

The Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard¹

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A number of commentators have made reference to the doctrine of creation in Kierkegaard's works. Scholars such as Michael Plekon and Kresten Nordentoft point to its relevance while Louis Dupré makes note of Kierkegaard's belief that because God created us, there is a certain »givenness« to human nature that we cannot manipulate.² More extensive treatments are given by Arnold Come and Valter Lindström, both of whom show the pervasiveness of the doctrine of creation in Kierkegaard's writings. While Come argues that Kierkegaard's use of creation has only a positive role in establishing the goodness and uniqueness of each individual, Lindström takes a more »traditional« approach in his attempt to disclaim the arguments of William Anz and others that Kierkegaard was indifferent or antagonistic towards »creation-centered faith.«³ Lindström, like Gregor Malantschuk, emphasizes Kierkegaard's belief that God's creation of the world from nothing establishes God's authority and our consequent »bond service« (*WL* 115; *SVI* 9, 112).⁴

Nevertheless, Come, Lindström and Malantschuk fail to examine, or even notice, how Kierkegaard incorporates the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in his anthropology. Kierkegaard argues that we, unlike the rest of creation, actually have an awareness of God's creation of us from nothing through our moment by moment choices. Each choice or leap we make is an actualization of a possibility and this process »repeats« God's creation of us from the »nothingness« of possibility. So as we engage our own possibilities of choice we sense our own nothingness and contingency. Because we are self-relational creatures whose deepest longing is for eternal blessedness, we use our wills to shield ourselves from this reality instead of yielding our wills to God in unconditional obedience. According to Kierkegaard, however, this trust in our own wills is actually »presumption« [*Formastelse*]

before God which results in the loss of God's loving presence in our lives (WL 115; SV1 9, 112).⁵ Kierkegaard's understanding of the Fall, the stages, and the Paradox is based upon this basic struggle within each individual. This paper, then, will go further than Lindström's claim that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was »one of the most prominent features in [Kierkegaard's] writings,« and demonstrate how the doctrine is actually the »basic ontological position« of his anthropology.⁶

I. A Theoretical Assumption

Before examining the inner logic of our presumption before God, it is important to show the broader theoretical implications of the doctrine of creation in Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard maintains that because God is omnipotent, God did not have to rely on any preexisting plan or materials to create the world like Plato's Demiurge. Furthermore, even though God gives the created world independence, creation does not sustain itself. God is in fact the *continual* creator so that everything would return to nothing apart from God. He states in *Practice in Christianity*, »You...see many forces stirring in nature around you, but the power that supports it all you do not see, you do not see God's omnipotence – and yet it is just as fully certain that he, too, is working, that one single moment without him and then the world is nothing« (PC 155; SV1 12, 145). Kierkegaard will emphasize this point by referring to Acts 17:28 where the apostle Paul states that »we live and move and have our being« in God (EUD 134; SV1 4, 32; CD 63; SV1 10, 67).

Kierkegaard does not believe his emphasis on God's omnipotence compels him to advocate the type of pantheism he sees evident in the romantics that would obviate any sense of human freedom. In his journals, Kierkegaard even states that omnipotence is a necessary precondition for the relative freedom we possess (JP 2, 1251; Pap.VII¹ A 181). The basis for this claim becomes clear by way of contrast with human interaction in which our wills are *relative* to one another. Between two humans, the more power one person exerts over another, the more the latter is dependent for his or her choices upon the former. So the more power an individual exerts the less free the other actually is in *relation* to that individual (WL 270; SV1 9, 258). Kierkegaard states, »This is why one human being cannot make another person wholly free, because the one who has power is himself captive in having it and therefore continually has a wrong relationship to the one whom he wants to make free« (JP 2, 1251; Pap.VII¹ A 181). In contrast,

Kierkegaard claims that the »unique qualification« of omnipotence is that it can »withdraw itself again in a manifestation of omnipotence in such a way that precisely for this reason that which has originated through omnipotence can be independent« (JP 2, 1251; Pap. VII¹ A 181). God's causality is not relative to ours so that God does not override or cancel out our choices nor do our choices impinge upon God.⁷ Kierkegaard expresses this by saying that »Omnipotence is not ensconced in a relationship to an other, for there is no other to which it is comparable.« This is another way of stating that God is transcendent to creation so that God is not bound by space/time relations.⁸ Because God is not a member of creation, His causality and presence in the world is *absolutely* different from humanity so that the way that God creates the world and acts in the world is *sui generis*. Kierkegaard makes this point in *Philosophical Fragments* by stating that we do not have the means to compare God against ourselves. God is not relative to us but *absolutely* different (PF 4; SV1, 212).

