Kierkegaard's *Dancing Tax Collector*

Faith, Finitude, and Silence

Sheridan Hough

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For Christian

Preface (or: Cheerful Expository Warning)

'Preface': yes, the face before the facing, the whisper to the audience, the exhortation to the orchestra before lights dim and music swells.

Just as well, in this case, because this project has some odd structural features, and the reader needs to be ready to spend some time within its narrative frame, and the portrait of one character in the Kierkegaardian bestiary that thus emerges. But 'framed portrait' is far too static a notion; rather, this work is an 'existential-phenomenological' investigation of this singular Kierkegaard character (whom we will meet in the Prelude).

And what is an 'existential-phenomenological' investigation?

It is 'existential' in its pursuit of the issues that human beings are constitutionally called to address. A Kierkegaardian account of human being, and the demands and concerns that are part of our human lot, will be elaborated in what follows. This investigation, as it focuses on one notable character, is also 'phenomenological': what is it like, *really like*, to move faithfully through the world, given our human constitution? Here I take my cue from Husserl, who commands us: 'zu den Sachen selbst!', *to the things themselves*. The term 'phenomenology', when reading Kierkegaard, is perhaps a contentious one; here it should be heard in its most primordial sense: my exploration of the life of faith, and the person so living it, is focused on what 'faithful comportment' can, and cannot, reveal to us. In this sense this study is 'regional phenomenology':[1] we will be focused on the 'movements'

[1] I borrow this useful term from George Pattison, who questions attempts to read Kierkegaard's *method* in a comprehensively phenomenological manner: historically, phenomenological projects (as seen in Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger) have, as he puts it, 'global ambitions' that seek '. . . a unification of the whole domain of experience and knowledge' (2002: 84). This project's 'regional' approach is happily free of such designs. (Cf. Merleau-Ponty: 'the opinion of the responsible philosopher must be that *phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy*. It has been long on the way, and its adherents have discovered it in every quarter, certainly in Hegel and Kierkegaard . . . ' (1962: viii.)

solicited by faith, and the phenomenon of a particular way of being in the world.

Of course, the way that the world *is*, or is 'available' to a person (to use the language of contemporary philosophy of mind, the 'affordances' of a person's environment),[2] has everything to do with the condition of the person in question. 'Condition', for Kierkegaard, is surely an ontological designation: for the aesthete, the world is a venue for (unsuccessfully) satisfying one's cravings; for the ethical being, the world is a terrain to be mapped by reflection, articulation, and choice (endlessly); for the religious person, the world is the site of suffering that must be embraced through confession of sin and the knowledge that one is, 'before God, always in the wrong', a realization which demands the practice of active love. Notice that these are very different environments: a person seeking to satisfy an urge will be engaged with the human domain in a way that the ethical deliberator can only pity; on the other hand, the religious supplicant understands that the ethical task of getting it right is never done, and surrenders herself into the embrace of a loving God.

All of these ways of 'being-in-the-world' (more about Heidegger and such locutions momentarily) have a task, and each has opportunities and abilities that the others lack. In each sphere, the world is structured by a life-commitment that makes particular undertakings available, and others not. Of course, the target of human development is not any one of these 'spheres' or 'stages' in life; in the Kierkegaardian scheme the ideal 'condition' is that of 'faith', the ultimate and highest way of worldly engagement: for the faithful person, *everything is available*. (What this expression can actually mean is the subject of this book.)

But the language of 'highest' surely betrays the worldly demeanor of Kierkegaard's only depiction of a knight of faith, the fellow dreamed up by the author of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de silentio, a man who 'looks just like a tax collector'. (Yes, now that we have identified our celebrity-quarry we will not make him wait in the wings until the Prelude.) This 'tax collector' (so-called, for now) is a person of sturdy gait, absorbed in the unfolding moment, taking pleasure in,

[2] See J.J. Gibson (1979); cf. Susanna Siegel (2010: 130–1).

remarkably, *all things*: clearly, de silentio (and, obliquely, Kierkegaard) intends for the reader to observe the phenomenon of faith. A faithful person has powers that the aesthete, the ethicist, and the religious practitioner do not (not to mention the human beings who have yet to set out on the path to selfhood): the faithful tax collector finds his quotidian environment infinitely abundant, significant, and the cause for joy, from moment to moment. How can this be?

