

Article

Thankfulness: Kierkegaard's First-Person Approach to the Problem of Evil

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Abstract: The present paper argues that, despite appearance to the contrary, Kierkegaard's writings offer promising argumentational resources for addressing the problem of evil. According to Kierkegaard, however, in order to make use of these resources at all, one must necessarily be willing to shift the battleground, so to speak: from a third- to a genuine first-person perspective, namely the perspective of what Climacus dubs Religiousness A. All (yet also only) those who seek deliberate self-annihilation before God—a God in relation to whom they perceive themselves always in the wrong—shall discover the ideal that an unwavering and in fact unconditional thankfulness (namely, for being forgiven) is to be considered the only appropriate attitude towards God and as such both necessary and sufficient for coming to terms with evil and suffering, at least in the life of someone making that discovery. I will argue that Kierkegaard's (non-)pseudonymous writings provide reasons, at times unwittingly, for adopting the perspective of Religiousness A; however, I will also and ultimately argue that the principle of infinite thankfulness as a corollary of that perspective flounders when it comes to making sense of (the eschatological implications of) the suffering of others.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; Religiousness A; theodicy; problem of evil; thankfulness; suffering; pragmatic justification; eschatology; universal salvation

“Wonder . . . unlocks an innate sense of indebtedness. Within our awe . . . we only know that all we own we owe.” Abraham J. Heschel¹



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1. Introduction

In a journal entry from 1842–43², Kierkegaard (hereafter: either Kierkegaard or SK) raises what he considers a decisive objection against the Leibnizian and analogous theodicy model/s: they establish, whether consciously and intentionally or not, a ‘universalizing teleology’, which as such cannot take individual suffering to be relevant and therefore can neither do it justice, be it theoretically or practically. Naturally, Leibniz recognizes and seeks to avoid such difficulties by urging that, rightly understood, it is in fact *not* a question ‘of the individual man [det enkelte Msk.] but of the whole universe’, which is at stake here, yet Kierkegaard counters that such a response must be deemed ‘foolishness, for if there is a single hum. being who has a legitimate reason to complain [gyldig Grund til Klage], the universe does not help’ (SKS 19, 392/KJN 3, 389).³

This answer, of course, is formulated from a point of view that already presupposes and must presuppose the issue at hand as valid and authoritative: namely, from the point of view of the very individual who asserts himself *as such*—the very same individual who *protests* against the perspective of the universal (presumably including himself), in its, to all appearances, inevitable marginalization of the individual and his experience of suffering. For indeed, it cannot be more than mere protest at this point: the individual protests against the fact that he or she, the individual, in the horizon of the general, as an apparently teleologically well-ordered whole, only plays the role of a quantité négligeable. In other words: the individual protests in the name of the individual. Now this seems on the one hand consistent, and on the other hand, namely philosophically, not very promising. Has

Kierkegaard no more to offer than mere *protest*—a protest in the name and for the benefit of the protester himself?

Using the so-called theodicy problem as a guideline, I will show here that he indeed has more to offer, but only at second glance and from the perspective of one who, by means of a healthy hermeneutics of suspicion, reads the author against the grain, so to speak. At first sight, it seems obvious what Kierkegaard himself in this context incessantly repeats: Every apology of the Christian faith must betray it; every attempt, no matter how honest, to support the ‘truth of Christianity’, thwarts not only the insight into what ‘the truly Christian’ is, but also and above all that existential realization of faith which, properly understood, constitutes its core. For a Christian is not one who knows that to be a Christian means to love one’s neighbor, but a Christian is one who loves his or her neighbor. Nor is a Christian someone who has the best arguments for the existence of a God to whom one can and should pray, but being a Christian means praying. And finally, a Christian is not to be confused with someone who is aware of the fact that a Christian must suffer for the sake of truth; the Christian is the one who suffers for the sake of truth. An apology of this and similar propositions is therefore a mere waste of time, and in truth, a betrayal of what is to be defended. Any such apologia, moreover, betrays the factual pettiness or unbelief of the apologist in question; in this vein, Anti-Climacus writes in 1849:

[I]t is certain and true that the first one to come up with the idea of defending Christianity in Christendom [i Christenheden at forsvare Christendommen] is de facto a Judas No. 2: he, too, betrays with a kiss, except that his treason is the treason of stupidity. To defend something is always to *disparage* [disrecommandere] it ... As for Christianity! Well, he who defends it has never *believed* it. If he believes, then the enthusiasm of faith [Troens Begeistring] is not a defense—no, it is attack and victory [Angrebet, og Seieren]; a believer is a victor. (SKS 11, 200/SUD, 87)⁴

According to my own hermeneutic maxim, it seems therefore always advisable to read Kierkegaard with the assumption that he, as Anti-Climacus formulates, writes in the perspective of the physician at the sickbed⁵ and, moreover, to keep in mind that in this case the illness—more precisely: the mental illness—consists in the misapprehension, as foolish as it is desperate, that his contemporaries are still Christians. However, this does not exclude that Kierkegaard believes—and possibly quite rightly believes—to have better arguments for a justification or defense of God at hand in case of doubt than his apologetically, at that time mainly speculatively minded, contemporaries. And it excludes just as little that from his own actual views—at times even: *against* Kierkegaard’s own will and conviction—valid and sustainable argumentative justifications of the truth and/or rationality of the Christian faith can *actually* be derived.

Especially with this latter possibility in mind, the following considerations address the problem of evil and the options for its solution by way of a theodicy. I will start with some methodological remarks about what I consider crucial in this respect: the first-person perspective plus an explanation of its implications for the topic at hand (Section 2). Second, I will sketch out Kierkegaard’s ‘new approach’ to the problem of evil, an approach in which, at least according to my reading, the concept of gratitude plays a central role (Section 3). Third, there is a partly apologetic, partly critical assessment of his standpoint (Section 4), followed by a brief conclusion (Section 5).

2. Methodological Prologue: The First-Person Perspective

If I am not mistaken, Leibniz, from Kierkegaard’s point of view, does not fall victim to criticism through recourse to teleological ideas *per se*, but because he wrongly presumes to be able to demonstrate their validity in a purely *philosophical* way or as a priori rational.⁶ Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms argue or polemicize unanimously *against* this presumption and vote—*nota bene*: also from a purely philosophical perspective—in favor of a consistent *agnosticism* with regard to teleology.⁷ If, on the other hand, they themselves invoke teleological patterns of thinking,⁸ then it is by consciously switching to a *religious* perspective, and by recommending such a switch to their readers also. This, indeed, is

my first hermeneutic thesis. And here it is the example of Socrates' top-down approach to teleology⁹ that points to a thematically relevant solution: Following SK, the individual must be willing, so to speak, to play another, a new, language game, including a modified grammar and new framework assumptions in order to solve the problem of evil at least with respect to its facticity in his or her *own* existence. In this case, there is *ex hypothesi* a strictly *religious* language game, including the framework assumptions of what Climacus calls Religiousness A, i.e., the religion of a voluntary self-annihilation before a God against whom the individual is to be considered always in the wrong, hence never suffering innocently, at least according to the premise.¹⁰ Drawing on the passage from the *Christian Discourses* just quoted,¹¹ we must therefore think of the person who, from Kierkegaard's point of view, plays the language game of the problem of evil correctly as someone who unflinchingly holds to the premise that his (spiritual) starvation, if it occurs, will indeed be due to the fact that he *found* no food (i.e., no redeeming certainty of God's love); but that this was and could only be the case because his own *need* for food was not strong enough for him to *look* for food in the unswerving insistence on its actual 'presence nearby'.

According to SK, and this is my second, likewise purely hermeneutic, thesis, the individual in his willingness to adopt this standpoint—and *only* this standpoint—solves the teleology problem that he had diagnosed in his journal note quoted above on Leibniz's conception of a theodicy. He solves this problem, admittedly, not in a theoretical, but rather in a practical or 'existential'¹² way, more precisely: in a way corresponding to a genuine first-person perspective. We might as well put it this way: Kierkegaard 'solves' the theodicy problem, first, by shifting it to another realm—that of the first-person perspective. Second, he does so on purpose and in full awareness of the fact (a) *that* a shift is taking place here, yet in such a way that (b) the *necessity* of this shift cannot fully be comprehended and confirmed from a third-person perspective but can only appear meaningful and plausible to someone who is actually willing to *make* that shifting movement him- or herself.