As his critique of Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger demonstrates, Kierkegaard already held this dialectical view of God's omnipotence by the time he wrote *Concept of Irony*.⁹ Kierkegaard supports Solger's idea of humanity as a *Nichtigkeit*, a nullity, because Solger realizes the »nothingness of everything« (CI 309; SV1 13, 377). Kierkegaard is quick to say, though, that Solger's understanding of the nothingness of humanity is confused and limited. Because he cannot find any »concreteness« for the infinite or validity for the finite, morality has no value. Kierkegaard writes, »all finitude together with its moral and immoral striving vanishes in the metaphysical contemplation that sees it as nothing« (CI 312-313; SV1 13, 380). As a result, Kierkegaard classifies Solger's treatment of creation as a »pantheistic absorption.«¹⁰ Kierkegaard claims that pantheism can arise in two ways, both of which reveal an un-dialectical understanding of how God's omnipotence makes human freedom possible. Kierkegaard writes, »If I let the human race create God, then there is no conflict between God and man; if I let man disappear in God, then there is no conflict, either« (CI 314; SV1 13, 380). In Kierkegaard's opinion, Solger is guilty of the latter. Because there is no substance to that which is created, there can be no sense of a conflict between God and humanity. In effect, Solger's understanding of the doctrine of creation does not allow him to see how we are »relatively freely acting causes« who can *choose* to disobey God (PF 76; SV1 4, 240).

II. Choice and Nothingness

Kierkegaard's appreciation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* did not end with the theoretical possibility of a dynamic interaction between God and humanity. Kierkegaard emphasizes that in the freedom God's omnipotence provides, we must account for our tacit awareness of God's creation and continual creation of us from nothing.¹¹ Kierkegaard claims that we experience the reality of God's continual positing of us through our own *experience* of decision making and how that dynamic of choice »points to« God (PF 76; SV1 4, 240).¹²

In the »Interlude« of *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard argues that historical knowledge is based upon a willed belief of the individual, which, for Kierkegaard, demonstrates that our wills are always active. As he would later state in *Works of Love*, »The individual first begins his life with 'ergo,' with *belief*. But most people live so negligently that they do not notice at all that in one way or another, every minute they live, they live by virtue of an 'ergo,' of a belief« (WL 230; SV1 9, 221).¹³ Here in the »Interlude,« Kierkegaard equates belief or choice with the transition of »coming into existence« and asks, »How is that changed which comes into existence [*bliver til*], or what is the change...of coming into existence?« Whatever constitutes this change, it is a change »in being and is from not existing to existing« (PF 73; SV1 4, 236-237).¹⁴ He states that while that which comes into existence goes from non-being to being, even in its state of non-being it must be something and answers that it must be a possibility.

Kierkegaard goes on to make a distinction between humanity and the rest of creation. He states that while nature »comes into existence« like us so that it has a history, it is not aware of this history. He writes that, »nature is too abstract to be dialectical...with respect to time,« and that its »imperfection is that it does not have a history in another sense.« Humanity has a sense of the historical because »its own coming into existence« contains »within itself a redoubling, that is a possibility of a coming into existence within its own coming into existence.« Kierkegaard's point is that in our freedom, we make transitions or decisions which are analogous to God's actualization of creation. In other words, God has us »come into existence« in such a way that we have the freedom to make decisions which are the »coming into existence« of a possibility we have presupposed before its actualization. Our »coming into existence« thus has within it a »coming into existence.« Every moment we continue to exist we make choices. Furthermore, these choices involve a sense of our own contingency, that we are

a possibility that God, who »holds all actuality as possibility in his omnipotent hand« has made actual (*M* 271; *SV1* 14, 286).

With every analogy there is obviously a dis-analogy. In this case, our moment by moment decisions involve a relation to time to which God as eternally transcendent is not bound. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does state, »The more special historical coming into existence comes into existence by way of a relatively freely acting cause, which in turn definitely points to an absolutely freely acting cause« (*PF* 75-76; *SV1* 4, 239-240). The question is how we as freely acting causes in our historical knowledge »point to« God as the absolutely freely acting cause.¹⁵ Kierkegaard argues that our own creation of historical knowledge involves belief, and coming to that belief »repeats« the initial possibility of the event, the possibility that God made actual (*PF* 86; *SV1* 4, 249).