Of course, enlightened beings always seem strange to everyone else. Socrates famously could not be seduced or made drunk, and he went to his death with uncanny cheer; Siddhartha Gautama, upon becoming the Buddha, could cause harm neither through thought, nor speech, nor deed, nor could he be the victim of physical violence or mindless insult.

Consider these two examples of enlightened 'world-navigation': both are the culmination of considerable thought and practice that turns on a conception of what a human being *actually* is, a view shorn of conventional assumptions, one that is thus able to direct how best to fulfill that understanding of our human legacy. An ontological picture, once adopted, always makes existential demands. For the Buddhist, the true realization of the 'selflessness' of all things is made manifest in the refusal of grasping attachment to the passing scene; for the Platonist, the innate contents of the intellect must be dialogically recollected: once knowledge is achieved, a person moves through the world with discernment, able to see what is real beneath the shiny distractions of mere appearance.

Kierkegaard's ontology is no different. The account of human being he develops by means of his seventeen (or so)[3] pseudonyms—each describing some aspect of his respective aesthetic, ethical, and religious frameworks—establishes what is, and is not, available to the person navigating by means of the relevant coordinates. It is a developmental picture, and the life of faith is its fullest flowering. The silent, joyful perambulation of de silentio's faithful person is thus of considerable existential-phenomenological interest. Indeed, this 'existential-phenomenological' approach has both descriptive and diagnostic

[3] —depending on how you count them: more about these voices in the First Movement.

elements: if we have a good picture of our 'being in the world', then we can stake some claim about how best to live.

On the Method (of Reading Kierkegaard)

I should also be clear that my 'existential-phenomenological' account is not in any way opposed to a religious, or indeed specifically Christian, reading of Kierkegaard's corpus. Far from it. Clearly, any responsible reading of these texts begins with the fact that Kierkegaard is a Christian thinker who seeks to illuminate what it means to live as an *actual* Christian (and not, of course, simply as a member of Christendom). Kierkegaard clearly believes that Christianity speaks to our human condition—Christianity provides an account of human nature, and thus how best to negotiate the world we occupy, in much the same way that Plato's metaphysical account of the tripartite self, and the immortality of the intellect, is crucial for understanding what a fully realized human life will look like for Plato.

I will also confess that I read Kierkegaard comprehensively. The way of life afforded in each sphere of existence can only be seen from within that perspective: true enough, but the issues and difficulties of each are not utterly discrete from the concerns of the others. The pursuit of pleasure, the demands of deliberation and choice, the surrender of oneself before a loving God—each of these has a vast network of connective tissue, and sometimes the tug of one possibility can only achieve motility through a change in perspective. For example: as I will argue in what follows, the aesthete chases what he takes to be 'pleasurable', but only the faithful person has access to 'ongoing pleasure' (again, making sense of this remark is the task of this book). This project is thus not a 'post-modern' hop through the various spheres of existence, but a cumulative (sometimes retrogressively, at others retrospectively so) investigation of what the life of faith promises.

As for the very notions of 'existential' and 'phenomenological': I had better say a word about the usual suspects. (In fact, I've already mentioned two of them, Husserl and Heidegger.) We might begin by considering two of Kierkegaard's true descendants, Heidegger and Sartre. Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* contains much that is recognizably Kierkegaardian (such as the 'idle talk' engaged in by the 'Public' and

'the call of conscience'; more of these in the First Movement); Heidegger, however, is certainly in no hurry to acknowledge Kierkegaard's influence;[4] in fact, Heidegger sets out to ontologize Kierkegaard by *rejecting* the religious, individualizing dimensions of Kierkegaard's work. Sartre's work is also deeply Kierkegaardian: the Sartrean picture of the structure of the self (in *L'Être et Le Néant*) as the opposition of 'facticity and transcendence' is surely a one-dimensional rendition of Anti-Climacus's three-fold set of 'relata' that describes the human situation in terms of opposed capacities (again, more about this in the First Movement). Sartre's ideas of avoiding 'bad faith', acknowledging the 'self' as a condition always in the balance, and, above all, the importance of freedom—all of these notions are first worked out in Kierkegaard's corpus.

