

Prologue

The Art of Existing Religiously as a Self

Religion is the tie that binds us to God and to one another, but in some very important respects it also determines who we are, what kind of persons we become, and what the spiritual qualities are that should characterize our inner being and shape our personal relations to others. In short, religion is a dominant force in defining us as individual human beings or selves. No thinker has reflected more deeply on the role of religion in forming the human self than the Danish religious poet Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), who produced in little more than a decade an astonishing number of works devoted to an analysis of the kind of personality, character, and spiritual qualities needed to become an authentic human being or self. Indeed, one could justifiably claim that many if not all of his writings are concerned in one way or another with these constituents of the human self and their importance for becoming a whole, authentic human being. From the very beginning of his literary endeavors, Kierkegaard was engaged in the analysis of a kaleidoscope of poetic personalities in the form of representative figures, many drawn from classical and biblical literature, others imaginary constructions of his own or pseudonyms who were themselves imaginary constructions, and still others who were actual persons. This array of poetic and actual personae populating his writings from early to late indicate that the typical way he went about reflecting on human selfhood, personality, character, and the spiritual qualities that constitute them was indirectly through a poetic portrayal of figures who exemplify these determinants or the lack thereof.

In connection with this poetic approach to the analysis of human existence Kierkegaard also engaged in considerable direct reflection on

these concepts. His early, mostly pseudonymous writings focus largely on the constituents needed to become an ethical or ethical-religious personality, while his later, specifically Christian works and journals concentrate on the concept of the self, the rigorous upbringing and upbuilding needed to become a Christian, and the content of Christian character as formed through the imitation of Jesus Christ. In Kierkegaard's view, "Christianity is precisely the personal and entered into the world for this very reason – to introduce 'personality, being a person.'" ¹ By a person or personality he means a solitary *I* or distinctive individual, which every human being is originally created to be and has as one's specific purpose in life to become. Indeed, for Kierkegaard a person's "whole salvation lies in becoming personality" or a person in likeness to God, who "in the most eminent sense is personality, sheer personality" in the sense of being a personal being or subject who is intimately related to human beings in an inward, subjective manner rather than objectively through nature or cognitive speculation. ² As Kierkegaard sees it, then, "[p]ersonality is what we need" yet the whole development of the world "has been as far as possible" from acknowledging this need. ³ Instead, the historical movement has been toward becoming like others in the form of a nonentity or mere number in the abstraction of the crowd or masses, with the result that the personal "I" or personality has been abolished in modern times. ⁴ Kierkegaard thus considered his task and service as a poetic writer to be one of "bringing poetized personalities who say *I* (my pseudonyms) into the center of life's actuality" in order to familiarize the present age with hearing a personal *I* speak in the hope that personality could be regained in the modern age. ⁵ In seeking to bring this existential ideal once again into view for his time, Kierkegaard understood himself to be a "poet of the religious" and more specifically a "Christian poet and thinker" who fought with the aid of the poetical to move human beings "in the direction of being persons of ethical and ethical-religious character" by acquiring the art or skill of existing religiously in relation to the eternal or unconditional, although he never claimed to exemplify this ideal in his own life but always described himself as a penitent and "poet who flies to grace." ⁶

Defined as a personal or solitary *I*, personality corresponds to the category of the single individual (*den Enkelte*), which was the central category of Kierkegaard's life and thought. ⁷ By his own testimony, Kierkegaard's whole thought and historical importance is contained in this "one single idea" of the single individual, which every human being essentially is, can be, and should be. ⁸ So important was this category to

Kierkegaard that he addressed many of his upbuilding discourses to “that single individual” (*hiin Enkelte*) whom he called “my reader” and requested this designation as an inscription on his own grave.⁹ In his view, the awareness of being a single individual constitutes the basic consciousness of a human being inasmuch as it forms the conscience or one’s eternal consciousness by which one is opened to the eternal and becomes aware of having an eternal responsibility to give an accounting of oneself as a single individual before God as the one thing needful for realizing oneself as a self or authentic human being.¹⁰ The awareness of being a single individual, then, is “the first condition of all religiousness” and “the very principle of Christianity” for Kierkegaard inasmuch as in his view it is only as a single individual, not *en masse*, that one is saved.¹¹