Kierkegaard makes this point in his example of the »perceiver« who wants to become aware of the reality of a star. He first claims that the moment we receive impressions we cannot doubt their occurrence, but the very *next* moment, the occurrence as a past event becomes equivocal to the perceiver of the star (*PF* 81; *SV1* 4, 244). He states, »When the perceiver sees a star, the star becomes dubious for him the moment he seeks to become aware that it has come into existence. It is just as if reflection removed the star from his senses« (*PF* 81; *SV1* 4, 245).

To understand how reflection provides the occasion of doubt, it is important to examine Kierkegaard's theory of the relation of consciousness to reflection. In the last section of *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Kierkegaard constructs a transcendental argument for the triadic structure of consciousness. Kierkegaard takes the reality of doubt as given and asks what must be the case for doubt to be possible (*PF* 166; *Pap.* IV B 1, p. 144). He rejects the possibility that doubt comes from outside of consciousness because the same »occasioning phenomenon« could lead to doubt or faith whereas two opposite occasioning phenomena could lead to doubt or faith. So, Kierkegaard concludes, doubt must come from consciousness itself and the relation between reflection and consciousness.

Kierkegaard argues that consciousness is made up of a contradiction between what he calls ideality and reality, or what is believed to be the case and what is the case. An immediate impression, for example, is reality while ideality would be the proposition we create about that occasioning phenomenon. Kierkegaard's way of putting this is that immediacy is reality whereas mediacy is »the word« which cancels immediacy by »giving expression to it« (*PF* 167-168; *Pap.* IV 4 B 1, p. 146). When consciousness

comes to reflect on their relation, when it relates the two and asks whether they correspond, there is the possibility of doubt. Consciousness has the ability to reflect on their relation and ask about the truth of the relation, but in asking that question, consciousness must consider the possibility of »un-truth,« that it is not the case that ideality and reality correspond (*PF* 167; *Pap.* IV 4 B 1, p. 146). In his journals, Kierkegaard makes this point by saying that every possibility entails its »counter possibility« (*JP* 3, 3707; *Pap.* X¹ A 66). Reflection, then, creates a moment in which the relation becomes uncertain, ambivalent, or, as Kierkegaard likes to put it, »dubious.« In the star example, the perceiver creates a moment of reflection in which it is not necessarily the case that a previous sensory impression has happened. In the moment of reflection the possibility that it did occur is necessarily considered alongside its »counter possibility,« that it did not come into existence. To cancel that moment of uncertainty, consciousness must make a resolution that the event did happen. As Kierkegaard states, belief does not give the star »being« but *makes certain* to consciousness that it did in fact exist. Consciousness must then be the »organ for the historical« which in its process of creating historical knowledge cancels the incertitude of its own reflection. Kierkegaard writes that »belief is not a knowledge but an act of freedom, an expression of the will. It believes the coming into existence and has annulled in itself the incertitude that corresponds to the nothingness of that which is not« (*PF* 83; *SV* 1 4, 247).

Because consciousness can make the occurrence of the event a possibility in its own moment of reflection, it realizes that the event did not necessarily have to come into existence. Everything that comes into existence must be contingent and therefore neither self-creating nor self-sustaining. Kierkegaard writes, »The possibility from which emerged the possible that became actual always accompanies that which came into existence and remains with the past, even though centuries lie between. As soon as one who comes later repeats that it has come into existence...he repeats its possibility« (*PF* 86; *SV* 1 4, 249). In the creation of historical knowledge, then, each individual re-creates God's moment by moment creation of the world by first making an event a possibility and then willing, or believing, that event as an actuality that did transpire.¹⁶ In repeating an event's possibility, our willed-creation of historical knowledge »points to« God's creation of the world from the nothingness of possibility.