This investigation will, on occasion, make use of Heidegger (and other existential philosophers, such as Simone de Beauvoir), but only in terms of their considerable *debt*: and, here again, the concept of 'debt' is one that is important to both Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Much has been written about what these existential thinkers have used, distorted, obscured, and simply pilfered from Kierkegaard's work; unfortunately, some of these accounts use Kierkegaard's work as a mine for helpful nuggets, bits that necessarily anticipate the later greatness of Twentieth Century figures (and beyond). Here I am not interested in either approach (particularly the latter). This project is focused on one Kierkegaardian figure, and one story-line, and so my use of other moments in the history of philosophy is guided by what use I can make of them in telling my Kierkegaardian tale. Plato and Hegel will need to appear, of course, as well as thinkers in the phenomenological and existential tradition: everyone will have their say when they can elaborate on a particular puzzle or theme; however, this work will not be otherwise concerned with what they have done (or failed to do) with their Kierkegaardian inheritance (interesting though such questions always are). In this arena, Heidegger and Sartre are particularly prone to usurp the philosophical limelight; on this occasion they will not.

[4] As Roger Poole puts it, 'Heidegger, struggling with Husserl for the effective leadership of the phenomenological enterprise, remorselessly ransacks Kierkegaard . . . ' (1998: 52).

Nietzsche is indeed a special case in this crowd of historical forebears and descendants. His oeuvre—a canon as brief as Kierkegaard's is vast—bears many curious and uncanny Kierkegaardian resemblances. Nietzsche did not get a chance to read Kierkegaard before his final, debilitating illness (other than bits gleaned from the later work of Bishop Martensen), but he shares Kierkegaard's disgust with 'Christendom', as well as his fascination with the tricks and traps of the human psyche. I will sometimes appeal to a Nietzschean perspective to elaborate on Kierkegaard's interpretive agenda.

Tuning Up

So: consider this a 'musical experiment' in the key of Kierkegaard. No noodling here, or unnecessary jazz riffs; instead, I will develop a melody-narrative focused on one enigmatic figure in one of Kierkegaard's most important works. This narrative has an arc: the conclusions we draw at the end of each section will be revisited and revised as our picture develops. And thus my initial 'expository warning': this is not a book to dip into by way of the index. Conclusions drawn in one section may be denounced in the next; one depiction of how things are will give way to another. This is a plea for the reader's narrative indulgence. Kierkegaard's corpus lends itself to a universe of readings, so count this as one tale among many. I intend to tell you a story—my own, of course—but one that draws directly from the words of Kierkegaard's own voices (and from Kierkegaard himself).

Respectfully,
SH, LTC

House lights down, please. Curtain up.

Acknowledgments

The importance of gratitude is a central issue in Kierkegaard's thinking, and one that is writ large in my own existential concerns. I am hereby delighted to celebrate the mentors and friends who have made this project possible.

Every book has a taproot in the past, and indeed this one began to develop during my undergraduate years at Trinity University; thanks to Lawrence Kimmel and Peter French for encouraging me to find my own way in these multifarious texts. As a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, I had the great good fortune to study with Hubert Dreyfus, whose passion for Heidegger's existential phenomenology has inspired students for decades. My encounter with Heidegger has motivated my thinking about many philosophical debates, and my understanding of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard is informed by the debt that Heidegger clearly owes to each. Thanks to Bert and Geneviève for many years of philosophy and friendship.

This book first took shape during my tenure as NEH Professor of the Humanities at Colgate University; I had the opportunity to complete an initial draft, and—best of all—to try some of it out on my students and colleagues in both the classroom and in a public lecture. The Colgate Philosophy Department is simply wonderful; special thanks to Maudemarie Clark, for her brilliant scholarship and wicked wit. Here in my home department at the College of Charleston, I am grateful to have ongoing, enthusiastic conversations about my work with my colleagues, whose philosophical projects are often somewhat distant from my own.