I will return to the second part of the thesis in Section 4. of the present article, namely in the context of a somewhat pragmatist defense of SK. For heuristic purposes, it may suffice at this point briefly to explain my usage of the term 'first-person perspective' (FPP). Following Lynne Rudder Baker,¹³ I distinguish between weak and strong, or robust, forms of FPP. Animals, especially primates, but also infants, exclusively generate weak forms. A dog, for instance, has 'a certain perspective on its surroundings with itself as the 'origin'' ([7], p. 328); it is, 'we might say, ... the center of its own universe' ([7], p. 328). This perspectival consciousness is also ego- or self-consciousness, albeit in a preliminary and improper way, and as such, it entails a rudimentary form of selfhood; if the dog could speak, he would express himself by saying, for instance, 'I am hungry', 'I see a prey over there', etc.

This weak type of FPP already exhibits basic characteristics that, in somewhat modified form, also apply to the strong type: Perspectival consciousness of the kind described is (a) ontologically distinctive and *unique* ((a) 'first-person perspective cannot be duplicated', ([8], p. 10), (b) pragmatically non-vicarious or *non-delegable* (no one can have his or her own perspective taken over by someone else), and (c) phenomenologically *unspecifiable* (neither for the particular FPP itself nor for any third party can a complete description of the content of that perspective be given).

Strong forms of FPP presuppose weak ones but cannot be ontologically reduced to them. What, then, constitutes the former? Although, for instance, a dog has beliefs and desires, he has no *conception* of belief or desire, nor himself as the *subject* or bearer of beliefs and desires. Conversely, a 'conscious being who exhibits strong first-person phenomena not only is able to recognize herself from a first-person point of view ..., but also is able to think of herself *as herself*'. ([7], p. 328f)¹⁴ This in turn requires linguistic competence, so that only beings with language capabilities can generate an FPP in the strong sense. Accordingly, a

subject of strong first-person phenomena is not only able to *think* first-person thoughts (typically using 'I'), but is also able to *attribute to herself* first-person

thoughts ... Not only can she think of herself, but she can think of herself as ... [such] and of her thoughts [desires, etc.] as her own. ([7], p. 332)¹⁵

Finally, the ability to generate FPPs in the robust sense is *person-constitutive*: ‘A first-person perspective is a very peculiar ability that all and only *persons* have’ ([8], p. 10).¹⁶

Now, Rudder Baker does not explicitly mention SK; however, she refers to Harry Frankfurt’s well-known distinction between first- and second-order volitions as a direct parallel to her typology of weak and strong forms of FPP.¹⁷ And from here it is actually quite easy to connect the latter with a Kierkegaardian conception of the *self*, more precisely to first- and second-level types of (the self qua) synthesis or between pre-volitional and volitional forms of (despair and) the self in Anti-Climacus’ terms.¹⁸ The hermeneutic benefit lies in the fact that to the Kierkegaardian self can be ascribed, *mutatis mutandis*, the very predicates that Rudder Baker finds in the FPP, both in its weaker and more robust types.

Unfortunately, Rudder Baker—and Frankfurt, too, for that matter—ignore three aspects that figure prominently in Kierkegaard’s conception: First, an FPP in the strong sense entails not only the ability to think and speak of oneself as such—moreover, to think and speak of one’s thoughts, desires, beliefs, etc., as one’s own—but also and in particular the ability to spell out the idea of one’s own self in terms of an *ideal*, a particular ‘life-view,’ the practical realization of which promises complete self-acceptance. Such an ideal may be fleeting or volatile, as in the aesthetical sphere of existence,¹⁹ but it must be present, if an FPP is to be possible, both genetically and phenomenologically. Second, according to SK, a self can only volitionally and/or reflexively relate to its own subjectivity qua immediacy (desires, emotions, etc.) in the very *medium* of the latter qua first-order subjectivity.²⁰ A person can only reflect upon his or her own desiring self (Kierkegaard) or ego (Rudder Baker) in the very *medium* of this desire, and more specifically, she can only reflect upon it as an instance of something which, measured against an ideal conception of herself, she tries to resemble. Third, this intricate structure of subjectivity (reflection within the medium of immediacy) gives rise to and facilitates *despair* and *self-deception*: Oftentimes the self that someone tries to resemble is not his or her true self and so the passionate attempt to actualize it not only proves futile eventually, but is also illusory, due to the person’s inability to *accept* its futility.

Two things follow for our present topic: If one wishes to discuss the problem of evil in terms of an FPP—and I assert that this is precisely part and parcel of that ‘new approach’ favored by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms—then the task at hand must be spelled out *in concreto*, i.e., as a context- and *perspective-dependent* task. Hence, it can only be tackled regionally, as it were, namely as a problem that is brought to bear within the confines of, indeed in the service of, a specific view of life: The problem poses itself in another way for the Kierkegaardian aesthete than for a proponent of Religiousness A, for Judge William than for a Christian. In light of this, the key criterion for assessing the way in which the problem is purportedly solved and/or approached by someone is *consistency*: Does the person in question actually *do justice* to the premises of a life-view endorsed by herself when dealing with her own and/or other people’s suffering or not?

A second question may then also be raised: Do these premises themselves *allow* for coping with (the experience of) evil in the first place, and is this in a contextually appropriate—at any rate: personally consistent—manner? Thus conceived, the perspective of a theodicy, claiming the ability in view of manifold evils ‘objectively’ and from a third-person perspective to put the goodness and wisdom of God to the test, is transformed into the issue of making sense of one’s *own* suffering before God, and this in light of a conception of oneself *as* a self in (either acknowledged or denied) relation to the latter.²¹

3. Kierkegaard’s ‘New Approach’: Gratitude to God

The shift in emphasis and perspective just explained raises two questions, one genetic or phenomenological and one normative or epistemic. First, what can *motivate* a person to adopt such a stance? Second, what can rationally *justify* it? I shall address the second question later (cf. Section 4.). Meanwhile, I answer the first with my third and last

hermeneutic thesis: From Kierkegaard's point of view, a person can only be motivated to adopt such a standpoint out of or in the medium of *gratitude*, namely gratitude towards *God*—a gratitude or thankfulness that arises from the basic Christian experience of sin-forgiveness. *Only* then and only from this perspective: but also *always* then. So, if we want to understand how the problem of evil and its solution look from (Kierkegaard's version of) the perspective of the first person, we must describe the world of the grateful person or the world from the perspective of the grateful.

I start with a brief *conceptual* analysis of gratitude. If we tackled this concept by utilizing the means of current semantic or phenomenological analysis, the details would be complex, but the starting point is rather simple and obvious: gratitude can firstly be described as a *mental occurrence* and/or as a *behavioral disposition* or as an *attitude* of a certain kind. Secondly, this involves certain *emotions*, which in turn can be triggered or reinforced by cultivating or realizing the corresponding disposition. Thirdly, gratitude is, ethically speaking, a *virtue*. A formal definition seems more difficult and here the problem is often solved by claiming a conceptual *field* that places gratitude in the vicinity of other, partly subsidiary, partly superordinate, partly secondary concepts: e.g., self-acceptance or acceptance of others (= dispositional dimension), joy or relief (= emotional dimension), or generosity or humility (= virtue-dimension).²²

None of this can be found in Kierkegaard and/or his pseudonyms. In contrast to other 'existential concepts', which are widely discussed in the authorship (e.g., anxiety, freedom, sin, despair, existence, etc.), the term gratitude (*taknemlighed*), although used regularly, especially in the edifying corpus, is discussed almost exclusively with regard to the *goods* or gifts that merit or even require gratitude.²³ Occasionally, the *preconditions* (e.g., love), the *media* (e.g., repentance²⁴), and the genuinely Christian *expressions* of gratitude²⁵ are also discussed. That being said, it is nevertheless possible to deduce indirectly from more or less scattered remarks in the authorship what Kierkegaard and/or his pseudonyms understand by gratitude: indirectly because this information must be obtained via passages in the text that either do not address the semantical issue at all or at least not explicitly and head on. I will give a few exemplary quotes and, in doing so, limit myself to the dimension of gratitude towards *God*, which is dominant in Kierkegaard anyway.

Formally or structurally, gratitude seems to correspond most closely to what Kierkegaard elsewhere describes as 'absolute wonder'²⁶, i.e., a post- or trans-reflexive form of consciousness, in which its subject has abandoned and left behind any naive or immediate trust in oneself, the world and God, as well as any skeptical reflection that claims to be able and obliged to sort out any superstitious elements from the idea of God, ultimately perhaps also the idea itself. Thus conceived, children may have the capacity to be grateful to their parents, and this is in a spontaneous and largely unreflective way. Yet, they are incapable of being thankful in any stricter, i.e., post-reflective and thus also religious sense; in other words, they cannot thank *God*. From a genetic point of view, gratitude in this latter sense corresponds to and arises from love for and belief in (a merciful) God—a loving faith, which is mediated by repentance and the awareness of sin.