III. Anxiety and the Fall

In his journals Kierkegaard makes a crucial distinction between the way consciousness relates to itself as the relation between ideality and reality. Consciousness can bring reality into relation with ideality, in which consciousness asks whether or not something has occurred. Or consciousness can relate ideality with reality, and this, according to Kierkegaard, is the ethical in which consciousness is interested in itself (*JP* 1, 891; *Pap.* IV B 13: 18, 19). While the former deliberation of consciousness is backward looking, so to speak, the latter regards the future and the self's quest for a true and meaningful self-identity. In both cases, however, the self or consciousness must still grapple with the nothingness of possibility, which repeats God's continual creation from nothing. An important aspect of that struggle is the self's felt need to cancel the »unrest« over the incertitude of possibility. Kierkegaard calls this unrest, anxiety.

Before examining how Kierkegaard incorporates anxiety in his interpretation of the Fall in *The Concept of Anxiety*, it is helpful to look at an example of this moment of unrest from his journals. Kierkegaard states that when a judge is uncertain about a case, he will, of course, make an investigation. If he is still uncertain, he will dismiss the charge and though nothing seems to have been accomplished, the judge has at least made a resolution that he is uncertain. Kierkegaard writes, »he was uncertain as to how he should judge; now he is no longer uncertain, now his verdict is ready: he judges that he is uncertain. He rests in that, for one cannot rest in uncertainty, but one can rest when one has determined it« (*JP* V 5620; *Pap.* IV B 10). Kierkegaard claims that we are so constituted that we cannot stand a situation of unrest; we must make a decision in order to do away with the restlessness of uncertainty because in that moment when we consider the possibilities of actions, the possibilities as non-being create an »empty space« we want to fill or cancel through a choice (*TDIO* 89; *SV* 1 5 241). Just as nature abhors a vacuum [*horror vacui*], we cancel the terror of the nothingness of possibility by annihilating its uncertainty through actuality. Kierkegaard writes that our experience of anxiety is before this empty space [*det tomme Rum*] so that this emptiness becomes the »impelling« [*frem-skyndende*] power in the life of spirit (*Pap.* VI B 122, 2; *TDIO* 89; *SV* 1 5, 241).¹⁷

The Concept of Anxiety examines this moment in which we consider possibilities for actions. Kierkegaard writes that his psychological deliberation creates a »still-life of sin's possibility« and examines the individual in that moment of »restless repose« [*bevæget Rolighed*] (*CA* 21–22; *SV* 1 4,

294).¹⁸ While in *Philosophical Fragments* and *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Kierkegaard discusses how consciousness as the organ of the historical cancels the uncertainty or un-sureness of being, here in *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard examines the interest or passion generated by consciousness' moment of reflection. Because consciousness is the relation between ideality and reality, consciousness »awakens« to itself when it realizes the collision between the two, when it considers the possibility that the two do not necessarily relate (PF 171; Pap. IV B 1, 149). In that moment of ambivalence consciousness senses the nothingness of possibility, the empty space, and because consciousness cannot tolerate that unrest, it *must* choose.

In *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Kierkegaard states that because consciousness is the relation and so presupposes reflection, it is consciousness that takes interest in the relation. He writes that consciousness is the third to the relation that relates the two sides of the relation (PF 169; Pap. IV B 1, 147-148). In *The Concept of Anxiety* and later in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard expands upon this triadic structure of consciousness but stating that consciousness, or spirit, is a relation that relates to itself (CA 44; SV1 4, 315; SUD 13; SV1 11, 127).¹⁹ Every possibility that consciousness or the self ponders is ultimately a possibility of the self. Because the self generates these possibilities, the self is passionately connected to these possibilities and its freedom is »entangled« by the fact that its choices are always based upon defining itself (CA 49; SV1 4, 320). In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard shows how anxiety is the way in which the self relates to these possibilities of itself. Every possibility and counter-possibility is a possibility of the self to which it is both attracted and repulsed. Those two opposing powers work in tension with each other to create the passion from which a decision or leap that resolves the unrest is made. This is why Kierkegaard writes that anxiety is »a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy« (CA 42; SV1 4, 313).

Kierkegaard describes this moment of uncertainty or anxiety as »freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility« (CA 42; SV1 4, 313). To understand what this means it is first important to appreciate Kierkegaard's distinction between innocence and immediacy. He writes that prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve are qualified »in immediate unity with his natural condition.« This immediacy, however, is not the same as the immediacy Kierkegaard discusses in *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*. Instead Kierkegaard describes this immediacy as ignorance of the knowledge of good and evil, which, according to Kierkegaard, is the knowledge of want, separation, perdition, and death. He writes,

Only of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was man not allowed to eat – lest the knowledge should enter the world and bring grief along with it: the pain of want and the dubious happiness of possession, the terror of separation and the difficulty of separation, the disquietude of deliberation and the worry of deliberation, the distress of choice and the decision of choice, the judgment of the law and the condemnation of the law, the possibility of perdition and the anxiety of perdition, the suffering of death and the expectation of death (*EUD* 125; *SV1* 4, 25).

