through the transformation. They will not bring the students to the endpoint of caring about classical music *for its own sake*. Thus, Callard argues, the extrinsic motivations must have a provisional status.³⁶ Their purpose must be to get the students to engage with classical music long enough and seriously enough that they start to appreciate it for its own sake. In other words, the teacher must hope that listening to classical music—even if for extrinsic reasons—will have a transformative effect on her students. It will change their preferences so they align with what classical music has to offer.

How is this transformation supposed to occur? How are the students supposed to shift from caring about classical music for extrinsic reasons such as grades to caring about it for its

³⁵ Callard, 'Proleptic Reasons', 129–33; *Aspiration*, 68–73.

³⁶ Callard, 'Proleptic Reasons', 129–33; *Aspiration*, 68–73.

own sake? Satisfying answers here are elusive. But it helps to see that the puzzle is neither new nor unique to the cases under discussion. What is at stake is the question of how habituation works. We know our brains are hardwired to like what we repeatedly do. The more we engage in a behaviour, the more we tend to enjoy it. What remains unclear is how and why this happens. There are a number of theories on offer, of course. But I will save adjudication of them for another time. For now, it will suffice to say that the phenomenon occurs regularly in a variety of areas of life. Thus, we should not feel embarrassed to rely on it here. We can maintain that one way to overcome the conative hurdle is to use extrinsic motivations to get the learner to engage with the relevant activity long enough and seriously enough that the force of habituation kicks in.³⁷

8. Kierkegaard on extrinsic motivation

On my view, Kierkegaard accepts Callard's view. This might seem wrongheaded to some readers. For Callard relies on extrinsic motivations, something Kierkegaard disavows. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard accuses the person who wills the Good for the sake of the reward of 'double-mindedness' (UDVS 36–37/SKS 8:148–50). In *Christian Discourses*, he censures those who obey God because of what they will get out of it. Such people violate the Biblical injunction against serving two masters (CD 88–89/SKS 10:95–96). Finally, Kierkegaard states in his journals that extrinsic considerations cannot get us to become religious. No 'consideration of ends in view' or 'teleology' will do the job:

Thus there is but one view left, but it is adequate—it is that a person says to himself: As far as venturing everything is concerned, I have no 'Why' at all.... That is to say: with

³⁷ Fossheim, 'Habituation as Mimesis'.

the intellectual awareness which a more eminent individual may have these days, no consideration of ends-in-view can get him actually to venture everything.... In the unconditioned all teleology vanishes. (JP 4:514/SKS 25:66)

These passages tell only one side of the story, however. Other Kierkegaardian texts tout the extrinsic benefits of morality and religion.³⁸ In *Either/Or*, Judge William praises the ethical life because it offers a way to avoid despair (EO 2:155–334/SKS 3:153–314). Anti-Climacus makes a similar claim about religion in *Sickness Unto Death*. Only by turning to God, he says, can we avoid the torments of self-loathing and lead a psychologically healthy life (SUD 131/SKS 11:242). In addition, both Climacus and Kierkegaard speak about Christianity’s promise of eternal salvation in a way reminiscent of Pascal.³⁹ Climacus even suggests that a desire for eternal happiness is what attracts people to Christianity in the first place (CUP 1:16/SKS 7:25). Finally, in *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard asserts that loving God for his own sake is too lofty for human beings. The proper way to relate to God is to cling to him because one needs what he offers:

If a person in the most solemn and strongest terms asserted that he loved God, that God, God alone, was his love, his only, his first love, and this person, when asked why, answered, ‘Because God is the highest, the holiest, the most perfect being’; and if this person, when asked whether he had loved God for any other reason, whether he did not sometimes love God for another reason, answered no—we might well be suspicious of him, that he was a fanatic.... The simple and humble way is to love God because one

³⁸ For discussion, see Fremstedal, ‘Søren Kierkegaard (on Eudaimonism and Autonomy)’; Webb, ‘Kierkegaard’s Critique of Eudaimonism’.