Gratitude is, therefore, best described as an intentional state of certainty linked to accompanying emotions, such as relief, joy, etc.,²⁷ which, in terms of content, consists of two correlative insights or convictions: firstly, the insight, on the part of the subject of gratitude, to be 'a good and a perfect gift' (SKS 5, 53/EUD, 45) him- or herself. This insight depends upon the ability to be and remain absolutely 'receptive' in relation to God, thus accepting 'everything from God's hands' (SKS 5,53/EUD, 45)²⁸—including the very capacity of such acceptance. With a sideways glance at Kierkegaard's contemporaries, we might as well put it this way: Kierkegaard considers gratitude a state of mind, in which—and in which alone—Schleiermacher's idea of religion qua absolute dependence or pure receptivity²⁹ can be thought of as fulfilled or fulfillable.

The second and correlative element to a grateful awareness of absolute dependence has already been alluded to in the quote above; it consists of the belief that 'everything that God does is good' (SKS 18, 245, JJ:331/KJN 2, 226)³⁰—such that in the medium of gratitude,

the acceptance of absolute dependence goes hand in hand with the ability to perceive and enjoy the fundamental goodness of one's own existence. The correlation of both aspects can perfectly be reformulated by invoking the titles of two edifying discourses: (1) 'To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection'³¹—and I am thankful for needing God'. (2) 'Every Good Gift and Every Perfect Gift is From Above'³²—and I am thankful for my entire being as a gift from God'.

With regard to the *addressee* of gratitude, assumed here as the only relevant one—namely God –, I must restrict myself to a short note. The reference to Kierkegaard's almost monomaniacally inculcated claim that the—*nota bene*: Christian (cf. 1 Jn 4:8)—God must be thought of as *love*, more precisely as the 'in love unchangeable' or as 'changeless in love' (SKS 13, 327/M, 268), which must suffice here. In a similar vein, a journal entry from 1840 states assertorically: '[D]ivine fatherly love ... [is] the one single unshakable thing in life, the true Archimedean point'. (SKS 19, 200, Not6:24/KJN 3, 196)³³ In the context of explaining the idea of providence, this general thesis is already hinted at in a journal note of 1837, which here, among other things, makes an aesthetically revealing comparison:

Div. Providence [Forsyn] operates in accordance with a higher association of ideas, so to speak, whereas the world operates in accordance with its finite association of ideas. Thus, whereas finite individuals each realize their ideas separately, the Deity, on the other hand, never forgets its grand plans [sine store Planer] ..., and in so doing, through its association of ideas, the Deity returns to its premise. The recurrence of the refrain in folk ballads ... is similar: although the refrain binds the song together—and in its binding together of the song allows the idea in the verse to realize itself—the refrain also has its own independent development. (SKS 18, 105, FF:158/KJN 2, 97)

If I am not mistaken, the one and same 'premise', to which the acting of divine providence, mediated through the infinite and often unexpected variations of historical change, returns to is nothing else than love or, more precisely, the in love eternally unchangeable God, whom Christianity proclaims.

For various reasons, however, a closer look at Kierkegaard's remarks regarding the *function* and *extension* of gratitude appears to me to be indispensable. What does the idea of gratitude achieve or accomplish from his point of view with regard to the problem at hand? First and foremost, it demands and allows for 'correctly' determining the extension of good and evil. Here are two pertinent quotations, first from the *Postscript*:

[I]f a person cannot know with certainty whether the misfortune [Ulykken] is an evil [et Onde] (the uncertainty of the relationship with God as the form for always thanking God), then neither can he know with certainty whether the good fortune [Lykken] is a good [et Gode]. The relationship with God has only one evidence, the relationship with God itself; everything else is equivocal [tvetydigt]. (SKS 7, 405/CUP1, 446)

Next, a quote from Journal NB4 (1847–48):

Have faith [Troen], don't worry about the rest. Every other good [Gode] is dialectical in such a way that there is always a 'but' that goes along with it, so that, from another point of view, it is perhaps not a good. Faith is the good that is dialectical in such a way that, even if the greatest calamity [Ulykke] were to befall me, faith would allow me to see it as a good [lade mig see denne som Gode]. (SKS 20, 300, NB4:28/KJN 4, 300)

A *first* common feature in the content of both quotations concerns the *uniqueness* of good and evil: Both belong to a special class of entities, namely those that are only possible *as such*. In other words, good and evil (evil as the wider concept of which moral evil is only *one* form) refer to modes of appearing: evil as the appearance of something as rather not being, good as the appearance of something as being welcomed in the widest possible sense.³⁴ A world in which it would be impossible to experience something as

rather not-being would be a world without evil. Thus, one may distinguish, also according to SK, the present world from the kingdom of heaven.³⁵

Provided the interpretation of both terms as phenomenological in the sense described can pass for adequate, a *second* parallel can be derived from it, which allows for defining good and evil more precisely, both extensively and typologically: Good in the *strict* (i.e., absolute or unconditional) sense is thus everything, but it is only that which categorically *excludes* the possibility of being experienced as rather *non-being*, while analytically *implying* its experienceability as *desirable* in the broadest sense. In the case of the concept of evil, it is just the opposite. On the other hand, a good (or evil) in the *broad*, i.e., relative or conditional, sense is and remains, in Kierkegaard's wording, 'dialectical': it can appear as good under changing conditions, especially situationally determined conditions, but as evil under changing conditions (see below).

My *first* thesis is: In SK, the *unconditional* good is identical to Christian faith or, coextensively, with the unconditional gratitude towards God or God as love, unconditional evil with *sin*.³⁶ My *second* thesis: Good is (with regard to human existence) for Kierkegaard all that and only that for which one can thank (God), and evil is all that and only that which excludes this possibility. Do whatever you can be thankful for—or will be or will have been able to be thankful for; this could be a motto and principle of Christian *ethics* that might be derived from this.³⁷

Recalling the definition of faith from *Sickness unto Death*, the same could also be expressed in this way: Gratitude is the (if not the only, then in any case primary) expression of that elusive state in which the self, 'in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, ... rests transparently in the power that established it'. (SKS 11, 242/SD, 131)³⁸ That this reading is by no means far-fetched can be shown, among other things, with reference to the following journal-remark: 'There are two ends [tvende Maal], every hum. being is $\tau\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, and the world-historical development [den verdenshistoriske Udvikling] is $\tau\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, but this [sc. the latter] $\tau\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is one we cannot penetrate'. (SKS 27, 269, Papir 277:1/KJN 11.1, 268). It seems to me not at all coincidental that Kierkegaard here explicitly denies the possibility of recognizability or self-transparency only to world-historical but not to individual-historical development or its subject. The term *gratitude* therefore suggests itself at least indirectly as *one*, if not the most plausible, answer to the question about the possible or the most important modes or expressions of individual self-transparency before God.

Against the background of these observations on the nature and typology of thankfulness, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard ascribes to it the axiologically fundamental function or *achievement* or accomplishment indicated above: For someone who actually learned to be grateful to God, it will be impossible, once and for all, to 'remain in one's merely human and earthly notion [blot menneskelige og jordiske Forestilling] of what is good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant'. (SKS 20, 198, NB2:139/KJN 4, 196) The unconditional gratitude to God, which in SK, as said, is rooted in the experience of forgiveness, leads, as it were, to a revaluation of all values—a fundamental transformation in the judgment of or, as Kierkegaard occasionally says, in allusion to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, a 'transubstantiation'³⁹ of good and evil: What hitherto appeared as evil can now 'substantially' be transformed or transfigured⁴⁰ into something at least instrumentally good or into a pure *adiáphoron*—while retaining its '*accidentia*',⁴¹ here above all: the experience of suffering.⁴² Conversely, what is experienced and judged as beneficial at first sight (success, prosperity, satisfaction, freedom from suffering, etc.) may turn out to be ethically–religiously problematic, namely as a possible or real obstacle in or for the relationship with God.⁴³

That gratitude indeed possesses this 'transformative' power suggests itself under the confines of secular ethics. If, for example, I catch someone trying to steal my bicycle and, instead of reporting him to the authorities, thank him for having taken it, and, moreover, confirm my gratefulness by voluntarily handing it over to him, then his act has not only ceased to be an evil—it has rather ceased to be *theft*, at least in a phenomenological and ethical sense. This basic transformational character can also be underpinned by speech act

theory: Dieter Henrich has rightly pointed out that the ‘use of the verb ‘to thank’ ... [is] to be counted among the illocutionary speech acts: By speaking thanks, what is meant by the word becomes *real* ([21], p. 185)⁴⁴, and what is meant is, in and through thanks, at the same time constituted as a *good* or transformed into one. To give thanks means to accept a gift, both as such and as a good; perceived in this way, thanks not only necessarily but also sufficiently conditions the possibility of being granted and given a gift.

