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FORGOING THE SELF IN KIERKEGAARD'S PHILOSOPHY

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There have been a considerable number of reactions against scholars who put radical subjectivity at the center of Kierkegaard's philosophy. These reactions emphasize the importance of social existence in Kierkegaard's works. The present paper agrees with these reactions, but it goes one step further by arguing that: once individuality has been established, the individual should, in certain circumstances, cut back on their individuality to become open to others. In this paper, the phrase "forgoing the self" is used as an umbrella term to discuss various forms of this process, e.g., forgetting the self, denying the self.

Keywords: Søren Kierkegaard – Subjectivity – Self – Society – Individualism – Faith – Isolation

Introduction

In *Man in the Modern Age*, Kierkegaard is named as the origin of what Jaspers refers to as "existence-philosophy" (see Jaspers 1957, 175). Jaspers praises Kierkegaard for his contributions to philosophy but also voices his criticism and concern: "Existence-philosophy may lapse into pure subjectivity. Then selfhood is misunderstood as the being of the ego, which solipsistically circumscribes itself as life that wishes to be nothing more" (Jaspers, 1957, 177). Jaspers' concern was justified. For some, Kierkegaard's philosophy of subjectivity has become a mouthpiece for promoting the view that the individual should follow a different path from society. Not only the layman but also many a philosopher believes that Kierkegaard's philosophy views becoming solitary as the pinnacle of one's development. As strong as some of the reactions may have been against such misconceptions, most scholars fail to put adequate emphasis on an inherent tension in Kierkegaard's philosophy of subjectivity, namely that, for Kierkegaard, there is always a tension between becoming an individual and, at the same time, living an ethical life in society. The present paper argues that this tension does not imply that living an ethical (or social) life is incompatible with being an individual. As Kierkegaard himself points out, thinking about the self *always* involves such a tension: "'[S]elf' signifies precisely the contradiction of positing the universal

as the particular" (SKS 4, 381 / Kierkegaard 1980a, 78).[1] Despite the tension between these two poles, Kierkegaard hints at the possibility of a reconciliation of the two in *Either/Or*: "What is required of me is the universal; what I am able to do is the particular" (SKS 3, 251 / Kierkegaard 1987, 263). Judge William says, language gives us a clue how this is so:

> I never say of a man: He is doing duty or duties; but I say: He is doing his duty; I say: I am doing my duty, do your duty. This shows that the individual is simultaneously the universal and the particular (SKS 3, 251 / Kierkegaard 1987, 263).

As we can see the message of *Either/Or* is not always a radical irreconcilable dichotomy between two choices; sometimes an either / or choice can involve a both / and.

Social life and individual life should be lived in parallel; such a parallel life would be achievable if we had a proper understanding of Kierkegaard's concepts of "self" and "individual". This paper endeavors to clarify these concepts. As we will see in the following sections, the view that having a social life is not incompatible with being an individual is espoused by many scholars. While the present paper agrees with such scholars, its aim is to address and remedy the inadequacies of their interpretations, and in doing so, it puts forward the following thesis: Despite how central the idea of developing a self is to Kierkegaard's philosophy, forgoing the self is not only appropriate in certain circumstances but also recommended.

1. Portraying Kierkegaard as a Radical Individualist

It would be only appropriate to start by showing a few examples of typical misunderstandings in the secondary literature concerning Kierkegaard's concept of the "self" and the individual's position in relation to society. So, without further ado, here is Peter P. Rohde missing the whole point of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*: "Kierkegaard was the supreme individualist, bent all times on isolating the individual with his responsibility" (Rohde 1969, 29). Rohde contrasts Kierkegaard with Grundtvig who, according to Rohde, "came to emphasize fellowship" (Rohde 1969, 29). Nevertheless, contrary to these remarks, Kierkegaard explicitly says that the knight of faith follows social norms and customs (see SKS 4, 134 / Kierkegaard 1983, 39). The individual's religious life of faith should not make the individual socially isolated by fully rejecting social morality (*Sædelighed*). The knight of

