

Article

Wearing the Good: A Kierkegaardian Exploration of “Messaged” Apparel

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Abstract: What might it mean to “wear the good?” This question arises from a dominating trend in contemporary spaces where objects such as clothing are employed to communicate desires and demonstrate ethical commitments to social causes, political institutions, beliefs, and ideologies. This paper explores the use of garments to convey messages, ethical stances, and even public virtues. It specifically attends to how “messaged” garments, or clothing items that bear images, symbols, and phrases, achieve these ends. Fashion theorist Malcom Barnard rightly intuits that “we have to use things to stand for our thoughts.” Yet the use of these garments warrants concern. This paper explores how such garments are enmeshed in the fashion industry and marketplace, identifying specific troubles that arise therein. Engaging the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, this paper attends to the ethical and spiritual complexities of “messaged” apparel, revealing their failure to supersede ambiguities, and ultimately collapsing ethical desires into aesthetic paralysis. The paper argues that a Kierkegaardian conception of hope can effectively guide those who wear such garments, countering the inadequacy of these wares to sustain personal and communal commitments. Hope directs the “worn” person beyond politicized and ethically “messaged” apparel towards new ways of dressing: adorned in finitude, humility, and an absurd perseverance towards the good.



Citation: Kealty, Céire. 2021.

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Religions 12: 640. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080640>

Academic Editor: Denise Starkey

Received: 3 July 2021

Accepted: 7 August 2021

Published: 13 August 2021

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Keywords: Søren Kierkegaard; identity politics; fashion theory; garments

1. Introduction

Garments have for centuries been used to demonstrate political leanings, whether individually or communally. For example, in pre-Revolution France, members of different classes joined together in the sans-culottes movement and scorned the breeches of the aristocracy by wearing trousers, a garment common to the working class. Movement members were distinguishable by their apparel. Today, people use dress in a similar, and more blatant, manner. T-shirts bear the visage of one’s favorite politician, urging others to “VOTE,” “GO GREEN,” and more. The use of political and politicized garments to convey ideas, beliefs, and commitments publicly has skyrocketed. Most, if not all, political candidates offer merchandise for sale at events and in online markets. Here, supporters can purchase shirts that connote their adherence to a campaign and its explicit message(s), whether that message is to “save the planet,” “tax the rich,” or most notoriously, “Make America Great Again.”

These garments dominate as tools of visual communication and wardrobe staples for activists and fashion enthusiasts alike. It is this dominance that warrants further exploration. Can these phrases, and those wearing them, be taken at face value? What of their implicit messaging? Political garments, curiously, draw from an aesthetic “tradition” in fashion and grasp towards more ethical ends while communicating social beliefs. Yet, these ends are problematized by the actual sources of these garments. One cannot evaluate the sincerity of activist apparel without considering its participation in the logics of fashion and its role as a product in the financial market. Is the sincerity of one’s actions and alignments preserved by these garments? Or is it tarnished? These and other questions guide my study.

My paper proceeds as follows. In Section 3, I trace the historiography of political and politicized apparel: their origin, popularization, and prevalence. In Section 4, I examine the role of garments in self-expression and communication, articulated through the lens of fashion theory. Here, I explore what exactly garments convey and how “messed” apparel beckons beyond mere aesthetic ends. In Section 5, I consult Søren Kierkegaard to locate “messed” garments within his three spheres of existence, as demarcated in *Either/Or*. His categories, the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence, elucidate deeper concerns underlying “messed” garments. I navigate *Stages of Life’s Way* and examine the Fashion Designer to offer insight on the systems in which garments are made and sold. Fourth, I engage Kierkegaard’s critique of his social context in *Two Ages* to unearth the hypocrisies knit into emblazoned apparel. Finally, in Section 6, I consider the hopes of the adorned and explore a notion of Kierkegaardian hope. I pursue an engagement with hope that is tangible to adorned individuals of all or no religious persuasions.

2. Establishing Key Definitions

Before tracing the historical emergence of “messed” garments, I must make an admission. In fashion theory, it would be redundant to preface the phrase “garments” with the modifier “messed.” Within this theoretical framework, garments are recognized as objects which enable the wearer to communicate ideas to the viewer and to the wearer himself. From a semiological perspective, clothing, like anything, “is a text that can be decoded as a sign” (Barthes 1994, pp. 186–87). Here, the garment functions as a sign, or a “prosthetic device or tool [sic] that we use to represent ourselves” (Barnard 2014, p. 79). Some theorists assert that garments communicate on their own and entertain interactions akin to a sender-receiver model, whereby the garment “sends” messages to the viewer-receiver. However, garments do not send these messages unassisted. As Colin Campbell asserts, for anyone to receive a message through clothing, one must first know what “language” is being “spoken” and one must be certain that the person to whom one is sending any message also knows the language (Campbell 1997, p. 342). Thus, “the ‘meaning’ of any one particular item of clothing . . . will differ depending on who witnesses it” (Campbell 1997, p. 343). The meaning of garments, then, can be manifold and variegated based on where a garment is worn. Still, I use the modifier “messed” intentionally to highlight this understanding of garments to those unacquainted with fashion theory.

The visibility of our current cultural interactions is embedded in the sender-receiver model, particularly in marketing and advertising. Depending on where we encounter a symbol, image, or phrase, we may recognize its role in convincing us to make a purchase, try a service, or invest in a brand. Garments can and do bear these linguistic and visual messages, in the form of a Nike logo, the name of a famous restaurant, and more. Other garments may advance messages and scenes that are politically and ethically charged. An ethically “messed” garment, for example, might be a shirt that expresses actionable statements, personally and politically: GO VOTE, LEGALIZE GAY, and GO GREEN, to name a few. It might invite an ideological shift: NO PERSON IS ILLEGAL, BLACK LIVES MATTER, and THE FUTURE IS FEMALE. These garments depart from a more Barthesian semiotic understanding of clothing, which privileges interpreting non-linguistic signs as imbued with linguistic meanings (Barthes and Stafford 2006, p. 118). Conversely, “messed” garments pose linguistic inscriptions and offer linguistic meanings in their emphasis on verbal communication. They bear explicit verbal messages, whether as a posed question, an exclamatory statement, or a simple phrase. These garments, of ethical and political sway, are the central focus of my exploration, as they invite those who encounter it to act anew, whether personally or publicly. Here, it may be most effective to refer to these garments as *ethically* “messed” apparel.

However, attempts to clearly parse what garments are ethically “messed” presents challenges. It can be difficult, in some circumstances, to clearly delimit the meaning of “messed” garments, and fully capture what they “say” to the viewer. A garment

that bears the words “I AM A FEMINIST” offers a message more explicitly than a shirt that says “FEMINIST.” Neither garment, however, captures the complex contours of the wearer’s feminism (for example, to which wave of feminism the wearer subscribes), or other beliefs intertwined in one’s conception of gender equality (see Section 5.3). As I explore in Section 4.2, a garment’s meaning can be contested and even wrongly interpreted by the larger community. The meanings of these wares depend in part on the contexts in which they are worn and a “shared language” between wearer and viewer. I acknowledge that, throughout this piece, “messed” garments and their meaning(s) may exceed the parameters which I have established to speak coherently about them. In a concerted effort to mitigate this risk, I have directed my exploration of “messed” apparel towards garments that meet one of three criteria: either they bear messages that are explicitly political and ethical in meaning and can be deduced with ease by a viewer, or they bear messages with political and ethical meanings that are clarified when properly contextualized, or they bear messages that, depending on the context in which they are worn, gain and generate political and ethical meanings.

To discuss garments as they inform identity and generate political expression requires me to attend to the notion of identity politics. I proceed through this paper with a purposefully guarded attitude towards identity politics; I resist reactionary understandings of identity politics, which reduce the phenomenon to offensive tropes about vulnerable and marginalized populations. Despite its prevalence in incensed political debate, the phrase itself resists strict definition. This ambiguity in the term “identity politics” allows for creativity in its examination. In this work, I approach the term as a broad framework by which people relate their identity to others. I draw this understanding from Malcom Barnard, who defines politics as the relation between groups (Barnard 2014, p. 93). Similarly, I lead with a broad conception of identity as a polysemous interaction of mind, body, spirit, and material.