Nevertheless, an important question remains: Are there entities that Kierkegaard categorically *excludes* from being ‘received with gratitude’? And, conversely, would it be conceivable from his point of view that something can never be received *other* than, but *exclusively* in the medium of it? At first glance, there seems to be *no* limit, or at most a single limit, to gratitude: it must be a gratitude addressed to *God*. For, once again, what we are talking about exclusively is a reconstruction of the perspective of Religiousness A, hence of voluntary self-annihilation before God. Now, the hermeneutical difficulty of such a reconstruction lies in the fact that Kierkegaard’s pertinent remarks are sketchy, ambiguous, and at times apparently contradictory.

The strongest answer is the following, taken from a prayer sketch in a late journal note from 1851: ‘Father in Heaven! That we might consider that *whatever* happens to us comes from you, and that nothing that comes from you can harm us—no, no, it can only benefit us’. (SKS 24, 313, NB23:219/KJN 8, 314)⁴⁵ Here, two things are essentially asserted: first, that everything that happens to ‘us’ (i.e., the Christian and/or the religious individual) happens to us or is to be interpreted and accepted by us as being determined and granted by *God*; second, that everything that happens to us is *good* or ‘useful’ to us (qua Christians), namely *as* determined by God. In comparison, a second, weaker version from 1841: He who ‘can say wholeheartedly: All God’s gifts are good when they are received with *thankfulness* [naar den modtages med *Taknemlighed*] [cf. 1 Tim 4:4]; in this thankfulness and by means of this thankfulness he has overcome the world’. (SKS 19, 219, Not7:55/KJN 3, 214f.).⁴⁶ This reading stands, at least at first sight, in a double tension to the one mentioned before. First, apparently not *everything* that happens to the Christian must be interpreted by him as coming from God, but only the *good*. Secondly, the *goodness* of what is thought to come from God is also subject to a condition: Only—though also always—if and insofar as something is received in *gratitude* from the hand of God does it in truth deserve to be called good or a ‘good gift’. Here, then, not only the divine *origin* of what happens to the Christian, but also the *value* of what has happened, depends on the way in which it is received.

So, do the two notes, written ten years apart (1841/1851), contradict each other? The answer is no. As for the tension mentioned first, it seems to be initially supported by a journal note from 1853: Suppose it says there that you suffered from a serious illness, for example, and asked God to deliver you from it, and provided, further,

you escaped from suffering, indeed, triumphed: isn’t it true that the deepest, the most fervent need within you would be to turn to God in gratitude [takkende]—ah, overflowing with thankfulness [Tak][?] Alas, ... According to the N.T., God must answer you, [‘]Well, my friend, you must not thank *me* for this because you know very well how triumph in this world is to be understood in accordance with the N.T.—that it is a sign that I have *not* given any help [at jeg ikke har hjulpet til]. [‘] (SKS 25, 194f., NB27:80/KJN 9, 196)⁴⁷

Kierkegaard seems to mean to say here that from the New Testament’s perspective, God is only at work where suffering is not avoided or canceled, but not where suffering *is* avoided. And this is apparently in contradiction to the first note of 1851 quoted above. In my opinion, however, the contradiction can be resolved, at least if one assumes that by the *totality* of what happens or can happen to the Christian is meant precisely that which happens to him *as* determined by the hand of God and consequently can, should and will be received gratefully, i.e., as an absolute good. Accordingly, God would *not* have his hand in the liberation from suffering—admittedly just as little: in suffering *itself*—only insofar as this liberation from suffering is not received by its subject from the hand of *God*, thus gratefully. Invoking the note from 1853, one may then conclude: God has indeed his hand

in play in all those cases where a true good is experienced (also and in particular where suffering is experienced), but not everything experienced *as* good deserves to be called truly *good*. With this reading, the upshot or quintessence of the 1841 note is quite compatible: Only there do we experience something truly good where the experience is received with thanks from the hand of God.

Only there—but also *everywhere*, and hence also there, where *conditional* (in Kierkegaard's terminology: aesthetic) goods are involved. Among these are those mentioned by Climacus, among others: Freedom from suffering, success, happiness, etc. These, too, can be functions of a—*nota bene*: conditional—good: always, yet admittedly also only, if and inasmuch as they are received in a certain necessarily and unambiguously good *way*, namely (a) from the *hands of God* as (b) at most *conditional* goods. Indeed, there is 'a proper way for human beings to be grateful for temporal gifts', which as such 'are not necessarily detrimental for the Christian' ([14], p. 129)—if and as long as the latter does not forget 'that it was only through thankfulness to God that *everything* became a good and perfect gift' (SKS 4, 96/EUD, 90)⁴⁸ for him or her.

But if one experiences something truly good precisely where the experience is received with thanks from the hand of God, then, conversely, one can also infer *God* as its author from the goodness of the experienced. In this sense, another journal note from 1841 states: '[I]f what you have received really is *the good* [dersom det virkelig er et Gode], then you of course know that it comes from God; [for] *every* good gift, every perfect gift, is from above'. (SKS 19, 219, Not7:52/KJN 3, 214).⁴⁹ The quintessence, which is in perfect agreement with the previously explained statements of SK, thus reads as follows: Since *everything* truly good comes from the hands of *God* (and from the hands of God only something *good*), then whoever *receives* something truly good—i.e., something in the medium of gratefulness—can make an infallible inference to God as its origin or *author*.

Pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, success and misfortune, happiness and unhappiness are, as has been shown so far, potential candidates of *both* the rightly understood *and* the misunderstood form of gratitude; none of them, however, can be considered good or evil in the strict or *unconditional* sense from Kierkegaard's point of view—or from the point of view of the religious subject depicted by him. But this means that the above-mentioned extension-question still wants an answer. From the preceding considerations an intermediate, if only *formal*, result has emerged: If, in Anti-Climacus' terms, it is not the object to *which* a subject relates in the aforementioned cases (e.g., *to* something as happy, painful or the like) that appears to be categorically decisive, but rather the respective kind of relationship *to* just this relation—and at the same time the kind of relationship with *God*: *in* relation to this relation, then what we are looking for is to be located in the realm of the *modes*, more precisely the *modes of consciousness* pertaining to this doubly reflected relation.

Now, my thesis is quite simple: The two missing candidates are sin and sin-consciousness or, respectively, the modes of consciousness corresponding to them. Two questions must be raised in order to make sense of this thesis. First, can I thank God for being a *sinner*? Not at all.⁵⁰ Second, can I thank him for the ability to *believe* that I am – indeed, for the ability to *be* – a sinner? Indeed. Why is the first kind of gratefulness to be considered impossible? Anything for which I can give thanks would, as we have seen, be transformed into a good precisely by my giving thanks for it. It is this possibility of transformation that finds its limit in sin: I cannot, properly understood, think of my own sin or the sin of another person as something for which I can give thanks, because I cannot think of it as something that would be transformed into a good by *virtue* of my giving thanks for it. But why is this different in the case of giving thanks for the ability to *believe* that I am a sinner? Because, judged theologically, sin and sin-consciousness form a complete disjunction. *Either* I can be a sinner, and then I do not know myself as such, or more precisely: My mode of consciousness qualifies as a *denial* of the fact that I myself am a sinner. *Or* I am conscious of and regret my own sin: then I cease to *be* that of which I am aware in this way precisely *because* of and thanks to my awareness. As a good Protestant, Kierkegaard indeed presupposes⁵¹ that the nature and reality of sin includes its own denial; hence, in terms and in the mode of

sin-consciousness, sin's self-transparency constitutes its annihilation, not only necessarily, but also sufficiently.

But if this is true, then the possibility of the transformation just mentioned is rooted not only in just *any* reason to thank God, but strictly speaking in the only, at least the only *unconditional* reason. Conversely, and by the same token, the term sin does not merely stand for a *conditional* or dialectical evil—an evil, that is, which could be appropriated in the medium of thanksgiving and thus be transformed into a conditional good; rather, it stands for an evil, or, more precisely, for the only *unconditional* evil. Hence, the extension of both classes of entities (that of the unconditional good and that of unconditional evil) boils down to exactly *one*.