[1] To clarify the jargon, by the "particular", Kierkegaard means the "individual", and by the "universal", he means "society" in general.

faith's "isolation" is solely limited to his inability to communicate *his state of faith* to others (see SKS 4, 161 / Kierkegaard 1983, 69). In that sense, the word "alienation" might perhaps be a better word than "isolation"; however, one should be careful in using this term since the knight of faith is only *partially* alienated – his alienation is restricted only to his faith insofar as it is incommensurable and incommunicable. In fact, total alienation (in its more common sense) is one of the characteristics that marks the difference between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith (see SKS 4, 144 / Kierkegaard 1983, 50). Except for his *internal* state of religiousness, the person of faith has a normal social life and is fully integrated in society.

According to another author, Henry Allison, Kierkegaard's method of philosophizing is meant "to help him [the individual] to come to grips, in the isolation of his own subjectivity, with the question of what it means to become a Christian" (Allison 1969, 127 – 128). This is a particularly strange remark that contradicts itself. It is not clear how Kierkegaard (or, rather, "his method of philosophizing") can promote isolation in subjectivity and, at the same time, expect the isolated individual to be open enough to be helped by Kierkegaard's philosophy. Yes, the phrase "in the isolation of subjectivity" (*i Subjektivitetens Isolation*) does appear in Kierkegaard's philosophy, but he made this remark in the context of praising Lessing's resistance to becoming systematic in his religious beliefs: Lessing understood that "the religious pertained to Lessing and Lessing alone" (SKS 7, 67 / Kierkegaard 1992, 65). This is entirely different from generally viewing isolation as a positive phenomenon. As we can observe, the problem is that the scholars quoted here give an air of generality to their statements. Furthermore, Allison puts Kierkegaard's philosophy in opposition to Hegel's – the reference is to Hegel's claim that "the individual must all the more forget himself, as the nature of Science implies and requires" (Hegel 2004, 45). Whereas Allison sees Hegel's philosophy as a philosophy of forgetting the self, he sees Kierkegaard as a philosopher who is opposed to the "forgetfulness of self" (see Allison 1969, 129). This is, however, another bad generalization. Firstly, as we will later see in this paper, it all depends on the context – in fact, Kierkegaard spoke highly of "self-forgetting" in explicit terms. Secondly, Hegel wrote the quoted line in the context of favoring the objective, scientific way of being – which makes Hegel's claim a very specific claim and not a general one. Kierkegaard did not wish people to lose their individuality and subjectivity to a purely scientific and objective mode of existence; accordingly, insofar as that is the case, we can safely assume that Kierkegaard had his fair share of misgivings about Hegel's claim, but it in no way implies that Kierkegaard opposed forgetting (or forgoing the self) in general.

2. Forgoing the Self

The Sickness unto Death is the main book where Kierkegaard theorizes about the self. For him, the human self is "a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (SKS 11, 130 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 13 – 14). Here, as we can see, Kierkegaard is clearly saying that the human self is something relational since it "relates itself to another" (i.e., an other). This interpretation which puts emphasis on the relational aspect of the self is referred to as the "relational achievement theory of the self" by C. Stephen Evans, and it views "the self in terms of its achievements and relationships" (see Evans 2006, 264). As C. Stephen Evans points out, there are textual reasons to believe that the other to whom Kierkegaard is referring is another human being (see Evans 2006, 269 – 270). Kierkegaard explicitly says that the self he writes about in part 1 of *The Sickness unto Death* is "within the category of the human self"; only in part 2 does he begin to talk about the "theological self" and its relation to God (see SKS 11, 193 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 79).