Though I acknowledge the irreducibility of one’s identity from a religious perspective, in this work I highlight and affirm the social construction of identity as a normative pastime in present social encounters. This understanding of identity is upheld, at least in part, by the Internet. In considering contemporary conceptions of identity, one cannot disregard the role of the Internet in influencing identity construction, modes of communication, and interpersonal relationships. Sherry Turkle argues that on the Internet, “we are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent . . . and ever in process” (Turkle 1995, pp. 263–64). If we lead with the understanding that identity is a question of “fluctuating personality and tastes,” which holds weight in the fashion world as much as the world wide web (Lipovetsky 1994, pp. 148–49), then garments intuitively become “a means of constructing one’s identity” (Rocamora and Smelik 2016, p. 11). As I detail in Section 4.1, the fashion system predicates itself on constant change and fluctuation. Thus, the dynamics of fashion “enables individuals to continuously define their identities anew” (Lipovetsky 2005, p. 84). Furthermore, as I demonstrate in this work, garments function in identity groups, not only as fashion objects, but also as tangible markers of expressed visions, desires, and hopes. Garments are commonly used by groups to align with others and unite under sociopolitical communities and coalitions (and this usage has only proliferated across social media and other Internet platforms). Thus, “all that we wear establishes a relation to other people and is therefore political” (Barnard 2014, p. 106).

In short, I posit that engaging with dress enables a more robust understanding of identity politics, given that dress serves as a normative medium of identity construction and as a material object used to uphold identity relationships.¹ To regard dress, then, is to regard an essential component of identity politics and its adjacent discussions. This conviction justifies my study and demonstrates its pertinence.

Before proceeding to my study, it is important to address the relevance of Søren Kierkegaard to this discussion. Where does Kierkegaard fit in this exploration of “messed” apparel? In truth, I undertake a novel exploration of a garment whose proliferation is a contemporary development (see Section 3). Still, placing these garments in conver-

sation with Kierkegaard proves to be an intuitive pairing. In the past 20 years, scholars of theology and philosophy have engaged Kierkegaard's authorship to interrogate the Internet and corresponding media technologies to make sense of current modes of interpersonal communication (Dreyfus 2009; Barnett 2019). Hubert L. Dreyfus, for instance, maps Kierkegaard's hostility towards the public sphere onto the "new" public, comprised of anonymous online chatrooms and expansive blogs (Dreyfus 2009, pp. 78–79). Dreyfus addresses the Internet, channeling Kierkegaard's address to the press, to make sense of a "new sphere of discourse" (Dreyfus 2009, p. 73). Garments, too, are a mode of discourse, tangibly displaying communal desires to communicate and express markers of identity, opinion, and action. Here, there is consonance between these projects. A slogan garment is akin to a pithy tweet, and a politically "messed" shirt claims reminiscent of cardboard signs at protests.

However, "messed" garments, though they gesture towards and are propelled by these mediums of expression, also exceed them. As a garment, a "messed" garment rests against the skin of the wearer. It is more proximate to the body than a cardboard sign, or a leaflet, or even a megaphone, and, as I explore in Section 6, garments can render a wearer vulnerable to public scrutiny, endangerment, and even arrest. It serves multifaceted purposes, as a bodily billboard and as a "second skin".

As I suggest in Section 4, "messed" wearers use these garments to amplify their views and to publicly proclaim responsibility for social causes and political movements. Can the same not be said for a social media post? In true Kierkegaardian fashion, Dreyfus chides the web surfer for being lost in endless reflection (or browsing), aided by the Internet's anonymity, and worries that even the unconcealed blogger expresses his opinions "about anything without needing any experience and without accepting any responsibility" (Dreyfus 2009, p. 78). This is *not* necessarily the case with the wearer of "messed" apparel. Here, the shirt, screen-printed with an ethical message, is worn to achieve more than just online "anonymous speculation" (Dreyfus 2009, p. 79). It is worn to surpass aesthetic musings and even make and maintain commitments for action (Dreyfus 2009, p. 83). Those who wear these garments grasp for a more committed way of life, and in doing so "support life" in a world marked by ethical decision and pursuit—what Kierkegaard understands to be the ethical sphere of existence (Section 5.1). Thus, a Kierkegaardian critique of "messed" apparel emulates previous discussions of Kierkegaard and media technologies, while offering further avenues of exploration, specifically that of identity politics, the fashion system, and consumptive market relationships.

3. The Origin of "Messed" Garments

As previously stated, garments have been an active medium on which individuals and communities demonstrate their identity, ideologies, and beliefs. Unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, is the emergence of "messed" apparel. I employ this phrase as an umbrella term, to include garments and accessories that boast political slogans, images of public figures, and other symbols that gesture towards socio-political, cultural, and ethical sentiments and beliefs. Such garments emerged in the mid-twentieth century, when the creation of screen-printing methods allowed for logos, phrases, slogans, and other insignia to be etched onto shirts, crewnecks, and other articles of clothing.

Drawing from semiotics, one can see how this innovation in garment-making has expanded the meaning(s) of garments, and the implications for the wearer. Consider, for instance, a white cotton T-shirt, the normative "blank slate" for screen printing. The shirt is a cultural sign, with a general meaning accepted among citizens (Jobling 2016, p. 135). The shirt exudes a kind of "coolness"—it is comfortable and fashion-forward. This meaning, and the sign itself, is transformed by the imprint of a slogan or phrase; it can become "an ideological sign of political rebellion" (Jobling 2016, p. 135). Here, it is signified as a particular act (Jobling 2016, p. 137).

The emergence of slogan shirts began in the 1960s. In England, a store by the name of Mr. Freedom sold Disney-inspired slogan shirts. Designer Vivienne Westwood pursued a

more controversial route with such wares, creating shirts with punk sentiments emblazoned on the chest. She featured phrases such as “PERV,” “SCUM,” and “DESTROY” on her garments in the mid-1970s. Designer Katherine Hamnett is most known for pushing slogan garments into the public light. She first began her work in 1979, designing a shirt emblazoned in the phrase “CHOOSE LIFE.” This phrase, a central Buddhist tenet, was worn by George Michael, lead singer of the band Wham! From there, she developed more shirts, featuring slogans such as “Education Not Missiles,” “Peace,” “Save the Sea,” and “Vote Tactically,” among others (Moore 2018).

In March of 1984, Hamnett put her shirts “to use.” She attended a reception for British Fashion Week while wearing a T-shirt with the message “58% DON’T WANT PERSHING” loudly printed on the front. While meeting then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, she unzipped her jacket and boasted her beliefs on her chest. Later, when reflecting on the encounter, she noted, “democracy was slipping through our fingers, and we really felt as if we had no voice. Slogan T-shirts gave you one. You can’t not read them even from 200 yards, and once you’ve seen them, they’re in your brain” (Moore 2018). Her vocal garment loudly decried Pershing, the American nuclear missile that the Thatcher administration had agreed to base in the United Kingdom. Here, Hamnett spoke not only for herself but also for the 58% of UK residents who opposed the missile’s residence in their country (Barnard 2014, p. 63). Her feat created a frenzy within the market, and bold slogan shirts dominated the fashion world from the 1980s onwards.

Independent designers and fashion houses have continued Hamnett’s legacy, channeling her conscious ethos into numerous garments. While some designers such as Henry Holland used insincere and playful mottos, others hoped to send inspirational messages. For example, in October of 2016, Maria Grazia Chiuri designed a T-shirt bearing the phrase “We should all be feminists” for esteemed French fashion house Dior. These words, inspired by the title of the critically acclaimed book by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, captivated consumers. Soon, even fast fashion retailers such as H&M and Zara offered similar iterations of the iconic garment. These are just some of the many “messed” garments that abound in shop displays, store shelves, and domestic wardrobes. Such garments suggest that wares can externalize human desires, in particular the desire to effect material change.

4. Garments and Self-Expression

4.1. Notes Regarding Dress

What does it *mean* to dress oneself? At first glance, the act of dressing seems unremarkable and rudimentary; it is a task required to mark one’s assimilation into mundane and repetitive scenes each day, such as attending work, meetings, and appointments. Dress, at the very least, helps maintain social conventions in dress codes. Yet, they still maintain a kind of worldly superficiality. Fashion theorist Joan Entwistle notes that before the mid-eighteenth century, “appearance [including dress] was not seen to express the self, but instead to be a performance ‘at a distance from the self’” (Entwistle 2015, pp. 69–73). Thus, dress was received as a “costume,” a way to enhance the body in spectacle and performance—nothing more.