In their state of innocence, Adam and Eve do not appreciate the import of this *possibility* of separation. They live in harmony with the external world because there is immediate trust in God; they do not *doubt* from where [*hvorfra*] comes the good for them or that that which they receive from God is good (*EUD* 127; *SV1* 4, 26). Kierkegaard writes that there is still anxiety in this state of innocence because the self, even though it is not qualified as spirit, is still generating possibilities for itself in its moment by moment choices. With those possibilities comes a sense of nothingness against which the self becomes anxious. The self »awakens« to itself, in the same sense as consciousness awakens in the collision between ideality and reality, through the prohibition not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For Adam and Eve in their innocence, the prohibition intensifies the ambivalence of the possibilities their freedom creates for it reminds them that they are able to choose or not to choose to eat of the fruit. Because they consider these possibilities themselves, they must generate the moment of temptation in which they are put into a position of unrest because they are attracted and repulsed by both possibilities.

Furthermore, in the unrest or anxiety of this moment of reflection the self is faced with the uncertainty of possibility and the nothingness it entails. Just as the will as the organ of the historical repeats God's making actual that which was previously only a possibility, so here the self is faced again with its own possibility, as that which is created out of nothing. Kierkegaard makes this point by comparing anxiety to the dizziness that occurs when one looks down into a »yawning abyss« (*CA* 61; *SV1* 4, 331).²⁰ This abyss, this nothingness, is in the individual's own eye as he or she beholds the various possibilities of the self so that the individual is projecting his or her own nothingness in possibility. Here in the ethical consideration of defining the self, or in positing the synthesis as Kierkegaard puts it, the self experiences a de-centering moment of nothingness and instead of »looking through« the external to the source of all good things, the self

grabs on to that which immediately presents itself in order to cancel the void or unrest of the nothingness of possibility. As Kierkegaard puts it, the self lays »hold of finiteness« to support itself (*CA* 61; *SV1* 4, 331).²¹ In the moment when the individual senses his or her own nothingness, the possibility of doubt over its own welfare, survival, and happiness becomes a real possibility. In that moment, the self does not continue to trust in God so that it is once again »absorbed in joy and glory,« but in the possibility of perdition and separation in the face of its own nothingness, the self grabs onto to that which immediately presents itself (*EUD* 126; *SV1* 4, 25).²² In that moment consciousness or spirit makes the resolution or qualitative leap to place its life in the things of this world (*M* 248; *SV1* 14, 262). As Kierkegaard puts it in »At a Graveside,« consciousness ennobles the external (*TDIO* 74; *SV1* 5, 229).²³ By trusting in the things of this finite and temporal world instead of »remaining in God,« Adam and Eve rebell against God because they loosened the »innermost« and »divine« joint of faith and trust in God (*UDVS* 269; *SV1* 8, 353). Because it is a willed position in which they demonstrate a lack of trust in God, their sin, along with that of everyone else, is primarily self-willfulness against God (*SUD* 81; *SV1* 11, 193).

Every subsequent choice is still wrestling with the nothingness of possibility. Kierkegaard writes that reflection makes everything conditioned or non-necessary which entails the possibility or nothingness of everything of this world (*JP* 3, 3715; *Pap.* X⁴ A 525). Everything to which we give our trust in this world is ultimately a willed position where we first consider that choice of the self as a possibility. In that moment of deliberation, we sense the nothingness of the possibility which entails our own nothingness. Most likely, according to Kierkegaard, as we are about »to sink« into our »own nothingness,« we maintain by ourselves »the diver's connection with the earthly« (*EUD* 305; *SV1* 5, 88).