And we can even go one step further: If you can be a sinner only by denying it, then it follows not only that the annihilation of sin coincides with its own self-transparency but it follows likewise that the sinner, as such, must be considered *incapable* of arriving at this very self-transparency by himself, instead requiring divine revelation. I quote Climacus, who, in agreement with the entire Protestant tradition, declares: 'The individual is ... unable to gain the consciousness of sin by himself [ved sig selv], ... which shows that outside the individual [udenfor individet] there must be the power that makes clear to him [oplyser ham] that ... he has become a sinner'. (SKS 7, 531/CUP1, 584)⁵² But if this is so, then the actual, ultimate and highest reason and object of Christian gratitude, rightly understood, consists of nothing else but the sheer *ability* to be thankful or give thanks—as an expression of something that can only be imparted or granted by God, and this for salvific reasons.

And since, last but not least, under earthly conditions, being a sinner can at no time be considered something to be done away with once and for all, also the reason for gratitude never ceases; consequently, one may reformulate Kierkegaard's major edifying principle, according to which humans are *always* in the wrong in relation to God,⁵³ as follows: There is, Christianly speaking, only *one* debt to God that we can never pay off—the as such inexhaustible debt of gratitude. In other words, every Christian must admit and declare that he or she certainly owes God many things, but only one thing in infinite measure: gratefulness.

The upshot so far is, according to Kierkegaard, that strictly speaking we can give thanks only for what is truly *good*. And only for something truly good we can thank *God*—and only for a good for which we thank God do we *thank*, strictly speaking. But under the conditions of existence, the one and only truly good must be expressed by a triad of keywords: faith, sin-consciousness and gratitude, or thankfulness. Speaking in Anti-Climacus' terms, one might also say that the good is coextensive with 'spirit', though in the present context, this word may again be interpreted as expressing that elusive paradoxical capacity of a Christian, which 'will make suffering blessed for him'. (SKS 25, 195, NB27:80/KJN 9, 196). In any case, from this vantage-point, it is easy to see how to respond to the problem of evil from the perspective of the first-person singular in the sense described at the outset—i.e., from the perspective of one who, in the sense of Religiousness A, supposes that the problem, rightly understood, must be transformed into the question of how he *himself* stands in the eyes of a God who, despite all appearances to the contrary, is to be thought of as love.⁵⁴ If the person concerned asks this question again as a Christian, i.e., from the point of view of Religiousness B and thus at the same time in unreserved gratitude for having been forgiven by God, she will express herself, in the words of Kierkegaard from a journal note of 1846, approximately as follows:

The only certainty is the ethical-religious. It says: believe—thou shalt believe. And if anyone were to ask me whether with its help I have always had it easy, then I would reply, No, but then still, still there is the indescribably blessed certainty that all is good [alt er Godt] and that God is love: either it is my fault when things go wrong—and then God is still love; or things will surely go well [det vil nok blive godt] and evil will be seen to have had its significance [vise sig at have haft sin Betydning]—but then, too, God is love. (SKS 20, 66, NB:73/KJN 4, 65)

And already in 1841, in another journal note, Kierkegaard assertorically denied that the skeptic's suspicion is justified: the very suspicion, namely, that any trustworthy theodicy must be able to respond to the problem of the suffering of the *individual* instead of (like Leibniz) swerving into a universalizing teleology, but that such an answer is de facto unavailable. Kierkegaard counters with rhetorical verve:

[D]o you think that *your* sorrow is so awful that your life should *refute* what has hitherto been held as the truth, that God cares for every hum. being with a fatherly concern [faderligt Omhu] [?] . . . [I]f you really were this special one among hums. who could say such things in truth—I am no coward—but I would nevertheless say to you—hide away from hum. beings, hide your wisdom, let them live in the beautiful belief in a fatherly Providence [faderligt Forsyn]. But it is *not* so, and I need not beg you to flee, but I say proceed, proclaim your grandiose wisdom, I am not afraid. (SKS 19, 241, Not8:47/KJN 3, 235)⁵⁵

These statements are obviously written from the perspective and with the bold gesture of the Christian, a Christian who is convinced, at least convinced in terms of the desperate courage of what Climacus calls a 'self-defense postulate' of Religiousness A,⁵⁶ that he should be and is in fact justified in holding fast to the assertion that de facto *no* human being has reasons to complain before or accuse God.⁵⁷

4. Kierkegaard's New Approach: Pros and Cons

At the beginning of the last section, I distinguished between the *motivation* to and the *right* of a faith (in the present case: the faith in the love of God). I responded to the motivation-question with reference to the gratitude of the sinner justified before and by God. The question about the right or the *rationality* of such a faith is still open. A response would at the same time have to invalidate the suspicion expressed at the beginning of my article: that Kierkegaard's protest raised in the name of the suffering individual against every teleologizing trivialization of individual suffering ends up being no more than just this, i.e., an attitude of mere *protest*. At the same time, I expressed the conviction that there are indeed relevant argumentative resources to be found in the authorship—resources that he himself overlooked or concealed. It is now time to provide reasons, or more modestly, at least a *single* reason for this conviction. Finally, I shall identify and explain a major problem that Kierkegaard's considerations raise beyond and independently of my argumentative support of his position.

My *SK-apologetic* argument has two parts, one indirect and one (pragmatically) direct. Regarding the first, I would draw attention to an important journal entry from 1848:

[Christianity] must be presented ... as it is, as being so difficult, so that it may become properly apparent that Xnty relates solely to the consciousness of sin [ene forholder sig til Syndens Bevidsthed]. To want to involve oneself with becoming a Christian for any other reason [Af nogen anden Grund] is quite literally foolishness [Daarskab]; and that is how it must be. (SKS 21, 163, NB 8:39/KJN 5, 170)

To begin with, it must not be overlooked that the phrase 'for any [other] reason' has double connotations: it can be read genetically ('for what [other] *motives* might someone engage with the Christian faith?') or epistemically ('which of these [or other] motives are, at least possibly, *rational*?'). I assert that, in the present context, both connotations are intended. On the epistemic level, and only that is of interest here, the following seems to be obvious: If wanting to involve oneself with becoming a Christian for any *other* reason than sin must be deemed 'foolishness,' then the conclusion seems entirely justified that there exists precisely one *non-foolish* reason for such a move, namely sin, or more precisely: sin-consciousness. Hence, *faith* is rational, according to Kierkegaard, to the extent that the idea of *sin*—more precisely: the standpoint of sin-consciousness—is rational. But is it?

My answer is negative—yet, negative in a sense that does not eventually undermine the possible viability of the idea itself; and this, I surmise, is also Kierkegaard's opinion.

Now, my argument purported to defend his point proceeds indirectly: there are both theological and philosophical reasons to conjecture, or even to expect, that the rationality of belief in the possibility and reality of sin should prove completely unjustifiable.⁵⁸ My *theological* argument simply presupposes that what Kierkegaard has to say on the subject of sin can at least be regarded as truly *Christian*, i.e., as *theologically* appropriate, though of course not necessarily as *true*. Hence, among other things, it follows that the expectation, let alone the demand, for an objective and thus faith-*independent* argument for the meaning, right and truth of the Christian doctrine of sin must be rejected as unjustified, indeed as foolish: only for the sinner, but also for *every* sinner and from *every* sinner's perspective, does it amount to a stumbling block and foolishness to speak of sin. Or put differently: For the philosopher and/or non-Christian, any talk of sin (especially that which relates to her own person) remains, and must remain, meaningless—precisely because, in Christian terms, she himself *is* a sinner.

This is true from a theological perspective, yet a *philosophical* argument also ties in here nicely. According to the latter, theologians *and* philosophers, Christians *and* non-Christians can and must agree at least on one point: The possible *irrationality* of the Christian faith is, objectively speaking, a necessary *condition* of its own rationality in that, from a Christian perspective, faith indeed rightly claims 'rationality', yet rationality in a novel, namely genuinely *Christian* sense, which, as such, requires, on the part of the subject making that judgment, a radical shift in perspective: He or she must become a believer and *as* a believer must be willing wholeheartedly to accept that the very reason for being or having become a believer (=sin) *must* appear foolish to the non-believer, and rightly so (see above). Conversely, all those 'objective' or sin-*independent* reasons or evidence upon which critics of religion usually insist as prerequisites for finding Christianity rationally acceptable *must* be deemed foolish from the perspective of the believer. Hence, Christianity is 'reasonable' (in the properly Christian sense) only if the Christian himself is willing to give up any *claim* to 'reasonableness' (in the non-Christian, hence improper, sense). By contrast, clinging to this *latter* claim will invariably result in forfeiting its *right*—paradoxically as it may seem.⁵⁹

It might as well be put this way: Peter can rationally believe in Christianity only if he is not ignorant about, if in fact he seriously considers, the possible *irrationality* of his belief—if he, positively speaking, believes despite and vis-à-vis the disquieting possibility that the rationality or reasonableness of his belief is not to be had except in the guise of its *irrationality*. The doubt about the rationality of the belief is therefore, first, a condition of its possible *genesis and practice*. Hence, secondly, the rationally *justified* faith resists being practiced, and the practicable resists justification. What makes faith possible casts doubt on its rationality; and what justifies it thwarts its coming into being. More formally: (1) In order for some faith to be rational, it must be possible.⁶⁰ (2) Christian faith is possible only under the guise of irrationality. (3) Hence, Christian faith can be rational only under the guise of irrationality.