The eighteenth century introduced Romanticism, and as Entwistle elucidates, Romanticism fomented “the sense that dress and appearance should be related to one’s identity” (Entwistle 2015, p. 73). The modern individual, she asserts, is one who is aware of being read by his or her appearance. Furthermore, the body, according to Joan Finkelstein, “has increasingly come to be seen as the container of the self, signifying ‘individuality’ and ‘authenticity’” (Entwistle 2015, p. 73). Fashion theorist Malcom Barnard concurs, noting that garments such as activist shirts lend themselves to the common “assumption [. . .] that one has an identity and that it is simply represented and externalized in what one wears” (Barnard 2014, p. 93). As seen in the popularity of slogan apparel, clothes are accepted as tools to not only adorn but also reveal “the self.” The realm of fashion upholds the “modern” self, who has a constantly changing personality and taste (Svendsen 2006, p. 148).

This modern notion has afforded present wearers the disposition to approach garments as a means by which persons can display their priorities, commitments, and affinities. If meaning is only skin-deep, then clothes clearly function as the wearer's "second skin".

Of course, in acknowledging that the meaning of garments depends on consensus and acceptance in social settings, one must consider how clothing can further presumptions about identity in instances of class, race, sex, and gender. These presumptions can be and often are harmful. For example, in the instance of "female" dress, one can think of how consensus has generated particular standards of dress, appearance, and adornment. Consensus dictates, for instance, what garments are appropriate and inappropriate for women (for example, the length of one's skirt or exposure of particular body parts). The 1970s and 1980s saw ample feminist critique against fashion and conventional standards of dress and beauty. Common arguments included the charge that women's dress reiterated the oppressive nature of feminine ideals of beauty which generated in women a permanent sense of dissatisfaction with their appearance (Negrin 1999, p. 103). These notions of dress also generated standards of beauty that were unattainable for at least one reason: they were constantly changing. The logic of fashion is recognized by numerous theorists, including Gilles Lipovetsky and Elizabeth Wilson, as wedded to change (Svendsen 2006, p. 22). Fashion, says Lars Svendsen, is an "eternal recurrence," not necessarily of the new, but rather of trends from the distant past and present (Svendsen 2006, pp. 32–33). Change in fashion is sought for its own sake and is thus a source of pleasure (Svendsen 2006, pp. 22–23). Fashion as a system is neither static nor neutral. It is dynamic, convincing, and boundless. This is not, in and of itself, a good.

One must consider the "good" here because identity is not simply comprised of dressing oneself, nor is identity construction merely the task of aesthetic arrangement. One's identity is intimately linked to the ethical, especially with regards to dress. The Christian Church, for example, regards garments as a means of generating or obscuring virtuous behavior, as dress can preserve the chastity of the wearer and those who encounter her. In holding the gazes of passersby, garments can function to generate ethical responsibility, for wearer or viewer. "Messaged" apparel extends beyond discussions of chastity and demands that justice be done, for any social cause, stated or otherwise. These garments materialize Barnard's assertion that "fashion performs . . . a representational form of communication [. . .] hairstyles, body modifications, clothes and make-up are things that stand for other things" (Barnard 2014, p. 54). These things are, in many ways, *ethical things*—ethical beliefs, ideas, and commitments. If one, as Svendsen asserts, cannot avoid giving others an impression of who one is by what one wears, then it follows that garments can offer moral impressions to others.

In its reference to ethical commitments, "messaged" apparel highlights a task we have largely assigned to garments in the present milieu: ethical representation. In one sense, the proliferation of political apparel harkens back to older critiques of fashion. Theorists Thorstein Veblen and Adolf Loos, for example, criticized the ornate and impractical dress of women as unnecessary and wasteful in the twentieth century, while in the nineteenth century suffragists critiqued female dress, "as it hindered the physical mobility of women and was detrimental to their health" (Negrin 1999, p. 99). These critiques, though variegated in expression, demonstrate a turn towards the "practical." Here we might think of "messaged" apparel as serving practical ends. Though they possess an aesthetic form by virtue of their being a fashion object, such apparel bears a practical function: to broadcast images, symbols, and phrases that evoke response. The garment can still entertain an aesthetic aspect, as a fashion item, but "says more" to the wearer and viewer: ideally, "they change our view of the world and the world's view of us" (Svendsen 2006, p. 151).

These responses can be ethically grounded. For instance, a shirt that says "Save the Trees" may prompt the viewer to think about her paper consumption, donate to causes that conserve forests, or another response. Yet they can also be geared towards other ends; a "Save the Trees" shirt that also bears a company logo can merge the viewer's ethical response to be associated with the depicted company. Here, the shirt functions

as an extension of advertising for the company and can help generate moral associations therein. These are just two examples of how political garments function as utilities for causes and companies. Still, these garments are not immediately received as advertising tools or marketing tactics. Rather, they are embraced as objects that make present aspects of the wearer's identity that he privileges as worth revealing. They "raise awareness" for various causes, perhaps near to the wearer's heart, and in this way generate attention around communal needs. "Messaged" garments as intentionally chosen articles of dress do not only amplify causes or persuade and challenge viewers with their messaging; they seek to broadcast the wearer's commitments, concerns, and loves. They offer personal benefits, too, enabling the wearer to generate personal agency. The garment can "give" wearers a voice, as Hamnett claims.

In short, the garment emerges as a convincing moral accessory that gestures towards the moral competence of the wearer, as well as her personal commitments. Designer Ashish remarks that slogan shirts are "like a billboard advertising what you believe in" (Molvar 2017). Here, in gesturing towards one's beliefs, we might be convinced of the wearer's commitments. Perhaps the garment assists in demonstrating the sincerity of the wearer. After all, why wear a "messaged" garment if one is not at least marginally committed to, or convinced of, the message on display? Some messages can be so provocative and politically polarizing that one would only wear it if they truly believed in the message on display (e.g., Trump regalia in an American context, or Pride apparel worldwide). The viewer might take the wearer at her garment's word. If one accepts the positioning of garments to demonstrate social identity and commitment, then a wearer's choice to don a particular "messaged" shirt links the message, albeit implicitly, to herself. The power of this move becomes more apparent in a communal setting, where the messages appear in a crowd of people clothed in similar apparel. The presence of numerous people adorned in political dress suggests a consensus among the masses. Conference, protest, and rally attendees are perceived as united, then, under a common cause. Kristina Haughland, Le Vine associate curator of costume and textiles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, concurs, noting that wearing "messaged" garments is "a way to add cohesion to groups and show support for people who feel the same way as you do" (Molvar 2017). Whether perceived by a supportive or dissenting passerby, the crowd will nonetheless leave an impression on the viewer and could even compel her to align herself with the crowd, and the compelling message displayed on the garments.

4.2. Concerns towards "Messaged" Dress

Using a garment to display one's moral compass, ethical commitments, and other features intimately knit into one's identity is a common, and yet concerning, pursuit. I take issue with the medium on which we emblazon our desires, hopes, and cries. In what follows, I detail my concerns with the garment's prominence as an ethical "second skin".

First, the ethical import of a garment can and often is tampered with by virtue of its being *on* a garment. Garments can convey meaning, and "messaged" apparel makes the intended meaning(s) of a garment more apparent to the wearer and viewer. Yet garments cannot send messages concerning the distinct specificity of the wearer's everyday life (Barnard 2014, p. 76). A T-shirt that says "FEMINIST" cannot explain the specificity of the wearer's choice behind purchasing and wearing the shirt; it cannot verify if the wearer's feminism is exclusionary or misandrist; it cannot explain if there are parts of the prevailing feminist movement that the wearer rejects; it cannot verify the conditions under which it was manufactured; and it certainly cannot explain why the wearer would purchase a garment that was made by the hands of exploited, underpaid garment workers in Southeast Asia or another part of the world.² Some of these concerns can be clarified based on the setting in which the wearer boasts the shirt, but the last concern, for the material realities of garment workers and industry practices, remains unresolved.

The same concern could be raised for a "MAGA" hat, manufactured in Mexico or elsewhere. In some sense, the material circumstances of the garment betray the espoused

beliefs of the person, policy, or political party they represent. The irony of a garment worn to represent the presidential campaign and policies of former U.S. President Donald Trump, who was expressly hostile towards immigrants and championed domestic production, is not lost here. Nor is the “feminist” garment produced by exploited garment workers, who are mostly women. This is not merely irony, either. Here, I raise a second concern. Garments, in boasting manifold meanings, may transmit unintended messages to the viewer, or the wearer.