As a personality or single individual, however, a human being is at every moment “simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race.”¹² By this statement, Kierkegaard, speaking in the voice of his pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis (“the Watchman of Copenhagen”), means that every individual “is essentially interested in the history of all other individuals, and just as essentially as in his own.”¹³ That is, each contributes to the development and perfection of the other. In a certain sense, then, to know oneself is to know all, as expressed in the Latin adage from Terence, *unum noris, omnes* (if one knows one, one knows them all).¹⁴ Consequently, the single individual is not an isolated, atomistic being as Kierkegaard’s critics sometimes charge but is essentially related to all human beings in and through our common humanity. Moreover, “the single individual is dialectically decisive as the *Prius* [precondition] for forming a community” inasmuch as in Kierkegaard’s view every member of a community being a single individual is what guarantees it as “a sum of ones” rather than a chimera in the form of the public or crowd.¹⁵ But the single individual is also higher or more than the race inasmuch as every individual is created in the image of God and has as one’s particular task in life to perfect oneself in resemblance to the divine.¹⁶ In relating to oneself as a single individual, therefore, one is even more intimately related to God whereas the race signifies a “lower commonality” that one shares with other human beings. The category of the single individual thus constitutes a spiritual or religious definition of what it means to be a human being for Kierkegaard.¹⁷

Another distinctive feature of Kierkegaard as a religious thinker is that, unlike the classical tradition of Plato and Aristotle and the scholastic tradition of medieval Catholicism, he does not use the language of

virtue to describe the spiritual qualities that characterize human selfhood, personality, and character, even expressing a negative view toward virtue in some of his works. A major question in the interpretation of Kierkegaard, therefore, is whether he should be regarded as a virtue ethicist in continuity with the classical and medieval virtue traditions and the renaissance of virtue ethics in contemporary moral psychology, philosophy, and theology, as some commentators claim, or whether he reflects instead the historic decline and disappearance of the concept of virtue in moral discourse and ordinary language, consciously avoiding the description of spiritual qualities as virtues on religious grounds, as I shall argue in the present study.

Focusing on the concepts of personality, character, and the question of virtue in Kierkegaard's authorship, this study seeks to underscore the moral and spiritual importance of religion for becoming an authentic self, concrete personality, and person of character for Kierkegaard. In view of the recent interest in the concepts of personality, character, and virtue in contemporary philosophy, theology, and empirical psychology, it is especially timely and important to consider Kierkegaard's religious perspective on these topics. Although this study is not intended to be a comparative study as such, it will have occasion to bring Kierkegaard into conversation with contemporary approaches to personality and character that do not recognize or take account of the spiritual dimensions of human existence that are decisive in his thought. Recent studies from the Character Project sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation in the United States and from conferences sponsored by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom are especially important in this regard.¹⁸ Since the early twentieth century, moral character and personality have been major topics of study in empirical psychology, the psychology of personality constituting one of the core subdisciplines in that field. Due to the subjective, value-laden nature of ethics and morality and the failure of early researchers to demonstrate significant coherence or consistency in the exhibition of character traits, the study of character was eventually abandoned in favor of a shift to the study of personality alone.¹⁹ In the 1960s, however, the existence of both personality and character began to be questioned by researchers who looked to external, situational factors rather than internal, personal features to explain human behavior.²⁰ Although serious challenges from neuroscience and social psychology remain, there is currently a consensus confirming the existence of relatively stable personality traits but not concerning the personological basis of moral character.

The lack of consensus on the status of character traits, however, has generated renewed interest in the existence, nature, consistency, and development of moral character in recent empirical studies.²¹

Consonant with the explosion of interest in personality and character in the field of psychology, there has also been a resurgence of interest in character and virtue in philosophical and religious ethics in contrast to the deontological and consequentialist ethics that dominated the modern age. While the current interest in character and virtue in these disciplines undoubtedly has aided our understanding of these concepts, the present study will endeavor to show that Kierkegaard offers a perspective on these issues that is important and should be taken into account, viewing them as he does in the context of a religious understanding of human selfhood that is deeply psychological in its analysis of human anxiety and despair yet open to spiritual dimensions and possibilities of human existence that are inaccessible to empirical measurement and/or excluded in secular versions of ethical theory and practice.