Although the idea of sin (or more precisely: the idea of sin consciousness) may indeed make no sense philosophically, this is not, nor can it be, the philosopher's final and/or ultimate word on the matter. For the philosopher must, perhaps grudgingly, admit and give consent to an additional counterfactual: *If* the idea of sin made philosophical sense, then the very fact of its apparent meaninglessness would be exactly what was to be expected in the first place. And the idea of sin is obviously unique in this respect, for any other such claim would be philosophical nonsense indeed; for example: 'Granted, the idea of a metal piece of wood makes no sense; but *if* it did, then the very fact that it appears to be meaningless would be exactly what was to be expected in the first place'.

The *pragmatic* argument in support of Kierkegaard proceeds directly instead of indirectly. In general, pragmatic, or more precisely, pragmatist arguments defend (here: religious) faith firstly against the background of the observation that false beliefs can be rational and irrational ones true.⁶¹ It follows not only that a *distinction* must be made between truth and rationality, but moreover, that rationality is *context-sensitive*, that is, the corresponding ascription is situation-dependent. Pragmatically rational, then, is not only

such a belief, but in any case, every belief that *first* arises from an acute *crisis situation*; on the part of the person concerned, such crisis consists in the awareness of imminent danger, either on a psycho-physically or spiritually significant and serious level (e.g., loss of income, health, sanity, life, eternal salvation, etc.). Secondly, the liberating belief emerging from such a crisis situation—namely the belief in a possible, in fact closely present, chance of salvation, or more generally in the possible overcoming of the respective danger—always (albeit not necessarily only) appears to be rationally justified if and to the extent that the affected subject is capable of coping *better*⁶² or more efficiently with the crisis in question, thanks to his or her belief, than either *without* the latter or on the basis of a *competing* belief.⁶³ And it is worth noting that the belief in question may be rational even if it should turn out to be *wrong* in hindsight.

Similarly, a faith that faces and responds to a crisis, for instance, prompted by the threatening prospect of being punished in hell, can be justified as rational—i.e., the faith in which a Christian realizes that to become aware of his own sinfulness was in fact granted by a God of love and with salvific intention. Admittedly, exactly the same—in Kierkegaard's terminology: 'existential dialectical'—*caveat*, to which I already pointed in the context of the above-mentioned *theological* argument, applies in the present case; it can be stated in interrogative form: Any faith that emerges from and as a solution to a crisis like the one described is rationally justified; but am *I* *de facto* in a crisis of the kind described? Both the possibility and the rationality of the faith in question are thus dependent upon doubt and reflection: a doubt, in particular, about the *rationality* of such faith.⁶⁴ But all this does not weaken or subvert the possibility of such faith to *be* rational.

Finally, I would address a major *problem* that Kierkegaard's approach raises. It pertains to the question of how the Christian can and should deal with the suffering of *others*—fellow Christians or not. Dieter Henrich remarks on Christian thankfulness and its limits:

In Christian theology, the tendency can easily arise to consider thanks as appropriate in relation to *everything* that ... exists and happens. After all, everything comes from God, and it belongs to his world, ... the best of all possible worlds ... However, the one who does *not* already start from the religious worldview, ... will not be able to find himself in such a thanks. For it is obvious that a gratitude for the suffering and the need of the *others* would have to become a presumption. ([21], p. 187)⁶⁵

Is Henrich right, that a human being can only be a *presumptuous* Christian, namely insofar as her own believing 'affirmativism' compels her to thank God also and among other things for the suffering of *other* humans (or other sentient beings in general)? And even if it could be shown that Henrich, at least theologically speaking, is *wrong*—would *Kierkegaard* share or be *able to* share this judgment? My thesis is that the latter is indeed the case, but Henrich's critical thesis can and must nevertheless be rehabilitated in a weaker variant: a variant from whose theological consequences Kierkegaard has unjustly shied away, as I would argue.

First of all, it must be kept in mind that the reflection on the suffering of *others* (factual or perceived as possible or probable) can and does become an integral part of one's *own* relationship to oneself and to God, especially in the sense of *contesting* one's faith in a loving and just God. Thus, Kierkegaard also reckons with and emphatically appreciates the Christian's solidarity and sympathy with the suffering of others—and this is regardless of whether this suffering is to be interpreted as misfortune, divine ordeal or divine punishment. He even explicitly demands extraordinary caution in the interpretation of the punitive suffering of others or that one refrains from it altogether, e.g., in the following journal note from 1851 about the meaning of the story of Job:

The significance of this book is ... to show the cruelty that we hum. beings commit by regarding being unhappy as guilt [ansee det at være Ulykkelig som en Skyld], as a crime. This is indeed hum. selfishness, which wishes to free itself of the ... serious and upsetting impression ... of suffering, of what can happen to a

hum. being in this life. In order to protect themselves against it, people explain suffering as guilt ... Oh, hum. cruelty! (SKS 24, 415, NB24:143/KJN 8, 421)

Beyond the pure textual findings, Kierkegaard's view could also be defended by recourse to one of Wittgenstein's theologically remarkable observations: 'You cannot hear God talking to another, but only if you are the one addressed'.—This is a grammatical remark ([29], p. 443).⁶⁶ Similarly, I think, in the case of thanksgiving: one can only give thanks for something that has been granted to *oneself*—ergo, one can either not give thanks for suffering at all or only for one's *own* suffering. That this is indeed possible and normatively binding from Kierkegaard's perspective has been shown above, and I hasten to add that here I completely agree with him.

Nevertheless, a problem remains: for it is obviously not the same whether my faith in a loving God is challenged by my *own* or someone *else's* cancer, by my own or someone else's threat of the punishment of hell: Other people's suffering becomes part of my own in such a way that it appears as something that I myself cannot gratefully transform into a good, if only a conditional good; rather, this is possible exclusively in the perspective of the first person, and one characteristic of this perspective consists precisely in the fact that it is non-delegable and cannot be taken up vicariously. It is true, as we have seen, that according to SK, in principle, *everything*, as coming from God, is or can be a good gift, namely if and insofar as it is received in gratitude. But no one can take over this act of reception for someone *else*, and therefore one is not entitled to judge whether the suffering of another is something that the latter himself can receive as a good and perfect gift from the hand of God—or already *has* done so.

To my mind, Kierkegaard would agree—yet would not consider this a real objection, and rightly so. However, the principle of sympathy and compassion for the suffering of others (plus the respect for their autonomy) finds a definite limit in one single, namely *eschatological* respect. Thus, Climacus, for whom—just like Kierkegaard himself—the idea of universal salvation is blocked,⁶⁷ speaks in regard to the Christian's view of the eschatological destiny of the non-Christian of an unavoidable particularism, or of a 'pathos of separation [Udsondringens Pathos]' (SKS 7, 529/CUP1, 582). This pathos 'gives the Christian a certain likeness to a person who is happy by preferential treatment [en Lykkelig ved Begunstigelse]', the likeness being that he, like the 'happy person [,] cannot essentially *sympathize* [kan ikke sympathisere] with others'. (SKS 7, 529/CUP1, 582) In fact, since 'the Christian's good fortune [Lykke] is distinguished by [sc. his own] suffering [Lidelse]', (SKS 7, 530/CUP1, 582) one may infer that, according to SK, one of the Christian's worst conceivable challenges or causes of suffering comes with the certainty that the dependence of faith upon a historical fact (the incarnation) 'excludes all who are outside the condition, and among those are the countless ones who are excluded ... by the accidental circumstance that Christianity has not yet been proclaimed to them'. (SKS 7, 530/CUP1, 582f.)⁶⁸