In American politics, manifestations of this concern abound. In June of 2018, former U.S. President Donald Trump, and then-First Lady of the United States Melania Trump, visited the New Hope Children’s Shelter in McAllen, Texas. Former President Trump was known to attract media ire; on this trip, however, it was Melania, or more specifically, her clothes, that generated controversy ([BBC 2018](#)). FLOTUS wore a Zara branded jacket, which featured the following words on the back: “I really don’t care, do you?” Tammy R. Vigil notes that this sartorial move stood in contrast to the expectations of her communications team. She notes, “it seemed that the Office of the First Lady had devised a relatively effective plan to demonstrate Trump’s heartfelt concern for children and her willingness to engage in compassionate outreach with an outing to Texas” ([Vigil 2020](#), p. 276). This goodwill trip, she continues, was “sabotaged” by the jacket: “reporters pointed to the care Trump usually took with her clothing and argued that the accessory was a clear indication that the first lady was either ‘going through the motions’ of the first ladyship and had no real regard for the detained children or that she was sending her husband a message that she would act on her own behalf without concern for his political agenda” ([Vigil 2020](#), p. 276). Media outlets raved for weeks over the clear distastefulness of wearing the garment while visiting migrant children.³ Meanwhile, Donald Trump insisted the display was a message to the “Fake News Media,” and Melania concurred: “It was for the people and for the left-wing media who are criticizing me. I want to show them I don’t care”.

Here, the Trumps confirm Joan Entwistle’s claim towards dress; contemporary people recognize the power of their appearance and that their appearances wield power, so they dress to convey that and more. Although then-White House press secretary and communications director Stephanie Grisham urged people to focus on the substance of the first lady’s visit instead of her wardrobe, the jacket dominated coverage of the trip ([Vigil 2020](#), p. 276). The outcry prompted by Mrs. Trump’s jacket further gestures towards the ethical implications of “messed” garments. Her garment conveyed a message that revealed the ethical components of speech and slogans. To wear a garment is, in one sense, to broadcast a moral stance. However, it is also to risk association with other stances, as illustrated by the power of the viewer’s perspective. The viewer’s perspective can reveal alternate stances, while obscuring the intended stance. To some, Mrs. Trump’s jacket revealed a lack of regard for vulnerable populations; it scorned migrant children and any “care” for them. Thus, the garment connotes an unethical meaning. Melania, the wearer, has publicly disagreed with this perspective; her insistence that the garment stands against the “Fake news media” offers its own moral stance. Here, she displays her view of mainstream news outlets as unethical actors in the public sphere. From this perspective, her choice in outfit scorns the unethical. Although vantage point influences the reception of the jacket, it remains that garments project un/ethical claims, which are interpreted by others. This interpretation may be scrutinous, or it may be fleeting. Both contribute to public reception of garments, but more specifically, those who wear the garments.

In the section that follows, I will explore an additional concern of mine surrounding “messed garments,” arising from a suspicion towards fashion and the market, two systems in which garments and garment-wearers find themselves. Here, I turn to Kierkegaard, whose insights tease out the deeper ethical and spiritual challenges of these garments.

5. Kierkegaard on Garments

What might Kierkegaard say about “messed” apparel? Kierkegaard routinely mentioned garments throughout his self-authored and pseudonymous works (Ziolkowski 2019, p. 92); garments serve as a leitmotif in his writings (Ziolkowski 2019, p. 89). As the son of a textile merchant, he likely approached dress more viscerally and personally than the average Dane. Such would be the case after his wares were publicly mocked in the Copenhagen tabloid, *The Corsair* (Ziolkowski 2019, p. 89). Though there are numerous explorations of dress throughout Kierkegaard’s oeuvre, I approach garments, specifically “messed” apparel, with three concepts in mind: his spheres of existence, his critique of the present age, and his engagement with hope.

5.1. Insights from *Either/Or*

Kierkegaard is, among other things, known for his thesis of three stages or spheres of existence. The first sphere is the aesthetic life—this is ground zero for every person. Here, “one simply attempts to satisfy one’s natural desires or urges” (Evans 2006, p. 86). The second is the ethical life, where “one grasps the significance of the eternal and by ethical resolve attempts to transcend one’s natural desires and create a unified life” (Evans 2006, p. 87). The third life, superior to the prior two, is the religious life. Philosopher Lars Svendsen attempts an engagement with Kierkegaard’s first two spheres of existence, vis-à-vis the fashion system. Svendsen critiques fashion as an obstacle to securing selfhood and attaining unity. He echoes Gilles Lipovetsky, who argues that fashion has created a new type of person, “the fashion person,” who does not connect strongly to anything or anyone, and who has a constantly changing personality or taste (Svendsen 2006, p. 148). Fashion, Svendsen asserts, is “the missing essence of the postmodern self, which is programmed constantly to go off in search of new versions of itself, but it becomes a self without any constancy whatsoever” (Svendsen 2006, p. 148). Again, fashion’s obsession with change, whether with the eternal recurrence of the new, or in contemporary rearticulations of prior trends, inhibits constancy, stability, and anchorage.

The ‘fashion self’ bears resemblance to the aesthete, as presented by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*. Svendsen notes that according to Kierkegaard, “the aesthete is characterized by immediacy, not in the sense of openness but in the sense of dependency on everything he has round about him” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 149). The aesthete despairs, says Svendsen, for two reasons. First, there is something random and transient about his life: “his life is built on sand” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 150). Second, man is a spiritual being, and the aesthete seems to deny this truth. Svendsen insists that the aesthete, much like the fashion self, “is in need of a view of life that can provide him with something firm and unchanging in the constant flux of life” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 150). Put differently, the aesthete needs continuity, since he lives without any recollection of his own life. He lives unmoored to anyone or anything, in a perpetual state of whimsical wandering.

This is how garments, and desire for garments, are packaged and sold, and how the fashion-forward individual lives. Another concern we encounter in the fashion system and its embeddedness in change is its roots in the market economy. Negrin notes that, beginning in the 1970s, feminists framed women’s quest to partake in shifting fashion trends as “yoked to the imperatives of the capitalist economy which used the mechanism of built-in obsolescence as a way of increasing expenditure on consumer goods” (Negrin 1999, p. 103). Here, the purchasing, curating, and wearing of garments was undergirded by the demands of the market, and the desire it generated.

The market itself demands and depends on the kind of aesthetic fluctuation that Kierkegaard highlights. In engaging with Kierkegaard’s sense of an “authentic self” from *The Sickness Unto Death*, Michal Valčo argues that liberal capitalist democracies stifle this self, by inviting its citizens to “celebrate their freedom of choice” through purchases, and are thus “ridden of the burdensome task of a true self-reflection” (Valčo 2015, p. 135). He continues: “They are to devote their time and energy into solving ‘practical issues’ at hand and shy away from the ‘impractical issues’ of spiritual integrity and deep moral

responsibilities" (Valčo 2015, p. 135). If they, unluckily, buckle under the weight of insurmountable social ills, they can "flee into the more 'intelligible' and 'real' world of economic choices and instantly available gratifications" (Valčo 2015, p. 135).

One might see "messed" garments depart from this sort of civic anesthetization. After all, political wares seek to highlight social concerns and draw attention to pressing ethical concerns in the public sphere. I am skeptical of this achievement, however. One cannot approach such garments without acknowledging their role as fashion items, as they are "in fashion" in the twenty-first century. Garments are also marketable objects, born from the fashion system and propagated by companies and corporations. Here, we might consider the teloses, or ends, of these systems. Towards what are they geared? The telos of the market is, ultimately, to satisfy one's shareholders and furnish one's bottom line; the telos of fashion is to be potentially endless. As Svendsen intuitively, "fashion does not have any telos, any final purpose, in the sense of striving for a state of perfection" (Svendsen 2006, p. 29). While both the market and the fashion world can accommodate and create space for participants to achieve their telos, neither the market nor fashion orient themselves fully towards these ends. The purposes of these garments may be manifold, but it is likely that brands produce such "messed" apparel to build rapport among their clientele, further desire for these garments, and further brand development. The end, here, is mammon, both ethically dubious and spiritually troublesome. In the Book of Matthew in the New Testament, a firm warning resounds: "no man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24).

The way in which desire is formed in the marketplace, through monetary choice, is of utmost importance to this work. Consider the conscious consumer, who desires to broadcast his personal commitments and beliefs. He might, if he takes the prior claims surrounding dress to be true, choose a garment, such as a graphic T-shirt, that accomplishes his goal. James K.A. Smith suggests that "rituals" such as these—the choosing, purchasing, and wearing of the item, as well as the act of going shopping for the acceptable garment—takes on a liturgical tone. For Smith, a liturgy can be "practices or rituals of ultimate concern" (Smith 2009, p. 131). These liturgies "shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world" (Smith 2009, p. 25). Smith beckons further, presenting a definition of religion that entails "institutions that command our allegiance, that vie for our passion, and that aim to capture our heart with a particular vision of the good life" (Smith 2009, p. 90).