IV. Ockham's Razor?

Before showing how Kierkegaard's understanding of humanity's awareness of nothingness informs his theory of the stages and the Paradox, it is important to address Jean-Paul Sartre's development of the nothingness of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*.²⁴ Sartre rejects the link between creation and consciousness and states that the »circle« within consciousness alone creates this sense of nothingness. Sartre argues that the sense of nothingness we feel stems from the derivation of possibilities in consciousness

by our reflective capacities and thus the ability to be, in a modification of Heidegger, a question to ourselves, or *pour-soi*.²⁵ With this question, we put ourselves in a position of »indetermination« which entails the »permanent possibility of non-being.«²⁶ Because each individual is this dynamic between the self and what it is for itself, *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, the nothingness we experience is a product of the »structure« of consciousness.²⁷

If Sartre is right, there would be no need, as Kierkegaard maintains, to incorporate the doctrine of creation to explain the sense of nothingness we experience in the process of decision making. We could apply our own version of »Ockham's razor,« that »plurality should not be assumed without necessity,« and say that because the very structure of self-relationality exhaustively explains the phenomenon, an appeal to the doctrine of creation is superfluous.²⁸

First it must be said that Sartre himself does not argue in an »Ockham's razor« manner; he does not reject the doctrine of creation because the reflective nature of human consciousness fully explains the nothingness we experience. Sartre first rejects the doctrine of creation and the idea of God as omnipotent because such a God would make created beings wholly passive and thus fully absorbed in their Creator.²⁹ Because there cannot be such a God, *it must be the case* that the nothingness we sense is a product of the structure of self-consciousness alone. So Sartre does not prove that the structure of self-consciousness exhaustively explains the phenomena of nothingness but merely claims that it *must* be the case. Moreover, Kierkegaard's dialectical understanding of God's omnipotence and human freedom exposes Sartre's failure to respect God's *absolute* difference from creation. For Sartre divine omnipotence must override our freedom, but Kierkegaard's dialectical understanding of the compatibility between God's omnipotence and human freedom makes it such that this is not necessarily the case. An appeal to the doctrine of creation could still be warranted to explain the phenomenon of emptiness.

Although Kierkegaard never directly addressed this possible critique, it does make us sensitive to the singular importance of the disjunction he poses at the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*. He states that the question of whether we have »established« ourselves determines the dynamics within our self-relationality. He writes that »such a relation, that relates to itself, a self, must either have established itself, or be established by another« (*SUD* 13; *SVI* 11, 127).³⁰ Kierkegaard at first simply states that the latter is the case such that the »human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself to

another« (SUD 13-14; SV1 11, 128).³¹ He then offers a defense of his position, an apologetic if you will, that shows why God's continual creation of us out of nothing is essential for understanding human experience.³²

Kierkegaard writes that if we created our self-relationality, there would only be one form of despair, in despair not to will to be oneself. The ideal itself, however, is completely up to the individual to determine.³³ Kierkegaard claims that this simply cannot be the case because it is not *comprehensive* enough. Such a position does not cover all the possible forms of human movement prevalent in the various forms of despair with the result that it does not provide »the definition« that, »like a net, embraces all forms« (SUD 82; SV1 11, 194).³⁴ Kierkegaard maintains that even if we fully appropriated our nothingness, as Sartre would have us do, and strove with all our will power to live authentically, this would still be a manifestation of despair. The effort would be the product of a contingent, finite being trying to give itself a sense of eternal and infinite significance, which manifests a self trying to live independently from its Creator. According to Kierkegaard, it must be the case, then, that there is not one but two forms of despair, not to will to be oneself *and* »in despair to will to be oneself« (SUD 14; SV1 11, 128).

While both forms of despair reflect our sinfulness before God, the latter especially manifests our rebellion against the reality of our complete dependence upon God as Creator. Kierkegaard writes that because there is this second form of despair that derives from the fact that we have not created ourselves, despair ultimately becomes an issue of not admitting who we are in terms of our relationship with God; it is to be in a state of *presumption* before God. In »The Care of Presumptuousness,« Kierkegaard states that if we in any way act apart from an admission of our dependency upon God for our very existence, we become presumptuous. He writes, »It is first and foremost presumptuousness to be spiritlessly ignorant of how a person needs God's help *at every moment* and that without God he is nothing« (CD 63; SV1 10, 67).³⁵ In contrast, the Christian, or the ideal that Kierkegaard upholds, is »once and for all aware of God« and knows that »to need God is a human being's perfection« (CD 64; SV1 10, 68).

V. Sin and Atonement

For Kierkegaard, the admission of our need for God is pivotal for entering the position of rest and peace for which we long because it is only out of the recognition of our powerlessness that we will yield ourselves to God.