³⁹ For support, see Adams, ‘Kierkegaard’s Arguments’.

needs him.... [T]he fundamental and primary basis for a person's love of God is completely to understand that one needs God, loves him simply because one needs him. (CD 188/SKS 10:198–99; see also JP 4:234/SKS 19:403).

Thus, Kierkegaard is of two minds about extrinsic motivations. Sometimes he is for them; other times he is against them. We can resolve this tension by attributing to him a version of Callard's position. On the one hand, Kierkegaard regards extrinsic motivations as crucial for jump-starting the transformation process. They attract the attention of people who do not already care about God or the Good, getting them to take such things seriously and to engage with them in a preliminary way. On the other hand, Kierkegaard believes we have to move beyond extrinsic motivations. They are a ladder we must climb up but eventually kick away.⁴⁰ That is, extrinsic motivations get us to engage with God and the Good long enough and intimately enough that we come to care about them for their own sake. This is why Kierkegaard chastises those who pursue God or the Good only for the sake of a reward. Such people have not completed the transformation. They have become stuck at a preliminary stage.

9. The transformative power of art

What does this have to do with art? I said earlier that art could give us a vision of our existential possibilities. It could help us see what it would be like to live differently than we do. But art can also help draw us to these possibilities. It can inspire us to leave behind old versions of ourselves and take up new ones. In sum, art can help us overcome the conative obstacle to transformation.

⁴⁰ For discussion of Kierkegaard's use of 'kicking the ladder' strategies, see Hannay, 'Johannes Climacus' Revocation'.

One way art inspires us is by giving us aesthetically appealing images of our possibilities. An artist may describe some new way of life with beautiful words or depict it with striking visual forms. He or she may embed it in a gripping narrative or have it embodied by a charming character. The result is that we feel pleasure upon viewing, hearing, or reading about the possibility. Or, if we feel pain, it is the kind of pain that nevertheless attracts. (This happens in our encounters with sad songs and tragic dramas, for instance.)⁴¹ One way or the other, the representation of the new way of life captivates our hearts and minds, pulling us towards the new way of life such that we find ourselves wanting to embody it. This is beauty's great power over us: it makes us want to repeat what we see.⁴²

Of course, when it comes to transformations, the hope is we will eventually stop needing the pull of aesthetics. Engaging with the new way of life will change us so we come to care about it for its own sake. In other words, the hope is the aesthetic appeal of the artist's representation of the new way of life will function like rewards, punishments, and other extrinsic motivations. It will be a ladder we climb up but then kick away.

10. Kierkegaard's use of art

I believe Kierkegaard wants to use art this way—as a means to inspire transformation. Initial evidence is easy to come by. In *Point of View*, Kierkegaard stresses that he must begin where his readers are. When trying to motivate them to change their lives, he cannot assume they have cares that they lack. He must speak to desires that they actually possess. *'If One Is Truly to Succeed in Leading a Person to a Specific Place, One Must First and Foremost take Care to*

⁴¹ For further discussion of this issue, see Strohl, 'Art and Painful Emotion'.

⁴² Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 4–7.

*Find Him Where **He** Is and Begin There.* This is the secret in the entire art of helping' (PV 45/SKS 16:27; emphasis in original).

Kierkegaard also observes that his target audience has aesthetic interests. They live their lives in aesthetic categories and in pursuit of aesthetic ends. Thus, if he wants to reach them, his writing style must appeal to these interests (PV 51/SKS 16:33). Dry, didactic lectures will not work. He must give them something beautiful, brilliant, or bewitching.