The market's potent manufacturing of desire cannot be overstated. In the North Atlantic West, in particular the United States, identity is intimately constructed in the marketplace, while being forged by market systems. Through advertising, companies display products or service that claim to satiate one's desires, while stimulating and constructing new desires (Holden 1999). Holden offers four types of desire constructions by advertisements: object-mediated desire (through the product, desire is made manifest), object-induced desire (the product stimulates desire for its consumer in external, unrelated others), object-directed desire (whereby the presenter and product are conflated), subject-oriented desire (desire for the person depicted in the ad is ancillary to the desire expressed for the product). Desire is not unidirectional or directed merely towards goods (or in the ideal sense, the Good). Rather, desire is scattered, serving multiple ends—and again, these ends are molded by and pass through the logics of the market.

Valčo and I share a similar hesitation towards valorizing the freedom to choose through purchases; he goes so far as to call "a unilateral promotion of economic and cultural freedoms" as he describes it "a new idol of our liberal society" (Valčo 2015, p. 135). His hesitation, it seems, stems from a suspicion towards larger social structures that overwrite contemporary notions of contentment, satisfaction, and goodness. Though it may not be his intention, Valčo offers a damning indictment of "messed" garments:

"Human individuality and personhood seem to be lulled by the omnipresent slogans of freedom, especially in its economic and moral senses, only to be

consumed and ‘flattened’ by the soft totalitarian power of consumerism. The loss of authentic individuality (in Kierkegaard’s sense) goes unnoticed in this process, as individuals are being subconsciously influenced by the omnipresent normative images and messages of economic, political, and cultural marketing ads and media content”. (Valčo 2015, p. 135)

Despite his attunement to the pernicious logics of the market (which also find their place in fashion, too), Valčo offers little respite to wearer or reader. He suggests, as an antidote to the mindless “mob individuals” that equate shopping sprees and activist tees with true freedom, a rediscovery, appropriation, and public emphasis on the constitutive character of cultural and religious traditions (Valčo 2015, p. 137). Furthermore, he says that the state “should be open to the cultural influences of extra-governmental institutions and movements and make it possible for such institutions and movements to exist” (Valčo 2015, p. 138). Here, one can imagine that Valčo is speaking about movements attached to “messed” garments, such as The March for Our Lives, climate movements, Pride Month, and more. Paraphrasing George McLean, Valčo insists that the shared values and practiced virtues of our cultural and religious traditions constitute “[the] deepest, most penetrating self-understandings and ultimate commitments which shape [the individuals’] modes of life” (Valčo 2015, p. 138).

Two tensions arise here. First, public displays of enthusiastic support, of creative tension, and of a beckoning towards God, must be palatable by the standards of the state (Alonso 2021, p. 61). This does not only refer to political or cultural beliefs that are reduced to mere fashion, but also to public displays of dissent that suffer media scorn, versus that which is acceptable and endorsed by state officials, celebrities, and communities. Usually, those with corporate sponsors are palatable enough, while spontaneous declarations are met with police resistance and media condemnation.

Second, it is in these relationships and communal participation in social associations that the logics of the market are reiterated. So often are our communal desires co-opted for monetary ends. We are embedded in a cultural landscape of corporatized desire. This dissatisfying social terrain is a breeding ground for fragmentation, exhaustion, and collective despair. The reduction of communal hopes for the good of neighbors, and goods that gesture towards the good, to mere objects available for purchase endangers expressions of tangible, demonstrable hope.

This is not to say that communities do not attempt to resist corporatization and market forces. Grassroots makers, or groups that print their own shirts separate from stock shelves, cultivate spaces of resistance within the world of politicized fashion apparel. These subversive practices, independent of corporate production, push against the co-opting wiles of larger organizations and fashion companies. Such garments can make present the collective hopes and dreams of the wearers’ group, while also signaling towards the deceptions of the systems in which they are worn. Antonio Eduardo Alonso notes that the “cries” of the collective, of hopes and dreams, and of the divine persist even in a landscape of misshapen desire and fragmented commodification (Alonso 2021, p. 77). Still, it remains difficult to say where authentic “messed” apparel begins and where corporatized messaging ends. The subversive practices and products of the activist group can be adopted by the mainstream fashion brand or used in advertising by larger corporations. Says Alonso, “even conscious acts of market dissent ... are themselves so easily commodified ... ” (Alonso 2021, p. 206). Such is a risk that exists, and while it may not discourage groups from paving their own way, it dilutes the effectiveness of the practice (in this instance, the practice is wearing a “messed” garment). In acknowledging the differences between a shirt made by an individual group and a shirt made by a market-oriented corporation, we must also acknowledge that these differences are easily obscured and can collapse into ambiguity.

Corporate actors not only manufacture desire, but also manufacture the notion that these garments can adequately present the self, that “messed” garments should be a first choice for self-expression, for publicly responding to ills, and more. The symbols,

visages, and phrases on these garments do evoke a sense of responsibility, of alignment with social causes, but these garments ultimately fall flat. They flatten the self to say, “I am [the sentiment expressed on] this shirt.” The shirt does not, and cannot, say enough about the complexities of identity—and even if it could, it constantly refers itself back to other systems with other ends. Dreyfus suggests, “if one leaps into the aesthetic sphere with total commitment expecting it to give one’s life meaning, it is bound to break down” (Dreyfus 2009, p. 82). I suggest, if one adheres to “messed” garments with the expectation that these wares will effectively anchor groups and effect change, without considering its rootedness in the fashion world, then this expectation (and others) will likely not be met. Ultimately, the ethically “messed” garment is subsumed into the aesthetic, and the self and its hopes become yet another “thing” to dispense for sale. We see this demonstrated in the dominance of personal responsibility logics in the United States; it is through purchases that we allegedly “help” others, change the world, and, as former President George H.W. Bush’s organization Thousand Points of Light purported, volunteer our way to social salvation. Purchasing power is legitimate, but not a panacea.

5.2. Insights from *Stages on Life’s Way*

Corporate manipulation and co-option are addressed, albeit indirectly, by Kierkegaard in his work *Stages on Life’s Way*. As the sequel to *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard uses *Stages* to further engage with his three spheres of existence; yet the latter departs from the former in marked ways. As he writes in his Journals, in *Either/Or*, “the esthetic component was something present battling with the ethical, and the ethical was the choice by which one emerged from it” (Kierkegaard 1978a, p. 41). Conversely, in *Stages*, “the esthetic-sensuous is thrust into the background as something past (therefore ‘a recollection’), for after all it cannot become utterly nothing” (Kierkegaard 1978a, p. 41). The ethical and religious stages take on new directions, too, but neither warrant explanations at present. Most pressing to the conundrum of “messed” garments is the aesthetic sphere, explored at a banquet of several people.

In the section entitled “In Vino Veritas,” we are introduced to five figures, who muse about erotic love over an intoxicating meal (hence the “vino”). Four of the five are familiar to those acquainted with Kierkegaard’s works; the banquet guests are Johannes the seducer (from *Either/Or*), Victor Emerita (editor of *Either/Or*), Constantin Constantius (pseudonymous author of *Repetition*), and the Young Man (who appears in *Repetition* and is credited with authoring several essays in the first portion of *Either/Or*) (Storm 2021). These familiar figures are acquainted with the Fashion Designer, a peculiar and vitriolic man. The Fashion Designer is a confounding character: “it was impossible to get a genuine impression of this man” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 22). The narrator remarks that this Designer is an expert in deception: “even when he was talking most maliciously, his voice always had an element of boutique-pleasantness and polite sweetness, which certainly must have been extremely nauseating to him personally . . . ” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 22). Fashion, for the Designer, is “a sneaky trafficking in impropriety that is authorized as propriety” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 66). It is fickle nonsense, hurtling towards ridiculous ends, as it “inevitably becomes more and more extravagantly mad” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 66).

Such is the system. And what of its participants? The Fashion Designer has a striking resentment of women, as primary participants, and his most loyal customers (“fashion is a woman”). According to him, these women who visit his boutique cannot resist it, for it is “as seductive and irresistible to a woman as Venusberg to the man” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 66). The Fashion Designer loathes woman’s absorption in fashion; according to him, “she wants to be that [in fashion] at all times, and it is her one and only thought” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67). He obliges, inviting her into his boutique, and “when I have her dolled up in fashion, when she looks crazier than a mad hatter, as crazy as someone who would not even be admitted to a loony bin, she blissfully sallies forth from me” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 71). The Fashion Designer, motivated by an insatiable desire to mold these women into ludicrous spectacles, achieves this end by creating and selling “fool’s

costume" (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67). Robert L. Perkins positions the Designer as "the 'high priest' of a sustained hoax at the expense of women" (Perkins 1984, p. 15).