This certainty, according to SK, cannot and will *not*, of course, find expression in judgments about who *in concreto* belongs to the class of those who are to or will be excluded from salvation; but very well in the judgment that this is true, at any rate, of all those who, for whatever reason, have not found their way to the Christian faith. It follows, however, that Henrich's thesis is correct in this one—admittedly and against him: *only* in this one—respect: Even in view of the terrifying prospect that people who were excluded from the faith through no fault of their own will go to hell as unbelievers, the Christian is obliged to be grateful to God. To avoid misunderstandings: I am not claiming here that the eschatological thesis of the 'double exit' (either hell or salvation) is *true* or untrue, truly Christian or not; I am merely claiming that Kierkegaard should have testified to this latter thesis, against the background of the presuppositions described, not only as *theologically* appropriate, i.e., as something 'truly Christian,' but moreover and unreservedly as something that the Christian can and must *receive as a good gift from the hands of God*. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, he stays silent about it in the relevant texts.⁶⁹

5. Conclusions

It has been shown that Kierkegaard transforms the so-called theodicy problem, mainly due to the problematic teleologizing tendencies in its traditional treatment, into a standpoint-dependent reflection of the first-person singular vis-à-vis the problem of evil: in this case, the standpoint of Religiousness A. Under this limiting condition, the claim to validity of his ‘new approach’ (which I have spelled out with special regard to the principle of unconditional gratitude towards God) must also be of limited range: The answers are convincing for all, yet also only for those who are willing to argue from and accept the same religious premises from which they were formulated in the first place. This limitation is not a weakness or disadvantage in Kierkegaard’s view, but, rightly understood, a clear advantage, namely in the service of determining what deserves to be called ‘truly Christian’. I am in full agreement with Kierkegaard here. Moreover, it has been shown that his standpoint (or that of the religious consciousness he projects) can be supported, among other things, by additional arguments, without betraying Kierkegaard’s overall and most fundamental intentions or convictions. This latter goal was mainly achieved by the qualification that doubting the rationality of faith is among its genetically as well as epistemically constitutive conditions—in other words, among the conditions of its own possible rationality. Admittedly, in the concluding section, the limitations of the Kierkegaard approach became increasingly clear: Other things left aside, it admits of and encourages—in fact, it implies and requires—gratitude for the exclusion of unbelievers from salvation.

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Notes

¹ [1], p. 188.

² Cf. SKS 19, 392f., Not13:23/KJN 3, 389f.

³ A helpful interpretation of the passage is to be found in ([2], pp. 58f.).

⁴ My emphasis; as to Kierkegaard’s overall view on apologetics cf. [3].

⁵ Cf. SKS 11, 117/SUD, 7.

⁶ Still unsurpassed, as far as Kierkegaard’s (here, in particular: Climacus’) relation to the Western metaphysical tradition in general, Leibniz in particular, is concerned: [4], here esp. pp. 125–128 plus 280–284. Cf. also [2], pp. 58f. and 71f.

⁷ Cf. *pars pro toto* SKS 7, 186/AUN1, 203f.: ‘I observe nature in order to find God, and I do indeed see omnipotence and wisdom, but I also see much that troubles and disturbs. The *summa summarum* ... of this is an objective uncertainty’.

⁸ Cf. *pars pro toto* SKS 10, 250f./CD, 244f.: ‘God does not allow a species of fish to come into existence in a particular lake unless the plant that is its nourishment is also growing there. Therefore one can draw a [safe] conclusion ...: ... this fish is found here, ergo this plant grows here ... That is, the need brings the nourishment along with it, ... not *by itself*, as if the need produced [frembragte] the nourishment, but by virtue of a divine determination [i Kraft af en Guds Bestemmelse] that joins the two, the need and the nourishment. Consequently, if one says this is the case, one must add ‘as sure as there is a God’; if God did not exist, then neither would this be as it is’. Cf. also Roe Fremstedal’s and Timothy P. Jackson’s observation that Kierkegaard seems ‘to rely on a teleological view of human nature ... where eternal happiness makes up our final end’ ([5], p. 6).

⁹ Cf. SKS 4, 249/PF, 44 (my emphasis): ‘Socrates, who did indeed advance what is called the physico-teleological demonstration for the existence of God ... constantly *presupposes* [forudsætter] that the god exists, and on this presupposition he seeks to infuse nature with the idea of fitness and purposiveness [Hensigtmæssighedens Tanke] ... At the god’s request, he casts out his net, so to speak, to catch the idea of fitness and purposiveness, for nature itself comes up with many terrifying devices and many subterfuges in order to disturb’.

¹⁰ As to the nature of Religiousness A—and its relation to Religiousness B (=Christianity)—cf. SKS 7, 505–510/CUP1, 555–561.

¹¹ Cf. footnote 7.

¹² This is Slowikowski’s term [6]; it corresponds to the claim that Kierkegaard’s entire ‘theodicy-project’ rests upon a fundamental premise: the premise, namely, that the idea of ‘spirit’ as an essential possibility and mode of being (human) makes sense ([6], pp. 216 and 218). I agree, yet want to go one step further: Even if, admittedly, subscribing to the idea of spirit as meaningful is in itself a (primary) *expression* or actualization of spirit—does that imply that there are no arguments available why we *should* subscribe to it? This is the major issue I am going to address in the following.

¹³ Cf., in particular, [7]; also [8] and [9].

- 14 My emphasis.
- 15 My emphasis.
- 16 My emphasis.
- 17 Cf. [7], p. 257.
- 18 Cf. SKS 11, 129f./SD, 13f. John Davenport provides helpful comments on the intricacies of first- and second-order volition in relation to the body, soul and spirit-synthesis in *Sickness Unto Death*: cf. [10], esp. pp. 234f.
- 19 Cf. SKS 4, 30-32/R, 154-157, for a paradigmatic description of such an aesthetically volatile self and its fleeting self-ideals.
- 20 Cf. [11], esp. pp. 752f.
- 21 The 'existential' character of Kierkegaard's theodicy and its transformation into the first-person perspective of the individual before God is also emphasized, each in its own way, by [2], p. 58, [6] and [12]. The fact that the reflection on the (factual and/or possible) suffering of *others* can be or become a component of and a reason for one's *own* suffering, while at the same time both dimensions can and must be distinguished in theory, shall be addressed separately, with a somewhat critical intention in mind, in Section 4.
- 22 These and related issues are discussed in greater detail in [13].
- 23 Cf. *pars pro toto* SKS 7, 163-166/CUP1, 177-179; SKS 5, 50-56/EUD, 42-48.
- 24 Both aspects are addressed in SKS 5, 53/EUD, 45f., for instance.
- 25 Here, above all, the willingness to follow and imitate Christ: cf., for instance, SKS 24, 177, NB22:144/KJN 8, 175.
- 26 SKS 18, 210, JJ:218/KJN 2, 193.
- 27 Cf. e.g., [14], who provides a (dispositionalist-)formal definition: According to SK, 'gratitude corresponds to an existential disposition of receptiveness, as opposed to possessiveness' ([14], p. 125); it is as such 'discernible in both the action and the character of the individual who is acting' ([14], p. 127).
- 28 My emphasis.
- 29 Cf. [15], pp. 23-30 (= § 4).
- 30 SKS 18, 245, JJ:331/KJN 2, 226 (my emphasis).
- 31 Cf. SKS 5, 291/EUD, 297.
- 32 Cf., for instance, SKS 5, 39/EUD, 31.
- 33 SKS 19, 200, Not6:24/KJN 3, 196; cf. also SKS 9, 190/WL, 190: 'God is love'.
- 34 As to this phenomenology of good and evil cf. in greater detail [16], pp. 195f.
- 35 Cf. SKS 24, 290, NB23:178/KJN 8, 290.
- 36 The idea that faith and gratitude are interchangeable or coextensive finds support in what I consider a Kierkegaardian claim, according to which faith is to be understood here in a narrower, Christian sense: namely as faith in God's forgiveness or in reconciliation. Given this presupposition we find unconditional gratitude wherever there is faith—and vice versa.
- 37 Cf. SKS 5, 51/EUD, 42 (my emphasis): The believer knows that the good is coextensive with whatever comes from God; yet, he does 'not anxiously question what it is that comes from God'; for he can „happily and boldly ... [say]: This, for which I *thank* God' (SKS 5, 51/EUD, 42; my emphasis).
- 38 SKS 11, 242/SD, 131. I see my reading confirmed by an essay which Paul S. Minear wrote and published almost 70 years ago and which is still worth reading in my humble opinion (cf. [17], esp. pp. 10-13). Minear's overall hermeneutical thesis seems to me to be accurate—and as of yet not sufficiently appreciated: '[T]hanksgiving was so central to Kierkegaard that no one is qualified to interpret him who does not enter into his understanding of gratitude' ([17], p. 14). This latter suspicion is further corroborated by the fact that the only more recent text that addresses the theme of gratitude in Kierkegaard (cf. [14]) does not mention Minear's essay at all. Tutewiler, too, emphasizes the—at least theological—centrality of the concept in SK, however: cf. [14], pp. 125 and 130.
- 39 Cf., for instance, SKS 1, 32/EPW, 76. Cf. also [18], pp. 233f. and 246f.: Schreiber points out that the expression used here ('transsubstantiation of experience') functions as an explanation—in fact, a synonym—for *faith* in the early Kierkegaard.
- 40 On the motif of transfiguration in Kierkegaard cf. the (also otherwise) important study by Markus Kleinert: [19], ch. III.
- 41 The term 'accidentia' must be taken with a grain of salt here. It is not meant to suggest (as an anonymous reviewer of the present article suspected) that, according to Kierkegaard, suffering is only *contingent* upon the believer's existence. Indeed, proponents of both Religiousness A and B clearly presuppose that suffering is constitutive of and *inevitable* for the religious form of existence they adhere to (cf., for instance, SKS 7, 392-477/CUP1, 431-525). My point is that while they clearly acknowledge (esp. 'spiritual') suffering as inevitable, they also and simultaneously consider and postulate that very suffering as overcome and defeated 'in ideality' (=qua faith).
- 42 Consequently, one must distinguish—probably also in Kierkegaard's view—between pain, suffering and (the experience of) evil: (a) Every suffering (i.e., every *interpretation* of pain) is painful or hurts, but not vice versa. (b) Every experience of evil is an experience of suffering and a fortiori of pain, but not vice versa. Thus, for instance, the evil of a cancerous disease might cease to