Therefore the religious author first of all must try to establish rapport with people. That is, he must begin with an esthetic piece. This is the earnest money. The more brilliant the piece is, the better it is for him. (PV 44/SKS 16:26)

[I]f you are able to do so, portray the esthetic with all its bewitching charm, if possible to captivate the other person, portray it with the kind of passionateness whereby it appeals particularly to him, hilariously to the hilarious, sadly to the sad, wittily to the witty, etc. (PV 46/SKS 16:28; see also CD 235/SKS 10:242)

Yet, Kierkegaard goes on in *Point of View* to place a limit on the use of aesthetics. It is permissible, he says, to rely on the power of beauty to capture people's attention and make them aware of their possibilities. But it is unacceptable to use aesthetics to push or pull them towards any option in particular (PV 50/SKS 16:32). We find the same restriction in *Postscript*. Climacus allows the use of aesthetics to attract people's attention and awaken them to their choices. But, beyond that, people must be allowed 'to go their own way' (CUP 1:277/SKS 7:250–52; see also PC 153/SKS 12:157).⁴³ It is not permissible to draw on the power of aesthetics or rhetoric to get someone to make any particular choice (CUP 1:49, 436/SKS 7:54, 397).

⁴³ For discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, 163–65; Kemp, 'The Role of Imagination', 212–15.

What stands behind Kierkegaard's rule against using art to influence people to become religious? In part, it is the fear that people will turn to religion for 'the wrong reasons' (see CUP 1:247–49/SKS 7:225–26; BA 168–69/SKS VIII.2 B 12). They will adopt a religious way of life because they have been enchanted by a beautiful representation of it rather than because they want a relationship with God. Moreover, Kierkegaard worries that people will become stuck at this point. Their hearts will never change from an aesthetic orientation to a religious one. They will never come to care about God most of all—more than beauty or anything else.

We can detect the depth of Kierkegaard's worries about aesthetic appeals in his striking suggestion that Jesus had to be ugly. Not only did the Son of God have to lack money, power, and prestige. He also had to become 'absolutely the equal of the lowliest human beings' (PF 32–33/SKS 4:239). This includes lacking physical beauty:

Christianity does not at all emphasize the idea of earthly beauty, which was everything to the Greeks.... It is a real problem: to what extent should Christ be portrayed as an ideal of human beauty—and strangely enough, although many other kinds of similarities have been discerned between Christ and Socrates, no one has thought at all about this aspect, for Socrates was, as is well known, uglier than original sin. (JP 1:368/SKS 27:213; see also PC 36–38/SKS 12:50–51)⁴⁴

Kierkegaard extends this line of thinking to preachers, pastors, and apostles. To make sure people do not come to Christianity for 'the wrong reasons', those who spread the gospel must make themselves look repugnant (BA 168–169/Pap. VIII.2 B 12). They must forego finely

⁴⁴ For discussion of the importance of Socrates's ugliness, see CI 148, 212n/SKS 1:198–99, 256n; CUP 1:248–49/SKS 7:224–26; JP 1:64/SKS 23:36; JP 1:368/SKS 27:213; JP 4:205–6/Pap. III B 8, 27, 30.

tailored clothing and handsome appearances. Ideally, they will not even have sonorous voices or be particularly eloquent (CUP 1:248/SKS 7:225; see also JP 3:592–93/SKS 22:322–23; JP 1:319/SKS 24:122; JP 1:373/SKS 22:133; JP 1:376/SKS 25:83; JP 1:464/SKS 24:206; PC 38/SKS 12:51).

In sum, Kierkegaard wants things set up so people become religious for ‘the right reasons’—or not at all. This insistence on motivational purity is misguided on my view. Think again about Marge. If she removes all possible ‘wrong reasons’ from the table to ensure her students only do their homework for the ‘right reasons’, the result will be that they do not do their homework at all. Marge’s students do not yet care enough about classical music to do their homework for its own sake. Prior to taking her class, they are not interested in whatever intrinsic value classical music might possess. Thus, her students need some ‘wrong reasons’ to get started. They need some reward, punishment, or other extrinsic consideration to drive them forward. In fact, demanding they have pure motivations at the outset would be to violate Kierkegaard’s rule about beginning where people are. It would be to expect something from them they cannot supply.