To understand *why* Kierkegaard would say this it is important to see how he correlates creation and soteriology. Kierkegaard maintains that God created us such that we ultimately long for an infinite, eternal good, and God alone is that good. Although Kierkegaard does not advocate passivity or a physical removal from the world, he does show some affinity to Christian mysticism when he states that the »good« is to know God (*UDVS* 107; *SV1* 8, 203; *EUD* 321; *SV1* 5, 102).³⁶ For Kierkegaard, then, there is an essential »correlation« between the dynamic of the human spirit and the relationship of the self to God.³⁷ We are creatures who fundamentally seek meaning and fulfillment, and we are, according to Kierkegaard, to find *evig Salighed* in our relationship to God alone.³⁸

In Kierkegaard's understanding of the »appropriate« relation between God and humanity, the doctrine of creation again proves »foundational« because Kierkegaard says that it is not a relationship of »like to like;« because we are creatures and God is the omnipotent Creator, we cannot relate to God directly but »inversely« (*UDVS* 193; *SV1* 8, 279). For Kierkegaard this means that we are to yield ourselves *voluntarily* to God, to prostrate ourselves in adoration and so »be nothing by worshipping« (*UDVS* 193; *SV1* 8, 279; *SUD* 86; *SV1* 11, 198).³⁹ Kierkegaard calls this submission of our wills to God, the death of the self because the self must relinquish all trust in itself to stave off the nothingness of its existence. Instead of running from this reality, the self embraces it or appropriates the reality of its contingency so that it admits that »a human being is nothing at all« (*TDIO* 83; *SV1* 5, 237). In that moment of decision the person does not choose the things of this world through self-assertion but yields his or her will and chooses intimacy with God (*UDVS* 107, 207; *SV1* 8, 203, 291-292).

In our presumption towards God, however, we trust more in our ability to create and sustain a meaningful life through our own »will-power« instead of finding »life« in God. We are, as Kierkegaard puts it, nothing that has tried to make itself something (*EUD* 309; *SV1* 5, 91). Kierkegaard's description of Jesus Christ as the Absolute Paradox must be seen in the light of this essential »struggle« between God and humanity in order to understand its true soteriological import. According to Kierkegaard, Jesus as the Paradox is the means by which God draws us back into an appropriate God-relationship by confronting us with the necessity of the submission of our wills. This confrontation creates the offense of the Paradox. Kierkegaard himself makes this evident when he states, »There is something else, something even deeper within you, and it is for your own salvation that it is taken away from you, and yet to our own harm there is nothing you clutch

so tightly and nothing that clutches you as tightly...it is one's own will« (CD 84; SV1 10, 87).

Because our nothingness is always presented to us in the possibilities we generate for ourselves, the reality of our need for God versus our »natural« trust in ourselves is the essential, existential struggle raging within the inner being of every individual. Although we are tacitly aware of this reality, we have the capacity through self-deception to hide from this reality. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard explains this dynamic by describing humanity's fall from God into finitude as a combination of weakness and strength. This dialectical understanding of sin becomes clear in the contrast he makes between humanity and the devil. Kierkegaard writes that Satan is completely aware his rebellion against God because he is sheer spirit. There is no finitude to which the devil grabs in order to support himself against God and so serve »as a mitigating excuse« (SUD 42; SV1 11, 154). Humans, on the other hand, rebel against God in defiance but grab onto finitude and temporality in order to run away from this reality. Our weakness is to evade our responsibility by clouding our consciousness from this truth about ourselves, avoiding transparency, so as to make it appear as if we are not in need of God (CD 181; SV1 10, 183; UDVS 23; SV1 8, 133). The most convenient form of this evasion is to do away with the awareness of the self as »the single individual« by focusing instead on externals and the future. It is to go from the consciousness of oneself who stands before God to living one's life in sensate categories where there is not a conscious awareness of oneself as a constant amid the flux of temporality. This is the state of objectivity or what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic stage.

Kierkegaard's stages of existence, then, are not merely a schema to describe the various ways people act in life.⁴⁰ They are the result of a self-relational being struggling to avoid the truth about itself. This struggle is constant while the resolution of the conflict has various results. It can be said, then, that the stages provide the particular manifestations of how the self uses its will to deny its nothingness. So while the root struggle or issue of each stage is the individual's control of his or her will to cancel out the void of existence, the exercise of the will manifests itself in different ways. Those various results are classified into the stages of existence.