Although Kierkegaard was first and foremost a Christian thinker and poet, he also possessed a deep understanding and appreciation of other forms and expressions of religiousness. In his view, “[t]here are not . . . different roads and different truths and new truths, but there are many roads leading to the one truth and each person walks his own.”²² Thus he was not interested in formulating a general theory of religion in terms of a formal system of beliefs, practices, and regulative principles or in investigating the various religious traditions of the world.²³ Rather, he understands religion or religiousness to consist essentially in an inward, passionate, personal relation to God or the eternal that forms the basis and guiding telos for the development of the single individual’s personal life. As he sees it, Christianity in particular is not a doctrine (although it has doctrines) but an “existence communication,” which means that one is not related to God in this religion in a cognitive manner as an objective truth that can be known and comprehended through a rational explanation but as a subjective truth that is to be actualized in existence via a relation to Jesus Christ as the paradoxical appearance of God or the eternal in time.²⁴ For Kierkegaard, therefore, the focus in religion is or should be on becoming the truth rather than knowing the truth in an objective manner.

In the process of elucidating what it means to be religious in this existential sense, Kierkegaard distinguishes between three stages or spheres of human existence, namely the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious.²⁵ The esthetic stage is where every human being begins in life,

existing in an immediate and/or reflective manner on the basis of one's natural desires, talents, and capacities in the pursuit of enjoyment and temporal happiness as the human being one already is. In the ethical stage, by contrast, human existence is seen as a process of personal development in which one becomes a person or self by choosing the good and striving to embody the universal moral values and goals that constitute it. Over against the self-centered immediacy of the esthetic and the presumed self-sufficiency or autonomy of the ethical, the religious stage is characterized by the recognition of one's inability to achieve the universal and realize oneself as a whole or authentic self apart from a higher relationship to God or the eternal as the basis of self-fulfillment and eternal happiness. Within the religious stage Kierkegaard further distinguishes between two forms of religiousness, namely *immanent religiousness* (Religiousness A), which assumes an innate relation to the eternal within every human being as the basis for eternal happiness, and *paradoxical religiousness* (Religiousness B, or Christianity), which is based on a relation to God or the eternal in and through the paradoxical entry of the eternal in time in the person of Jesus Christ as the source of a human being's authentic selfhood and eternal happiness. Although the ethical and religious stages are distinct spheres for Kierkegaard, they are nevertheless closely related, with the result that he (or his pseudonyms, as the case may be) sometimes refers to them together as the "ethical-religious" in a broad sense that includes both Religiousness A and B in opposition to the esthetic, while using this term at other times as a designation for Religiousness A in contrast to Religiousness B.

In addition to being a poet, Kierkegaard is preeminently a dialectical thinker noted for his distinction between two forms of dialectic: *conceptual or quantitative dialectic* and *existential or qualitative dialectic*.²⁶ The first form of dialectic brings opposite concepts together in such a way as to emphasize the opposition, duplexity, and tension between them rather than a synthesis or mediation of opposites in a higher unity as in Hegelian dialectic.²⁷ The second form of dialectic involves the interpenetration of thought and existence in such a way as to emphasize the qualitative contradiction or gap between an individual's present existential condition and his or her ethical or ethical-religious telos. As Kierkegaard sees it, existential dialectic informs the very structure of human existence and is applicable to every stage of human life inasmuch as we are never fully realized as human beings but are always in the process of becoming as long as we live, therefore just as negative as positive in relation to existential truth.²⁸ Existential dialectic in the religious stage is further

characterized by a peculiar dialectical structure that Kierkegaard calls “inverse dialectic” (*Omvendt Dialektik*) or “the dialectic of inversion” (*Omvendthedens Dialektik*), according to which the positive is always given expression and known in negative or opposite form.²⁹ For Kierkegaard, both immanent religiosity and Christianity are characterized by the fact that they continually use the negative as their essential form or distinctive mark; that is, a positive relation to God is given expression in and distinguished by negative forms of passion or pathos. In Religiousness A these negative expressions take the form of resignation, inward suffering, and the consciousness of guilt, while in Religiousness B, or Christianity, they come to expression primarily in the consciousness of sin, the possibility of offense, dying to the world in self-denial, and external as well as internal suffering in likeness to Christ due to the fact that the essentially Christian is the opposite of the merely human, pagan, or secular mentality and thus inevitably receives opposition from the world as a result.