At first blush, the Fashion Designer's words can be interpreted as just another misogynistic tirade against women. Yet, the Fashion Designer paints an unflattering portrait not simply of women, but of women as fashion participants. His harshness exposes his own resentment for the system in which he exists and works. Though the Designer cannot be regarded as the sole spokesperson of the fashion world, his dialogue unearths the same insidious motives of the fashion system and the market that we encounter when scrutinizing "messed" apparel. I have two points to accompany this claim. First, we can see in the Fashion Designer glimpses of corporate advertising tactics. Companies manufacture "sustained hoaxes," such as deceitful greenwashing campaigns marketed under the guise of "sustainability," to attract, captivate, and placate consumers for the sake of selling products and services.

Second, in his diatribe against women, the Fashion Designer claims a cheapening of the "sacred." He accuses woman of being reflective "to an incomprehensibly high degree," engrossed in possibility (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67). Though Kierkegaard often characterizes men as reflective and women as lacking reflectiveness in his authorship, here the Fashion Designer says otherwise (Walsh [1977] 2011, p. 199). But this is no compliment. Woman, according to the Designer, "knows how to relate everything to adornment or fashion" (Walsh [1977] 2011, p. 200). For woman, "there is nothing so sacred that she does not immediately find it suitable for adornment, and the most exclusive manifestation of adornment is fashion" (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67). He continues, noting, "no wonder she [the wearer] finds it suitable, for fashion, after all, is the sacred" (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67). If we lead with the Designer's charge that fashion is the sacred, or rather, that woman understands fashion as the sacred, then it follows that woman's reflective capabilities always refer back to this "deficient" notion of the sacred. Woman's reflection, according to the Designer, *evacuates* objects (and ideas) of deeper, more rooted meanings. It is through reflection that woman, allegedly, reduces everything to an item of adornment, something to be worn and flaunted on the body. Thus, woman's reflective capacities are something to be scorned and perceived as degrading. Everything, it seems, can be worn. This, according to the Designer, is an unsurprising route for fashion, given that fashion, as mentioned above, is understood as the sacred. The Designer begrudges the reduction of religious inclinations not only to adornment, or perhaps aesthetic impulses, but also maligns a system that he regards as ludicrous and yet cannot escape.

We see here how the Designer expressly faults woman for the desecralization of all. His charge distracts from his own hand in corrupting through his work in fashion. Thus, in critiquing woman, he critiques the fashion system. The Designer himself co-opts fashion to achieve his own end. Similarly, it is industry that presently co-opts phrases, images, and symbols for a profitable end. The Designer does not consider profit in his speech; in fact, he admits that he incurs a loss in pursuing his feat (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67). However, contemporary corporations do consider profit, if not first, then certainly in accordance with other interests. There is also profit in co-option, particularly if what is co-opted is "in fashion" and enthusiastically consumed. I counter the Designer's charge towards woman with the insistence that systems, not individuals, hold responsibility. Furthermore, I suspect that the Designer's anger might be more fairly distributed away from women towards those who uphold the fashion system, for it is designers, brands, and marketers that find objects, ideas, and even vocalized proclamations "suitable for adornment." Here, we might think of brands that produce garments that depict phrases and words, or even Christian iconography. One need not look far, for instance, to find T-shirts, jackets, and baseball caps that bear the visage of Jesus and Mary. We might also consider the influx of religious symbols in clothing design during the 1990s as a tangible example of the Designer's charge (McDannell 1995, p. 61). Thus, it appears that the systems which create items for adorning endorse a wearing of all, and in doing so, co-opt and reinvent notions of the sacred.

It is in the Designer's words that we also encounter his stance towards interpersonal connectedness. We recall that he delivers his diatribe in the company of others to further his own view of love. The Designer concludes his statement by urging his listeners to "not go looking for a love affair, stay clear of erotic love as you would the most dangerous neighborhood, for your beloved, too, might eventually wear a ring in her nose (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 71). The Designer, in contenting himself with making a mockery of women, uses his life's work to retreat from others. His work in fashion serves to justify his own distance from people, specifically, a romantic partner. By reducing women to fools through his work, and through his insistence to "stay clear of erotic love," he endorses a communal avoidance of women. Thus, the Designer's work is to sabotage and disavow any potential encounter with erotic love, a love that unifies, fosters intimacy, and leaves those involved vulnerable. In short, his work disavows displays of the good.

The Fashion Designer's motives stand in sharp contrast to the contemporary wearer, who dons a "messed" garment to achieve greater unity with others, and to make themselves vulnerable by dressing. To wear a garment that speaks to maligned identities, demonstrates solidarity with marginalized groups, and bears bold and politically provocative phrases, is to face risk. The Designer scorns this risk, by turning from erotic love. The wearer, conversely, turns towards a plurality of loves encountered in communal movements. The Designer acts to be alone, and the wearer acts to draw nearer to others.

The Designer does not, however, shy away from the social function of dress and adornment. He notes that women often detect "whether the lady passing by has noticed it—because for whom does she adorn herself if it is not for other ladies!" (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 67) The women of the Designer's time, and the people of ours, seek to be seen, and in being seen, participate in communal demonstrations of commitments, beliefs, and even religiousness. In acknowledging the idolatrous behavior of the fashion consumer, the Designer hints at the deeper desires of the wearer. The women of his heyday resemble the contemporary person, anxious to dress in a way that not only appeals to self and others, but conveys ethical commitments, connotes trustworthiness, and draws one into community and wholeness. Though he may discount these desires as superficial, I see more at work here. The Designer's commentary on his craft illustrates how garments fail to sustain the wearer's desires or effect their ends, as empty, cheapened relics of ethico-religious desires led astray, and how garments in fashion can bury these deeper hopes. His words, and his motivation for ridiculing women, also remind us of the forces acting against well-meaning consumers. The Designer, in this way, serves as the face of corporate manipulation, exposing the deceitfulness of numerous corporate actors. He also unearths the complexity of garments, as tools of deceit, as objects of fashion, and as social accessories.

5.3. *Insights from Two Ages*

It would be too tidy a claim to suggest that Kierkegaard's vision of his "present age" is synonymous with the twenty-first century. However, there are specific observations that Kierkegaard makes of his social place that are consonant with the social terrain unearthed by "messed" garments.

In his concluding essay, "The Present Age," Kierkegaard asserts that the present age is comprised of the following attributes: it is "essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence" (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 68). Here, Kierkegaard takes issue with reflection, or an endless musing on possibility without choosing to do something. He heralds the revolutionary age for its social heroes, who serve as inspirational prototypes for onlookers (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 72). In contrast, the present age seems neutered to such prototypes, and does not even house them, for the sake of sensibility (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 72). Concerning reflection, Kierkegaard bemoans the ways in which reflection allows for the individual to escape to endless possibilities—the person who reflects may hum and haw over a decision, without making a choice (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 77).

The present age for Kierkegaard is one of empty phrases: “certain phrases and observations circulate among the people, partly true and sensible, yet devoid of vitality” (Kierkegaard 1978b, pp. 74–75). Here, Kierkegaard observes that words and those who speak them devolve into empty abstractions. A passionless, reflecting age “lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it” (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 77). His charges resound against those who have weakened the meaning of the phrases emblazoned on a shirt. For example, a corporation that claims to champion women’s rights might emblazon company merchandise, websites, and various ephemera with phrases such as “WE SUPPORT WOMEN” to demonstrate adherence to their assertions. Does the company materially enact the phrase in their corporate structure? To what lengths does it go to support women? Would they, for instance, pay more for their feminist tokens and reduce their bottom line to ensure that the women workers several countries away who manufacture these items are paid well? And what of the company that incorporates the phrases “sustainability” and “going green” into their corporate motto and advertising? Does the company want to “save the planet” by changing to clean energy to power their corporate offices? Do they opt for eco-friendly products, and even reduce the production of certain products to avoid landfill contribution? Or is the phrase another instance of greenwashing? Here, objects such as garments become substitutions for generative action, not just among individuals but within larger organizations.

Whether it be from learned helplessness or an unfamiliarity with consumer agency, reflective potentialities emerge in the realm of “worn” activism. Kierkegaard offers his own example: “the established order continues to stand, but since it is equivocal and ambiguous, passionless reflection is reassured” (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 80). Furthermore, in the example of Christianity, “In the same way we are willing to keep Christian terminology but privately know that nothing decisive is supposed to be meant by it” (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 81). Our evocative phrases have, in some sense, been evacuated of their ethical import and transformative power. “Messaged” apparel is too familiar a medium to effectively convert others to causes; instead, it illuminates the weariness of the wearer in the face of structural distress.