But it is not necessary to get lost looking for such passages to become convinced; a mere look at the general structure of part 1 would make it clear that the concern of part 1 is human relations: For instance, one of the most powerful passages about the nature of despair and the self is about a young girl in love (see SKS 11, 135 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 20). There is a good reason why Kierkegaard focuses on human relations such as love in this part of the book: such relations play vital roles in self-formation. What Kierkegaard takes issue with is the fact that such relations can potentially become unhealthy when one's will to be oneself is completely extinguished. In other words, Kierkegaard is criticizing extremes such as the "will to be someone else, to wish for a new self" (see SKS 11, 168 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 53).

It would be a bad generalization to assume that just because Kierkegaard is warning about how certain relations could go wrong and lead one to despair, he is denying the importance of human relations in self-formation, or that he is criticizing every kind of human relation. Put briefly, his warnings about specific cases should not be confused with a general criticism of human relations.

The present paper aims to augment the relational achievement theory of the self by arguing that, in certain cases, Kierkegaard favored forgoing the self.[2] What the present paper would like to add to the understanding of Kierkegaard is the following: Once one reaches a certain level of selfhood, not only could one give up one's self but also, in certain circumstances, it might even be the appropriate thing to do.

[2] The phrase "forgoing the self" is used as an umbrella term that includes concepts such as: denying the self, forgetting the self, opening up oneself, etc.

Kierkegaard does, indeed, believe that there is a bad way of forgoing the self, in which case, the individual "does not dare to believe in himself" and becomes "a copy, a number, a mass man" (see SKS 11, 149 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 34). But there are situations in which the inability to forget oneself is the wrong attitude: In the same book (*The Sickness unto Death*) where Kierkegaard associates forgetting oneself with becoming a copy, he also warns against what he refers to as "inclosing reserve" which he regards as yet another form of despair. Whereas the problem with losing oneself to the crowd is the absence of self, the problem with inclosing reserve is having an excessive sense of self (see Beabout 1996, 130). According to Kierkegaard, the greatest danger of this kind of despair is suicide. However, the person can be saved simply by opening themselves up to others (see SKS 11, 180 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 66). In opening up, one inevitably has to lower the walls of one's highly isolated self. As Kierkegaard says, the trouble of someone caught up in this type of despair is precisely that "he is unwilling to forget himself" (Pap. VIII2 B 158 / Kierkegaard 1980b, Supplement, 154). In such a state, one is so cut off and isolated that one "does not want communication" (SKS 4, 425 / Kierkegaard 1980a, 124).

In *Works of Love*, we again see Kierkegaard heavily attacking those who are cut off in their subjectivity. The following statement might come as a shock to those who think isolated subjectivity is at the center of Kierkegaard's philosophy: "Youthfulness wants to be the only *I* in the whole world" (SKS 9, 95 / Kierkegaard 1995, 90). For Kierkegaard, it is "a mark of adolescence to say: *I* – and *I* – and *I*" (see SKS 9, 95 / Kierkegaard 1995, 90). His message of Christian love inevitably involves forgoing the self to a certain extent. In opening oneself to others, the self is still preserved; therefore, *the act of forgoing is not total*. One is neither meant to nor is asked to annihilate one's sense of self; rather, it is only expected of the individual to cut back on the unhealthy excesses of the self. We could perhaps use the word "pruning" to refer to what Kierkegaard has in mind. By "pruning", I mean the following: appropriately cutting back on the self in order to improve and strengthen one's sense of self in a healthy manner. In this sense, the act of pruning is *directional* and *formative*.

As we have seen in this section, having too much self prevents one from being open to others. Ronald F. Marshall refers to this shutting up within oneself as a "cowering fear of others" (see Marshall 2013, 87). As Marshall points out, in his criticism of the *I*, Kierkegaard's emphasis falls on the *you*: For Kierkegaard, "[t]hat word ["you"] is a subtle denial of the self as a valuable initiating subject" (Marshall 2013, 88). For the purposes of our discussion, we can take the *you* to mean generally the *other*, and vice versa.