As Kierkegaard sees it, “*all religiousness lies in subjectivity, in inwardness, in coming to oneself*” in such a way as to be shaken, deeply moved, or awakened in one’s inmost being so as to undergo a qualitative change within oneself.³⁰ The art of existing religiously for him thus consists in being able “to be entirely as one ordinarily is, to live among the daily and continual recollections of the old and yet to be changed in the deepest ground of one’s being.”³¹ In Kierkegaard’s view, however, “most people, in the religious sense, go through life in a kind of absentmindedness and preoccupation; they never in self-concern sense each his own *I* and the pulse beat and heart beat of his own self,” in relation to which they live “as if they were continually out, never at home.”³² While he admits that people do have some religiousness, they tend to have it in the form of a “religiousness-at-a-distance” that does not come close enough to their lives.³³ That is, they have it in the form of an idea, a wish, a longing, a presentiment, or an illusory resolution and intention but not as something “to be used now, right now, now in this moment,” with the result that *they also relate to themselves at a distance* or are present to themselves only in a past or future sense rather than in the present moment.³⁴ Thus they “do not grasp that the religious is the *one thing needful*” for a full and meaningful human life but consider it “*also to be needful*, especially for difficult times.”³⁵ As Kierkegaard sees it, however, to be totally present to oneself in self-concern constitutes the highest task of a human being as well as the highest expression of religiousness, “since only in this way is it absolutely comprehended that a human being absolutely needs God at every moment.”³⁶

But what does it mean to be totally present to oneself in self-concern? And why is religion or a relation to God the one thing needful for a human being? As Kierkegaard sees it, to be deeply moved or shaken within oneself in self-concern over the meaning, quality, purpose, and telos or goal of one's life is to wake up to the possibility of becoming a self, which constitutes the central task of a human being inasmuch as every human being is primitively intended or destined to become a self and has that task as one's fundamental responsibility to fulfill in life. The task of becoming a self thus provides the anthropological context for Kierkegaard's thought as a whole, including the related concepts of personality and character. As defined in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), a human being is a synthesis of the psychical (mind or soul) and the physical (body) united in a third factor, namely spirit or the self, which signifies first of all that we are not merely animals like the rest of nature but enjoy a special status as conscious beings in relation to the divine.³⁷

But what is spirit?³⁸ In Kierkegaard's view, all language about the spiritual is metaphorical in nature and therefore impossible to define or grasp in a literal sense. But some clarity may be brought to this concept by noting that it is identified first and foremost with God, who is the invisible, eternal Spirit from whom human beings have their source as derived or finite spirits, whose essential task in existence is to become authentic selves or spirits in likeness to the divine.³⁹ Spirit thus signifies the presence or possibility of the eternal in a human being. As human beings, we are not merely a synthesis of mind and body but also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, which means that the first synthesis is possible only through a positing of the second synthesis in the introduction of spirit or the eternal to human consciousness. In other words, one cannot establish oneself as a synthesis of mind and body without establishing a relation to spirit or the eternal as the basis of that synthesis.

But what is the eternal? This term is understood in several different senses by Kierkegaard, its most common association being with God or the divine as that which is real, unchanging, complete, perfect, certain, righteous, and everlasting.⁴⁰ The eternal also constitutes a transcendent, transforming dimension or potentiality within a human being that gives continuity and meaning to our lives in the context of time as well as to time itself. As Kierkegaard or his pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis understands it, the eternal first makes its appearance in human consciousness in the moment or instant (*Øiblikket*, literally "a blink of the eye") when one's experience of time – in itself merely an infinite succession or continuum of passing moments without any distinction between past,