The choices for the “messaged” wearer seem limited; one can choose to be informed, or blissfully ignorant. Try as they might, the informed risk slipping in to window shopping ethical commitments or consuming tremendously distressing media, for the sake of being informed: “So the present age is basically sensible, perhaps knows more on the average than any previous generation, but it is devoid of passion. Everyone is well-informed; we all know everything, every course to take and the alternative courses, but no one is willing to take it” (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 104).

In fairness, social participation in the world of “messaged” garments signals towards competency not only in reading and interpreting ethical signs (e.g., a “recycle” symbol on a shirt or blue can), but also towards an awareness of macroscopic cognitive dissonance in the general populace. Consumers know that women face oppression throughout the world, that the environment is buckling under human consumption, and that gay men are being murdered in Chechnya. One of our first responses to these ills is to don a relevant garment—a FEMINIST shirt, a GO GREEN shirt, a rainbow shirt. In some sense, one may know this is not enough. But what more can be done? I empathize with the frustrated wearer, who feels dissatisfied with buying her way to a better world but is at a loss of what more to do. Furthermore, there exist numerous shirts that one could wear—how are they to decide which garment takes precedence? Again, such is the concern presented by the “present age,” or more specifically, “the Public” (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 91). The Public obliterates qualitative distinctions, and levels all. Without being able to deduce which cause is more pressing, more pertinent, and more deserving of one’s attention, the wearer faces a conundrum, one that intersectionality seeks to ameliorate.⁴ Still, as one can choose to align with a cause, one can also choose to disengage. Dreyfus suggests that “a commitment does not get a grip on me if I am always free to revoke it” (Dreyfus 2009,

p. 85). This tension to choose or not to choose is part and parcel of market participation and of fashion. There is always another shirt to choose from.

I acknowledge that “messed” wearers often comprise communities that are desperate to enact concrete change, that desire goodness for those most vulnerable, and that ache for unity. Here, they scorn superficiality, disengagement, and the Public. Wearers don specific “messed” wares to claim distinctions, to claim the importance of the ideas, policies, and hopes to which they align themselves. Still, I worry their use of garments as a mode of communication inches them closer towards abstraction. Slogan shirt firebrand Katherine Hamnett has herself cautioned that “T-shirts by themselves are all very nice but they achieve nothing. This is the danger” (Molvar 2017). Her words are reminiscent of Kierkegaard, who remarks that in the present age, “so little is actually done . . . ” (Kierkegaard 1978b, p. 105). Hamnett urges wearers to effect political change by contacting politicians and applying pressure on constituents. She gestures beyond the endlessly reflecting public sphere, suggesting that action cannot be postponed; one must act (Dreyfus 2009, p. 76). Here, she endorses a journey towards the ethical sphere of existence, where “one engages in involved action” (Dreyfus 2009, p. 83).⁵ Yet not all actions are held in equal value. Wearing a garment may be less effective than contacting one’s lawmakers, while contacting one’s representatives may be less effective than striking, and so on. At this venture, Kierkegaard might remark that the ethical sphere, too, fails to sustain commitment or forestall despair. Here, my concern lies with how attempts to stretch “messed” garments beyond their foundation as fashion objects and as objects for sale hasten this failure.

There are numerous other passages in Kierkegaard’s works that might have served well here. I have purposely limited myself to concepts found in *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life’s Way*, and *Two Ages*, to think through the problematics of “messed” apparel and the theoretical and tangible implications it raises, while teasing out the nuances rarely addressed in this kind of garment. I do not have the last say on Kierkegaard and “messed” apparel, though my hope is that my musings can inspire further engagement with what has proven thus far to be a socio-politically, ethically, and spiritually relevant way of dressing oneself.

6. Dressed for Hopeful Ends

Writing an indictment of “messed” garments is all well and good, but what can be done for the anxious activist, clothed in a way that anchors her to the earth, in the face of existentially challenging social ills? We cannot abandon her, nor can we discard the concerns writ large on her person. In recent years, Christian scholars have produced scathing denunciations of consumer culture; much of what I have said above pays homage to this legacy. Yet, I acknowledge that these critiques do not provide resolution, nor much hope, to those being critiqued. I have written this piece not from a place of condemnation, but of personal frustration. As someone who has participated in public demonstrations, called for justice in word and cloth, and owns “messed” shirts, I find myself increasingly disillusioned with the impulse to emblazon everything, even well-meant ethical sentiments, on a garment. This estrangement only grows the more reports emerge on how garments contribute to climate distress in different ecosystems (for example, producing a single cotton T-shirt requires approximately 650 gallons of water). What is needed is a robust sense of hope, that empowers individuals and communities long after “messed” garments have fallen out of fashion.

Ruby Guyatt acknowledges that hope is essential to engaging with the ills of the world, “allowing us to invest ourselves wholeheartedly in the absurd task of manifesting this infinite good state of affairs in our finite, fragile world” (Guyatt 2020, p. 9). Those who don “messed” garments also grasp for hope, and their garments serve as tangible markers of their hopes, for a saved planet, peace on Earth, safety for women, and more. First Lady of the United States Jill Biden, for instance, wore a blazer emblazoned with the phrase “LOVE” to, in her own words to reporters, offer a “sense of hope” to a world

made weary from the COVID-19 pandemic and to attempt to “bring unity across the globe” (Shear 2021).⁶

One might be tempted to charge those who rely on objects to convey their desires, beliefs, and dreams with embodying a hope that distracts “from useful work” (Nussbaum 2018, p. 206). As previously discussed, the generative potentials of these garments are muted by their co-option in the market, as commodities for sale and as conduits to profit, and their credibility obscured by their position as an item “in fashion.” However, this charge fails to account for the complexity of those persons and groups who wear these garments and invest their time, energy, and even money to pursuing good ends for their neighbors. It also fails to account for the risk incurred by wearers. For some, the act of donning a “messed” garment presents risks to their person, especially if it exposes aspects of their identity that are not socially accepted or are considered “illegal” or indecent.⁷ These risks fluctuate and heighten depending on the context in which these garments are worn. Risk is crucial for Kierkegaard, and indicates a deeper, passionate commitment, one that through risk renders us vulnerable (Dreyfus 2009, p. 86). In acknowledging that these garments are no failsafe, we must also acknowledge that their wearers desire to meaningfully demonstrate their social investments and ethical concerns. Thus, we must look to hope anew, as the fertile ground for alternative and invigorating modes of being and acting, and an anchor to those made vulnerable by the risks they bravely face.

I have been encouraged by Guyatt, who places Kierkegaard in conversation with environmental activists to face the threatening storm(s) of climate change with renewed hope. It is through engagement with Guyatt and Kierkegaard that I credit the wearers of “messed” garments with espousing an admirable hope. It is this Kierkegaardian appraisal of contemporary hope (and its tangible demonstrations) that the present-day wearer can more meaningfully “wear” her commitments.

Guyatt acknowledges that hope can be passive or rooted in utopic fantasies that ultimately anesthetize the hopeful (Guyatt 2020, pp. 2–3). She locates an alternative kind of hope in Kierkegaard, comprised of four components. First, “Kierkegaardian hope is this-worldly and active, yet rooted in and sustained by an eternal good” (Guyatt 2020, p. 4). Second, Kierkegaardian hope “constantly anticipates the good, which—in being a path rather than a goal—destabilizes the potentially discouraging effect of a consequentialist ethic on individual acts to counter [social ills]” (Guyatt 2020, p. 4). This hope resists and looks beyond neoliberal tendencies towards personal responsibility initiatives. Third, “it hopes the best for every human being” (Guyatt 2020, p. 4). It is neighbor- and stranger-oriented. Fourth, “it is cautious and attentive, kept in check and catalyzed by its reciprocal relationship with fear” (Guyatt 2020, p. 4). It is attuned and awakened to the world.

Guyatt notes that for Kierkegaard, “hope is only hope insofar as it is hope for the good. And the good is only the good insofar as it is actualized” (Guyatt 2020, p. 4). The good, she continues, makes an existential claim upon the individual person and demands that she actualizes this claim in and through her life (Guyatt 2020, p. 4). Such a hope does not retreat from the world, but rather faces the ills of the world head-on. Here, one might think of the hopeful cries of “messed” garment wearers. Kierkegaardian hope challenges the kinds of hopes articulated through “messed” garments in that the former hope is anchored to the good. Kierkegaardian hope is not temporal, as are some social movements demanding material and “earthly” goods (though these demands are necessary); instead, “it expects not this or that particular ‘good’ outcome, ‘fulfilled’ in the attainment or realization of an event . . . Christian hope is to hope for the good” (Guyatt 2020, p. 5). This hope does not fixate on a specific movement’s success or the amelioration of a particular social ill. Does this hope run the risk of undermining the particularities of social movements?