3. Pseudonymity and the Self

Alasdair MacIntyre is widely known among scholars for regarding Kierkegaard as a proponent of extreme individualism (see MacIntyre 2005, 140). According to MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard, "It is not just in morals, but in every sphere which touches on human existence that the relevant criteria lack objective justification" (MacIntyre 2005, 138). This statement seems to be a hasty generalization that poses two problems: Firstly, it is not immediately clear that the relevant criteria do, in fact, lack objective justification; secondly, even if they did, *lacking objective justification* is not synonymous with *lacking justification in general*. Although most defenders of Kierkegaard try to rescue him by addressing MacIntyre's criticism of Kierkegaard's so-called irrationalism (see Davenport, Rudd 2001), the criticism can be addressed from another side: the issue of the self. The simplest reason why bringing up the discussion of the self is relevant is MacIntyre's mentioning of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. According to MacIntyre, one of the reasons behind Kierkegaard's use of various pseudonyms is to reveal to his readers how the choice between alternative points of view is "criterionless" (see MacIntyre 2005, 138).

What is perhaps most relevant to our discussion is becoming aware that the literary device of using pseudonyms is closely linked to the notions of "identity" and the "self" – more specifically, to the author's sense of self. Kierkegaard has no qualms about forgoing his sense of self, albeit temporarily – that is what our philosophical attention should be focused on. Put differently, the use of pseudonyms has more to do with loosening the sense of self than with putting forward criterionless alternatives, and as such, it cannot be a practice of extreme individualism. Being able to write from different perspectives in the voice of different characters presupposes the ability to put one's sense of self and identity aside. In fact, Kierkegaard could not have been more explicit about how unrelated he was to his pseudonyms (see SKS 7, 570 / Kierkegaard 1992, 626). This leads to the assumption that perhaps "there is something unique and special about each pseudonym" (Stewart, Nun 2016, xv). Alastair McKinnon's rigorous analysis can be taken as a corroboration of this claim (see McKinnon 1969, 120). For example, concepts such as "incommensurability", "leap", "mistrust", "immanence", and the "teleological suspension of the ethical" are specific to certain books or time periods, and either they do not appear in other works at all or their appearances are not nearly as prominent.

The reasoning behind this pattern is quite simple: Kierkegaard did really adopt a new persona in writing a pseudonymous book and was able to forget his "everyday" self (named Søren) in the process. Kierkegaard's practice of using pseudonyms carries significant existential implications: For Kierkegaard, the ability to adopt different personalities and see from different perspectives marks the difference between real and

fictitious characters. Whereas fictitious characters are stuck in what they are, real people have many other possibilities than what they are – a fictitious person "has no identity that encompasses many possibilities" (JP VI 6439 (Pap. X1 A 530) / Kierkegaard 1980b, Supplement, 140). One's pseudonyms are manifestations of such possibilities. In that sense, only real people can forgo their sense of self to become pseudonymous.

4. Isolation *Before God*

Perhaps the most well-known account of Kierkegaard as the defender of the "solitary self" comes from Mark C. Taylor who believes that, according to Kierkegaard, "the fullest realization of selfhood is to be found in isolated individuality rather than in community with other selves" (Taylor 1975, 350). But not every scholar believes that Kierkegaard holds such a radical position. So, is Kierkegaard an individualist or someone in favor of being open to others? Well, both. As Backhouse puts it, for Kierkegaard, individualism is "a tool for authentic existence and true human sociality" (Backhouse 2011, 170). Contrary to common belief, complete isolation is frowned upon by Kierkegaard. An example of this can be found in *Either/Or* where Judge William criticizes A's "isolated position", telling him, "You no doubt think that it often is the case that you have indeed gained a wealth of psychological observations, but this is often an illusion" (SKS 3, 89 / Kierkegaard 1987, 85).