present, and future – is touched or intersected by the eternal, thereby establishing a “foothold” or dividing point for the division of time into past, present, and future tenses in the concept of temporality as that state of consciousness in which “time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time.”⁴¹ The moment thus constitutes “the first reflection of eternity in time, its first attempt, as it were, at stopping time” so as to posit spirit or the eternal in the form of the present and the future in a human being. In Christianity the moment is seen as being made possible by the coming of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time, when all things were made new (Gal 4:4).⁴² From a Christian perspective, therefore, the moment is both objective and subjective in character; that is, it is both a historical event and a state of consciousness within a human being that is made possible by a relation to the eternal in time. The Christian view of the eternal thus stands in contrast to the Greek association of it solely with the past, which in Kierkegaard’s view is to lack a concept of the eternal or spirit in a deeper sense inasmuch as it is understood only in a backward direction rather than forward in terms of the future and the fullness of time as including the past but not limited to it.⁴³ Properly speaking, then, the moment is not an atom of time but an atom of eternity inasmuch as “the life that is in time and is only of time has no present” but is only a parody of the present, which in abstraction from the eternal is “infinitely contentless” and “infinitely vanishing,” having no past or future.⁴⁴ As Kierkegaard sees it, such an empty, fleeting understanding of time is characteristic of the esthetic stage of life, in which no moment has enduring significance for a human being. Only when a consciousness of spirit or the eternal is posited in a human being is the moment truly present and the task of becoming a self as a derived spirit in likeness to God begins. To live in the moment or to be totally present to oneself in self-concern thus means to assume the task of becoming spirit or a self by incorporating a relation to God or the eternal within oneself in the realization that we are defined as human beings not merely by our finite, material existence in time but most essentially by a relationship to God, which is what really “makes a human being a human being” for Kierkegaard.⁴⁵ Only by sustaining a relation to God or the eternal in the present and as a future possibility within oneself can one become an authentic self, concrete personality, single individual, and person of character. As Kierkegaard expresses it in one of his Christian discourses, the religious individual, like the lily and the bird who have no care for the next day, “is one who is present (*Nærværende*)” or contemporary with him- or herself:

We frequently hear the wish to be contemporary with some great event or great man; the idea is that contemporaneity might develop one and make one into something great. Perhaps! But should being contemporary with oneself not be worth more than a wish! How rare is the person who actually is contemporary with himself . . . But the believer (the one present) is in the highest sense contemporary with himself. To be totally contemporary with oneself today with the help of the eternal is also the most formative and generative; it is the gaining of eternity . . . This contemporaneity today is the very task; when it is worked out, it is faith.⁴⁶

Employing the image of a rowboat in which the rower's back is turned away from the goal toward which he or she is rowing, Kierkegaard suggests that in order to work properly toward the goal of eternity in the future, one must, "with the help of the eternal," live "eternally absorbed in today," turning one's back to the next day, as it were, in order to be able to see "today and its tasks with perfect clarity."⁴⁷ While one might think that one would be "most distanced from the eternal" by turning one's back on the next day, Kierkegaard claims that "the believer is closest of all to the eternal" in living today inasmuch as "[f]aith turns its back to the eternal expressly in order to have it entirely present with it today."⁴⁸

Kierkegaard uses the lily and the bird again in another discourse to teach us in a humorous manner what it means to be a human being and what the requirement is religiously for being that, namely to be silent, unconditionally obedient, and joyful before God in the moment when it comes. "[E]verything depends on the moment," he contends, yet "the misfortune in the lives of the great majority of human beings is this, that they were never aware of the moment, that in their lives the eternal and the temporal are exclusively separated" because they did not learn respect for God by becoming silent.⁴⁹ For "only by being silent does one find the moment" and make use of it by becoming unconditionally obedient to God's will and unconditionally joyful in today.⁵⁰ "What is joy, or what is it to be joyful?" Kierkegaard asks, to which he answers: "It is truly to be present to oneself; but truly to be present to oneself is this *today*, this *to be today*, truly *to be today* . . . Joy is the present time with the whole emphasis on: *the present time*."⁵¹ Like the lily and the bird, who are completely present to themselves in being today, the person "who eternally and infinitely is present to himself in being today" is able to cast all his or her sorrows upon God and in the same instant become "contemporaneous with the first moment one exists" in being unconditionally joyful in "a today that never ends, a today in which you eternally can become present to yourself" by remaining in God.⁵²