exist not only by the ceasing of the disease *itself* (together with the pain and suffering), but also by ceasing to appear as *evil*. Cf. in greater detail [16], pp. 196f.

43 For an overview on Kierkegaard's treatment of (the concept of) evil cf. [20].

44 Henrich 1999, p. 185 (my emphasis). Here and hereafter translations of Henrich's text are my own.

45 SKS 24, 313, NB23:219/KJN 8, 314 (my emphasis).

46 SKS 19, 219, Not7:55/KJN 3, 214f. Cf. SKS 19, 206, Not7:3.a/KJN 3, 202.

47 SKS 25, 194f., NB27:80/KJN 9, 196 (my emphasis).

48 SKS 4, 96/EUD, 90 (my emphasis). In order to get a grip on the full meaning of the quotation, one would have to italicize three words ('through,' 'God,' and 'everything') in turn and explain them separately, then likewise in combination again. However, such hermeneutical procedure would leave the overall result of my interpretation above largely unaffected if I am not mistaken.

49 SKS 19, 219, Not7:52/KJN 3, 214 (my emphasis).

50 If sin is coextensive with despair (and I claim that it *is*, for Kierkegaard), then a person can only be thankful for the *possibility*, but not for the *actuality* of being a sinner. Cf. SKS 11, 131/SD, 15: To 'be *able* to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to *be* in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery—no, it is ruination' (my emphasis). One might also utilize this idea to determine the extension of sin: Sin is what you cannot give thanks for: either *because* you cannot give thanks for it (for instance, you prove unable to thank God for having to love your neighbor; or for being able to be a sinner), or because you, properly understood, *cannot* give thanks for it (for instance, you cannot be thankful for breaking your marriage; or for being a sinner).

51 Cf. [22].

52 SKS 7, 531/CUP1, 584 (my emphasis). Cf. SKS 4, 263f./PF, 62ff., where Climacus explains why faith in the Christian sense can neither be an act of knowledge nor of will.

53 Cf. the eponymous edifying discourse at the end of the 'Ultimatum' in *Either/Or II*: SKS 3, 320-332/EO2, 346-354.

54 It was objected by an anonymous reader of the present article that the view I ascribe to Religiousness A actually belongs to Religiousness B (=Christianity), and to the latter alone, in Kierkegaard; for what is (purportedly) at stake here is the—*nota bene*—genuinely, *Christian* idea that God is love. 'However, on my reading this idea is—at least it *can* be—part and parcel of Religiousness A already, since large parts of the *edifying corpus* are indeed written with this latter perspective in mind—and they invoke and elaborate upon the idea of God as love as an *integral element* of that view. Cf., *pars pro toto*, the following quotation from an early edifying discourse (1843): '[W]hen all the devils stood ready to rescue your soul from the insanity of despair by the explanation that God is *not* love, is it not true that you then clung fast to the words [sc. that God *is* love] even though you did not understand them ...? ... Then you understood that every good and every perfect gift is from above if it is received with *thankfulness*' (SKS 5, 55/EUD, 47f.; my emphasis).

55 SKS 19, 241, Not8:47/KJN 3, 235 (my emphasis).

56 Cf. SKS 7, 183/CUP1, 200 (note).

57 I find most welcome support for the Kierkegaard-reading presented here, in Timothy H. Polk's 'doxological' approach to Kierkegaard's interpretation of (the book of) Job in *Repetition*: According to Polk, 'Kierkegaard's reading of Job explores the possibility that what conventionally seems to be an attempt to bless God, the defense of God through the construction of theodicies, may really be cursing in disguise. It also suggests that what looks like cursing, Job's outrage, may really be a hidden form of blessing ... Readers are implicitly encouraged to hope that the God who answers Job might be their God, too, who substitutes his blessing for and against the curse' ([23], p. 139).

58 Thus, Claudia Welz [24] rightly speaks of '*reasons* for having no reasons [to defend God]' in the context of addressing the problem of evil in SK.

59 On the idea of forfeiting a right precisely by claiming it cf. [25].

60 When I believe that *p* I cannot at the same time (and in the same respect, here: actuality) believe that $\sim p$. Given the first belief is instantiated, the second would not be irrational, but simply impossible—both logically and psychologically. Therefore, an impossible belief is not *either* rational or irrational, but *neither nor*. Accordingly, only possible beliefs can be rational, and every rational belief is possible.

61 (1) *True* beliefs may be *irrational*: Consider the man who, due to a bizarre mental defect, can only generate one single belief and in fact does so permanently: 'Copenhagen is the capital of Denmark'. As it so happens, the belief is true—but most of the time irrational. This is because rationality is situation-dependent and context-sensitive, and there are countless situations where it would seem completely beside the point to generate that belief (let alone the corresponding utterance). (2) *False* beliefs may be *rational*: Consider a man hiking alone in the Canadian Rockies. Suddenly he perceives what he takes to be a grizzly—he stands frozen in order not to attract the animal's attention. Upon closer inspection he then realizes that what seemed to be a bear at first sight was in fact nothing but a fir tree, the shape of which remotely resembled a bear. Now, although his belief ('I am confronted with a deadly predator') was obviously wrong, it was nevertheless entirely rational (just like the ensuing behavior), due, again, to the particular situational circumstances in which it was generated (being alone in the wilderness, etc.).

- ⁶² ‘Better’ at least from the perspective of the person concerned. But please note: The fact *that* this is the case—i.e., *that* the perspective of the person concerned is not only necessary, but also sufficient for rightly speaking of ‘better’ here—is, of course, true ‘objectively,’ i.e., from a *third-person* perspective also.
- ⁶³ Cf. [26], pp. 1–31, as a classical source for this line of argument. Cf. also [27], ch. 3 (esp. pp. 50–60), for a similar attempt to defend the rationality of Kierkegaardian faith on pragmatist grounds. Cf. also [28], pp. 236–250; Fremstedal notes that Kierkegaard “seems to be a *pragmatist concerning the content of belief yet a fideist concerning its revelatory form*” ([28], p. 249).
- ⁶⁴ And it would be worth an additional consideration, whether or not—under the circumstances just mentioned and by invoking what Climacus dubbed ‘self-defense postulate’ (see above)—one should not rather speak of *acceptance* here than of faith, and this in the spirit of Mk 9:24: ‘I have faith. Help my lack of faith!’.
- ⁶⁵ My emphasis.
- ⁶⁶ (=Zettel, 717; my trans.).
- ⁶⁷ Cf., for instance, SKS 25, 451, NB30:80/KJN 9, 456f.; cf. also SKS 26, 414, NB36:5/KJN 10, 424, where Kierkegaard apparently tries to resist the temptation of supporting the idea of universal salvation. As to this whole complex in detail cf. [30], pp. 89ff.
- ⁶⁸ Cf. SKS 26, 217, NB32:127/KJN 10, 219f.
- ⁶⁹ Victor Eremita’s side-glance at the idea of a ‘humble expression of a doctrine of predestination [ydmyge Udtryk for en Prædestinationslære]’ (SKS 6, 440/SLW, 478) might be the only hint in that direction; cf. [30], pp. 90f. Cf. also SKS 25, 405f., NB30:28/KJN 9, 410.

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