In a sense, Kierkegaard has to appreciate this point. Not only does it fit his rule about beginning where people are but it also reflects his actual practice.⁴⁵ His descriptions of the religious life are not ugly or aesthetically repugnant. They are beautiful, striking, witty, and humorous. In *Fear and Trembling*, the lyrical brilliance of Silentio’s speech in praise of Abraham mirrors his unbridled admiration for the father of faith. Something similar holds true of

⁴⁵ In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus says the image of the ideal not only draws us to it but also makes us want to resemble it (PC 186–89/SKS 12:186–189; see also JP 1:413/SKS 20:173). For further support, see Kemp, ‘The Role of Imagination’, 222–23, 229.

the famous discourses on the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. The language Kierkegaard uses to fill out these metaphors for the religious life possesses a sublime elegance. His words and phrasing reflect the simplicity and serenity that the lilies and birds allegedly exhibit. Finally, think of *Works of Love*. Along with *Fear and Trembling*, it may be the text that inspires the most readers. What draws people to *Works of Love*, however, is not just *what* it says but *how* it says it. Indeed, the aesthetic appeal of Kierkegaard's literary style may be the primary engine of this work's transformative power.⁴⁶

11. Conclusion

On my account, art stands at the centre of Kierkegaard's therapeutic project. It is the means by which he motivates us to make the transformations that will cure us of our existential ailments. The stories he tells offer us preliminary glimpses of the ethical and religious modes of existence, and the aesthetic appeal of his writing draws us towards these lifestyles. Kierkegaard's hope is that repeat encounters with these stories will change us for the better. Upon reading them, we will find ourselves caring most of all about God or the Good rather than ourselves.

My account has focused on Kierkegaard's use of the *attractive* power of art. But Kierkegaard also draws on the power of art to *repel*. He builds negative aesthetic values into his accounts of the lifeviews that he wants to us to leave behind so we will not only understand but also *feel* their badness. Consider, for example, the terrifying words of the Seducer at the end of

⁴⁶ It is necessary to recall that aesthetic appeal need not revolve around pleasure. Works of art can also have aesthetic appeal in virtue of their painful content or the painful emotions they evoke. This is often what happens in Kierkegaard's writings. Although his words and stories sometimes have a simple beauty that gives rise to simple pleasure, they are frequently jarring, unsettling, or disturbing. The evocation of these difficult feelings is partly responsible for the transformative effect his works have upon us. Thanks to Vanessa Rumble for encouraging me to develop this point.

Part I of *Either/Or*, which are meant to scare us away from the life of enjoyment. Or take the Preface and Epilogue of *Fear and Trembling*, where Johannes de Silentio pokes fun at philosophers who think they can go ‘farther than faith’. He renders this position laughable so we will not take it seriously ourselves.⁴⁷ *Postscript* follows a similar pattern. It offers us a stinging satire of academic philosophy in the form of endless reflections on the perils of endless reflection. I am unsure whether the account I have developed in this paper would apply to these aspects of Kierkegaard’s authorship. Aesthetic repulsion may operate by a different mechanism than aesthetic attraction. Still, the *prima facie* similarity between the two strategies is noteworthy.

Both the attractive and the repellent version of Kierkegaard’s strategy raise moral concerns. Most notably, it seems manipulative to use aesthetic appeals rather than reason to get people to do something. This is part of what we find troublesome about many advertising and marketing campaigns. Yet, this objection might not bother Kierkegaard. It is true he talks about the importance of autonomy and letting people go their own way. But he also claims it is permissible to ‘deceive people into the truth’ (PV 53/SKS 16:35; BA 171/Pap. VIII.2 B 12; JP 1:288/SKS 27:411; PC 190/SKS 12:189; WL 276–77/SKS 9:274–75). I have spoken about Kierkegaard’s views on the morality of deception elsewhere,⁴⁸ however, so I will put the matter to rest here.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For discussion of the humorous aspect of Kierkegaard’s writings, see Lippitt, *Humour and Irony*.

⁴⁸ Aumann, ‘A Moral Problem for Difficult Art’; Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, 161–82.

⁴⁹ Versions of this paper were presented at the Living in Uncertainty: Kierkegaard and Possibility Conference at the University of London and as the Julia Watkin Memorial Kierkegaard Lecture at St. Olaf College. Many thanks to

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