Whereas *inward* isolation brought by faith – by the religious – is a positive quality for the individual, *outward* isolation brought by aestheticism can be quite harmful. The most obvious danger concerns the problem of transgression: Thinking everyone else is in the wrong could lead to transgressing social norms because one sees oneself above the rest. While it is true that the knight of faith also, in a sense, transgresses social norms, he does so with anxiety, *always being tempted by the ethical*! But more importantly, his transgressions take place *inwardly*. What Judge William criticizes as A's illusion is precisely this: that insofar as outward, social existence is concerned, the aesthete is not above the rest of his society, even though he might regard himself that way.

Given some of Kierkegaard's strong claims, it is easy to understand why he might be accused of overlooking the ethical potential of society in shaping individuals. However, it is important to bear in mind that even when he expressed his most radical ideas about suspension of the ethical, he made sure to emphasize that "[t]he ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine" (SKS 4, 160 / Kierkegaard 1983, 68). Accordingly, those who consider suspending the ethical should acknowledge that (a) the ethical as the universal is applicable to everyone including the person who suspends the ethical, and that (b) even though the act of suspending the ethical might have subjective value, one is not exempt from one's social duties (which are given by

the ethical as the universal) – after all, Kierkegaard does not write about *abolishing the ethical for society*, but about its inward *suspension for the individual*. Furthermore, it cannot be stressed enough that the suspension pertains solely to *faith* (see SKS 4, 149 / Kierkegaard 1983, 55), and it is the "essence of faith to be a secret" (see SKS 9, 35 / Kierkegaard 1995, 28). Once faith ceases to be a secret, its holder is no longer a believer (see SKS 9, 35 / Kierkegaard 1995, 28). Meaning, the act of suspension is *inward* and *internal* by virtue of pertaining to faith. Observed from the outside, the knight of faith behaves like everyone else (see SKS 4, 134, 144 / Kierkegaard 1983, 39, 50); accordingly, he ought to live according to the customs (*Sædelighed*) of society if, outwardly, he is meant to be indistinguishable from others. Outward isolation would be at odds with the descriptions Kierkegaard gives us.

Kierkegaard's criticism of isolated subjectivity can be traced back to his master's thesis, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*. As he argues, we do not get the "pinnacle of irony" in Socrates (see SKS 1, 243 / Kierkegaard 1989, 197), by which Kierkegaard means that as isolated as Socrates was, he did not *fully* isolate himself in his subjectivity; that is why Socratic irony has praiseworthy qualities for Kierkegaard. In contrast to this kind of irony, "when subjectivity (…) isolates itself, (…) irony manifests itself in a more alarming form" (ibidem). The latter, which Kierkegaard contrasts with Socratic irony, is referred to as "romantic irony." What we encounter here is, again, Kierkegaard's issue with the isolated self. *The Concept of Irony* demonstrates that this theme dates back to his early writings. For Kierkegaard, the only justifiable and positive form of isolation is "isolation before God" (see SKS 7, 481 / Kierkegaard 1992, 530). Social isolation resulting from romantic irony is something to be neither praised nor promoted. As we can observe, in discussions of faith and isolation, it is crucial to know where the emphasis is put: Kierkegaard's belief is that the individual is alone and isolated *before God* (*for Gud*), not before his fellow human beings (see SKS 12, 220 / Kierkegaard 1991, 225; also see SKS 7, 481; Kierkegaard 1992, 530). He considers it a "heroism" to become "an individual human being", but he does emphasize that the individual is "alone *before God*" (see SKS 11, 117 / Kierkegaard 1980b, 5, my emphasis). The amount of emphasis Kierkegaard puts on being alone before God in various writings leads me to conclude that isolation concerns solely theological (or religious) matters (e.g., passion, and faith) which are, by Kierkegaard's definition, *inward*.