Not necessarily. Guyatt insists that “Christian hope for one thing—the good—hopes for all things” (Guyatt 2020, p. 5). Kierkegaardian hope, then, bursts forth with unlimited fervor. To choose “the possibility of the good” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 262), Kierkegaardian hope chooses infinitely more than a merely human, finite hope (Guyatt 2020, p. 5). It accounts for all ills and strives for the healing of each and every hope. Thus, this hope can

nourish those firmly planted in specific social movements by reorienting members to the Good, which aims for every good.

A hope that hopes beyond human ability is “absurd.” It is the perfect helpmate, then, for the weary activist, who stares down the absurdly insurmountable worries of the contemporary age. It acknowledges her weariness, and sacralizes it as a reflection of her connection to God and others. Essential to this companionship is the notion of faith. Kierkegaardian hope acknowledges the finite limitations of the hopeful individual yet rests in God’s infinite goodness (Guyatt 2020, p. 5). Kierkegaardian hope engages with faith in the infinite God; this faith grounds the individual in the steadfast hope of God’s eternal goodness. Alonso asserts that “a hope untethered to human striving [and reoriented towards God] resists both the denial of those failures and the pull toward cynicism to which laying bare those failures can quickly draw us” (Alonso 2021, p. 124). It is a hope that extends beyond human action, but also into the material world, “loved by God and yearning for redemption” (Alonso 2021, p. 124). Guyatt insists, “this eternal anchoring means that we are able to hold onto and reinvest ourselves in our hopes for the good of this world, even when this good seems unattainable. In this way, the expectancy of faith sustains and reinvigorates our efforts, maintaining our hope in the face of the apparently impossible” (Guyatt 2020, p. 5).

Furthermore, the expectancy of faith allows room for the activist, the “messed” garmenteer, and the conscious consumer to admit their weariness. Such a faith “undermines a ‘worldly, conceited mentality that would die of disgrace and shame if it were to experience making a mistake, being fooled, becoming ludicrous’ by a particular hope not being met” (Guyatt 2020, p. 6). It allows space for the individual to come undone, to bear her wounds and admit her inadequacy in the face of the world’s hurts. In short, it enables the individual to acknowledge her vulnerability and how her commitments have made her vulnerable (Dreyfus 2009, p. 86). Admitting this inadequacy does not become a means to disengaged laxity; rather, it generates catharsis among her community. This catharsis is active, inspired, and invigorated by hope and is mobilized towards achieving the good for all people. In this space, she can abide in hope, and, ideally for Kierkegaard, rest in God.

What of the irreligious or agnostic individual? She, too, is included in Kierkegaard’s schema. Though she may not engage Kierkegaard’s Christian hope, she can still espouse an “ethical” hope that, while imperfect, grants some stability, eschews hopelessness and childish folly (Guyatt 2020, p. 10). Guyatt notes that Kierkegaard has identified non-Christian hope as a gift (e.g., “the physician has hope,” in Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 258–59). There is also ample room for wearers and activists to demonstrate virtues and values essential to Christianity without being Christians themselves. In truth, the simple act of loving one’s neighbor is an encounter with the Triune God.

All in all, the words of Kierkegaard offer the “messed” wearers a new way forward, one turned against the logics of fashion and the market and well-acquainted with the absurd tasks facing them. A Kierkegaardian notion of hope, coupled with an “eschatological humility” (Alonso 2021, p. 127), can provide a model for anxious activists who find that their garments can no longer anchor them, or those who wish to embellish their wares with a renewed hope and depart from stale, corporate simulacra. Such a hope offers alternative ways of conceptualizing empowerment beyond the impulses of the marketplace. Consumers, activists, and those rendered weary by the ills of the world can approach Kierkegaard’s insights as a guide to cultivating new sight, towards manifold hopes, subsumed in a singular, eternal hope. To hope for the good is not simply to consider a slogan or phrase, screen-printed on a shirt, but to embark on an absurd, future-oriented journey towards uncertainty, sustained by the commitment of oneself and one’s peers to a good that reigns eternal.

7. Conclusions

This article has sought to undertake a novel task: engaging Kierkegaard with a popular garment and fashion object of the mid-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Kierkegaard’s

commentary on dress exceeds what I have detailed in the previous pages, yet the particularities of my exploration offer further avenues of sartorial inquiry for scholars and patrons of Kierkegaard. In this study, I have pursued an engagement of “messed” apparel so that their proliferation, impact, and complexity might be considered not only by those well-acquainted with fashion theory, but also in philosophy, theology, and other theoretical disciplines. The findings of this study, I hope, will spark interdisciplinary conversation among those who are attuned to the “cries” of hope, made manifest in garments, human people, and communal spaces—conversations made urgent by current environmental and sociopolitical distress. In gesturing towards a Kierkegaardian hope as a way forward, I privilege a way that “neither excuses us from the daily labor of working for the bread of justice nor absolves us of our complicities in the daily breads of injustice” (Alonso 2021, p. 127). This project asks of its readers to engage, humbly, with the hopes and dreams of yearning communities as well as their own, and to embrace human finiteness. Furthermore, in doing so it asks readers to encounter how this embrace might, as Alonso intuitively, set individuals free to persist, advocate, and “cry” with a clearer vision of both limitations and possibility (Alonso 2021, p. 127). My final hope for this piece is, simply, that these words can speak life into the weariness of individuals, those who reach for “messed” garments and those who dress differently, those who strive for God and those who strive for good, but hope, nonetheless, for the good of all. May it invigorate their necessary work.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Amanda Brinkman, founder of Google Ghost, and creator of the “Nasty Woman” T-shirt, says the following about politically “messed” apparel in Allure Magazine: “When you wear a T-shirt, like the Nasty Woman T-shirt, you’re not only making some of your beliefs known, you’re identifying with a larger group of individuals who feel the same way.” Continuing, she notes, “I’ve given high-fives to women in parking lots wearing the shirt: It’s a simple and positive way to note that we’re on the same team.” For context, “Nasty Woman” is derived from comments made by former U.S. President Donald Trump towards then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.
- ² Here, I raise an important point about garment production. Much of the “messed” apparel we see on store shelves or available for purchase online have been made under exploitative conditions. These conditions can weaken the message of the garment being bought, as I discuss in Section 4.2. I mean not to imply that every wearer purposefully contributes to these exploitative conditions. In Section 5.1, I acknowledge that there are groups who seek to eschew industry practice and produce apparel that is made locally, nets fair wages for garment workers, and other standards that we might interpret as “ethical.” Still, the ironies at play in an individual, desiring to broadcast her desire to ameliorate a particular social ill, purchases an item that can and does contribute to the social ill, must be highlighted. It is in this contradiction that we see the problematics of relying (perhaps too much) on garments to convey such beliefs and stances.
- ³ Melania Trump’s jacket in recent weeks was held in contrast to a blazer worn by First Lady Jill Biden in Cornwall, England. It was emblazoned with the word “LOVE” on the back. NBC News’ Mika Brzezinski argues that the former’s jacket “telegraphed . . . sarcastic apathy,” while the latter’s jacket allegedly “says everything” about the new presidential administration’s sociopolitical trajectory. Both garments, notes Brzezinski (2021), send messages.
- ⁴ Discussions of the Public and levelling give way to discussions of intersectionality. Intersectionality positions numerous perspectives as deserving one’s full attention, for to adopt an intersectional lens is to more clearly encounter the nuances visible in structural problems in society. For example, an analysis of garment workers’ plight in California would require an intersectional approach, engaging matters of race, gender, class, and others. I wonder how Kierkegaard might appraise intersectionality—would it serve as an obstacle to further Kierkegaardian exploration? This discussion, though rich, exceeds the scope of my work.
- ⁵ I also have concerns with the wearer who trusts in her purchasing power as the only way forward. This is far too abstract, too removed, and too sensible to enact real, material change or furnish an eschatological sense of hope.
- ⁶ The effectiveness of Jill Biden’s sartorial gesture, worn to generate hope globally, may be judged against the Biden administration’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic through policy and other actions. Here, Hamnett’s caution that a garment on its own “does nothing” resounds.
- ⁷ For instance, in June 2020, a woman was accosted by British police for wearing a shirt that said “F*** BORIS [Johnson].” See (Osborne 2020).

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