After several years of thinking and writing about Nietzsche and Heidegger, I returned to some earlier questions about Kierkegaard. I was fortunate to find Robert Perkins, the founding editor of *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, who encouraged me to pursue these issues in print. When I became particularly focused on *Fear and Trembling*, I was delighted to discover not only Sylvia Walsh's Kierkegaard scholarship, but also her careful, elegant translation of *Fear and Trembling*; this book makes use of the Walsh translation. Thanks to

Cambridge University Press for permission to use these passages from *Fear and Trembling* (© 2006). For my forays into the Danish language, I am indebted to the expertise and patience of Margaret Cormack; thanks also to Baroness Louisa Bille-Brahe, whose love of the Danish language has brought a number of Kierkegaard's nineteenth-century idioms to life for me.

Over several years, ideas at work in this book were road-tested across the globe as invited papers. Many thanks to Jay Garfield and the Smith College Philosophy Department; Chen-Kuo Lin and the Philosophy Department of National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan; Kuan-Min Huang and Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan; and Romulus Brâncoveanu and the Philosophy Department at the University of Bucharest, Romania. I have also presented some of this work in conference settings: some of these thoughts appeared in a keynote address at the American Philosophical Association in December, 2006; in a session of the American Academy of Religion in November, 2011; and at Brigham Young University in November, 2013. I was delighted to read from my work at Kierkegaard's 200th Birthday Celebration at the University of Copenhagen in May, 2013. Early, less elaborated versions of some material in Movements One and Four have appeared in *International Kierkegaard Commentary* (vols. 15, 18, and 23); thanks to Mercer University Press. In drawing a comparison with Nietzsche's account of the self, I have made use of ideas first explored in *Nietzsche's Noontide Friend: the Self as Metaphoric Double*; thanks to Penn State Press. Wendell Berry's 'Poem XII' appears in the book with permission, © 2010 Counterpoint Press. Thanks to Princeton University Press for permission to use these translations: *Either/Or 1* & 2 © 1987; *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, © 1990; *Two Ages: the Age of Revolution and the Present Age*, © 1978; *Stages on Life's Way*, © 1988; *The Moment and Late Writings*, © 1998; *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, © 1993; *Without Authority*, © 1997; *Works of Love*, © 1995.

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My grandmother, Mary Margaret Griffis Cordell—who attended the University of California at Berkeley in 1919—was a keen reader of Kierkegaard; my grandfather, D. Glen Cordell, became a Presbyterian pastor later in life, and wrote a seminary thesis on both Kierkegaard and Jonathan Edwards; their interest in this strange Dane is surely now in part my own. Phyllis and Vernon Hough have patiently listened to many iterations of these ideas, and their ample curiosity and fondness for philosophical talk has made this a much better book (and me a far better person). Thanks to them both for a lifetime of love.

Heartfelt, ardent thanks to my fellow philosopher, colleague, and spouse, Christian Coseru. Our ongoing conversation is an enduring pleasure, and I am utterly grateful for his marvelous, witty erudition and generosity of spirit. He wears his many languages and specialties—from phenomenology, to philosophy of mind, to Buddhist epistemology—with loveable ease. Christian is the finest dance-partner on the philosophical floor that anyone could wish for, and the depth of my gratitude to him, and for him, must be indicated with love's profound silence.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

CA	*The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
CI	*The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
CUP	*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments,'* two vols., trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
E/O	*Either/Or*, 1–2, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
EPW	*Early Polemical Writings*, trans. Julia Watkin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
EUD	*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
FT	*Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
JP	*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, (1) 1967; (2) 1970; (3–4) 1975; (5–7) 1978.
PC	*Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
PF	*Philosophical Fragments* and 'Johannes Climacus', trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
PV	*The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
R	*Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
SLW	*Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
SUD	*The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
TA	*Two Ages: the Age of Revolution and the Present Age*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.