Furthermore, even in works (such as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*), where there is extreme emphasis on subjectivity and individuality, it would be of benefit to the reader to keep in mind that Kierkegaard distinguishes between two types of isolation: (a) the isolation of the ironist which separates the ironist from society, and (b) the isolation of the man of faith before God. The latter

case is encountered in what Kierkegaard refers to as "religiousness B" (see SKS 7, 529 / Kierkegaard 1992, 582). Whereas religiousness A can be present even in paganism – Socrates would be, for Kierkegaard, the most obvious candidate – Religiousness B is Christian due to its paradoxical and isolating nature (see SKS 7, 505ff, 529 / Kierkegaard 1992, 555 – 557, 582). One crucial thing that differentiates the two types of religiousness from each other is "the paradoxical transformation of existence by faith" (see SKS 7, 529 / Kierkegaard 1992, 581). Therefore, it should be borne in mind that the isolating nature of religiousness B pertains to faith. Nowhere does Kierkegaard write that religiousness B requires social isolation. In religiousness B, others are excluded only insofar as one's faith is concerned.

In fact, sociability is required in order to reach religiousness B. In order to understand why, we need to refer to Socrates again whom Kierkegaard praised for the fact that his subjectivity did not isolate him. If religiousness A is, indeed, as Kierkegaard claims, a prerequisite for religiousness B (see SKS 7, 506 / Kierkegaard 1992, 556), and if isolation is not permissible in religiousness A (since Socrates as a prime example was not isolated and was praised for it by Kierkegaard), then it follows that one cannot reach religiousness B through isolation. The "romantic ironist" cannot become an individual in a religious sense simply because such an ironist is socially isolated. Alternatively, Socratic irony is not an obstacle to the religious sphere. In fact, this appropriate kind of irony (which requires sociability) is needed for the transition: Since "irony is the *confinium* (border territory) between the esthetic and the ethical" (see SKS 7, 455 / Kierkegaard 1992, 501 – 502), and since the ethical is a necessary stage to be surpassed in order to reach the religious, irony has its rightful place in this transformation. But, to repeat the obvious, it is Socratic irony (which contains a social element) that Kierkegaard has in mind, not romantic irony.

Kierkegaard himself is a prime example of a social ironist: Kierkegaard's biographer Joakim Garff draws attention to Socrates' and Kierkegaard's similar "virtuosity in casual encounters", writing "Kierkegaard was a Copenhagen Socrates and Socrates was an Athenian Kierkegaard" (Garff 2007, 311). Kierkegaard's biographer is right to point out that Kierkegaard's encounters were "not only philosophically or psychologically motivated, it also stemmed from a fundamental need for contact, both communicative and physical" (ibidem). Even more to the point, in a valuable short volume entitled *Til Erindring om Johan Georg Hamann og Søren Aabye Kierkegaard*, the theologian Peter Christian Zahle refers to Kierkegaard's need for sociability as his daily "people bath" (*Menneskebad*) (see Zahle 1856, 9).

In the works of other Kierkegaard scholars, we see other alternative interpretations that argue against social isolation. For instance, Merold Westphal augments Kierkegaard's categorization by defining his own concept of "Religiousness C":

> Christ continues to be the Paradox to be believed, but also becomes the Paradigm or Pattern or Prototype to be imitated. Only as *imitatio Christi* is the Christian life fulfilled, and this brings it out into the public square; for this is where the life of Christ occurred, except for periodic withdrawals to seclusion for prayer (Westphal 2008, 134).

Others have touched on the same argument in other words; for instance, Thomas P. Miles writes that Kierkegaard's message of "the joy of faith" entails "an openness to engage in genuine, loving relations with others. (…) [J]oy names not just an openness to engage in these relationships, but a way of actively doing so" (Miles 2011, 235).

5. Self-Denial, Self-Forgetting, and Love

"True love is self-denial's love", writes Kierkegaard (SKS 9, 363 / Kierkegaard 1995, 369). He further writes, "[T]he true expression of loving much is just to forget oneself completely" (SKS 11, 277 / Kierkegaard 1997, 140). As these two lines show, for Kierkegaard, the two concepts of "self-denial" and "self-forgetting" are closely related to love. In this section, we briefly examine what Kierkegaard had in mind when he used these concepts. The concept of "self-denial" is all over Kierkegaard's writings, especially his religious works, but "self-forgetting" appears less frequently in his writings. Perhaps the clearest passages about the notion of "self-forgetting" can be found in *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* where Kierkegaard comments on the story of the Anointing of Jesus. What is praised by Kierkegaard in the story is the sinful woman's act of self-forgetting. Throughout the third discourse of *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, Kierkegaard reiterates the phrase from Luke 7:47, emphasizing again and again that "she loved much". She is absolved from her sins by Jesus because she forgot herself, which made her able to love much. It might have been her love that saved her, but it was her capacity to forget herself that was the key to her love:

> [S]he has forgotten herself completely, forgotten every disturbing thought in her own inner being, is perfectly calm, or is calmed like the sick baby that is calmed at its mother's breast, where it cries itself out and forgets itself. One cannot succeed in forgetting such thoughts and yet keep thinking about oneself; if one is to succeed, one must forget oneself (SKS 11, 276 / Kierkegaard 1997, 140).

For Kierkegaard, the sinful woman's act of weeping symbolizes the act of forgetting: "in weeping there is also this blessing: forgetting" (SKS 11, 276 / Kierkegaard 1997, 140)! Kierkegaard's phrase, "blessed tears of self-forgetfulness" (see ibidem), was the inspiration for the title of Ronald F. Marshall's essay, *Tears of Self-Forgetfulness* – an essay in which Marshall links the tears of self-forgetfulness to sin, confession, and judgment, and these three are, in turn, linked with "preparations for salvation" (see Marshall 2010, 192). But Marshall gets it the wrong way around. According to him, the tears we shed are "a blessing by ushering in self-forgetfulness" (see Marshall 2010, 183); however, a careful reading of the passage where this topic is discussed in *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* reveals that one becomes able to weep *because* one forgets oneself (see SKS 11, 273 –280 / Kierkegaard 1997, 137 – 144). Self-forgetfulness is the key.

Marshall further talks about self-denial. Not surprisingly, the act of self-denial is strongly associated with Christianity for Kierkegaard. The ability to deny the self is intricately linked to the highest Christian ethical task: love. "Christian love [*Kjerlighed*] is self-denial's love" (SKS 9, 59 / Kierkegaard 1995, 52). In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, he writes, "To follow Christ means, then, to deny oneself" (SKS 8, 324 / Kierkegaard 1993, 223). In talking in favor of self-denial, Kierkegaard argues that preferential love (such as erotic love) is a form of self-love (SKS 9, 59 / Kierkegaard 1995, 53), and as such Christianity has its misgivings about it. Since the Greeks – whose way of thinking has impacted our Western view of love – had no conception of loving in self-denial, they divided love in various forms of preferential love (ibidem). What Kierkegaard advocates instead of preferential love is: loving the neighbor as a love that denies the self (see SKS 9, 367 / Kierkegaard 1995, 374).

Conclusion

Kierkegaard's philosophy is resistant to making universal generalizations. Everything comes with a caveat, or an exception. His philosophy is about human existence, and human existence is rarely neat and systematic. Even though Kierkegaard often appears to be vehemently defending extreme subjectivity and individualism, when we delve deeper, we find numerous exceptions and warnings that fly in the face of our assumptions. Although many scholars have tried to characterize Kierkegaard's philosophy as a philosophy of extreme subjectivity and isolation, many have reacted by arguing that, for Kierkegaard, a fulfilling life involves being open to others. I hope this paper has convincingly shown that the reality of the matter is more complex: Neither isolated subjectivity nor full immersion in the crowd is Kierkegaard's ultimate message. Existence is always in flux, and the individual should, depending

on the situation, be against the crowd, be open to the other, belong to a community while inwardly following a different path from society, forgo their ego, or take any other action that might be deemed appropriate.

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