Furthermore, because each »progression« to a higher stage is yet another manifestation of our rebellion against God, Kierkegaard's theory of the stages should not be construed as implying any form of Pelagianism, as if the progression of the stages leads to faith.⁴¹ Each progression to a higher stage up to Religiousness A is a movement of the self against the felt failure

of the present stage of existence. The self in its will and imagination re-defines its world and itself in that world so as to reestablish some sense of meaning and significance. So we see that the self is always looking for meaning and fulfillment, but in each stage prior to Religiousness B, the self looks to its own self to create that meaning. Even in religiousness A where the individual incorporates a sense of nothingness and guilt, the person generates the position in the power of the »natural man« as Kierkegaard puts it. An individual in this stage still uses his or her will to create and sustain this position of self-annihilation so that he or she does not admit his or her powerlessness before God. The individual still believes that he or she alone can establish an appropriate relationship to God instead of admitting that even the »most honest striving is nothing« before God (*JFY* 167; *SV1* 12, 439). Because it is a self-willed position in which the individual rejects the help God offers in Jesus Christ, religiousness A manifests itself as a position of rebellion against God.

The Paradox that Jesus Christ presents, in order to be the paradox, relates to this fundamental concern of each individual by showing that all the efforts of the individual in the power of »the natural man« to create and sustain meaning are nothing.⁴² The Paradox is an offense because it ultimately demands the very thing the self has tried to protect all along through the stages, its belief that life is found through the power of self-assertion. So Kierkegaard writes, »Offense ultimately is occasion for an individual in relation to the essential when someone wants to make new for him what he essentially believes he already has« (*CUP* 539; *SV1* 7, 471). The offense, then, is not essentially a cognitive concern but relates primarily to the longing for life or eternal blessedness. As N.H. Sørensen puts it, the offense is not so much against the head as it is against the heart or the inner being.⁴³ The person who will not submit his or her will to God will walk away from the help Jesus offers as the Paradox whereas the person who seeks help in his or her powerlessness to cancel the void and meaninglessness of existence will come to enjoy, according to Kierkegaard, at-onement with God.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my friend and colleague, Tim Dalrymple, for his help in the development of this paper.
2. Michael Plekon, »Prophetic Criticism, Incarnational Optimism: On Recovering the Late Kierkegaard,« *Religion* 13 (1983), pp. 137-153, p. 147; Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1972, pp. 74-77; Louis Dupré, »The Constitution of the Self in Kierkegaard's Philosophy,« *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963), pp. 506-526, p. 506. See also John Elrod, »Human Subjectivity and Divine Creativity in Kierkegaard's Thought,« *Creation and Method: Critical Essays on Christocentric Theology*, ed. Henry Vander Goot, Washington, D.C., University Press of America, 1981, pp. 47-58, p. 47; Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard i Kristen-Livets Historie*, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1991, p. 45; and John Heywood Thomas, *Subjectivity and Paradox*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1957, p. 167.
3. Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, Buffalo, New York, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995; Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, Buffalo, New York, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997; Valter Lindström, »The First Article of the Creed in Kierkegaard's Writings,« *Kierkegaardiana*, 12 (1982), pp. 38-50, p. 39.
4. Lindström, »The First Article of the Creed in Kierkegaard's Writings,« pp. 45-47; Gregor Malantschuk, »Begreberne Immanens og Transcendens hos Søren Kierkegaard,« *Kierkegaardiana* 9 (1974), pp. 104-132, pp. 121-129; Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 312-313.
5. Here in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard uses *Formastelse* whereas in *Christian Discourses* he uses *Formastelighed*. The two words are synonyms for »presumption.« The Hongs differentiate between the two by using »presumption« in *Works of Love* and »Presumptuousness« in *Christian Discourses*.
6. Lindström, »The First Article of the Creed in Kierkegaard's Writings,« p. 42. The idea of a »basic ontological position« comes from Michael Wyschogrod's book *Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence*. I use this expression in order to discredit Calvin O. Schrag's claim that Kierkegaard's »existential ontology« remained implicit and needed Heidegger and Sartre to provide systematic expression. Schrag most likely got this idea from John Wild, who, in *The Challenge of Existentialism*, claims that Kierkegaard's analysis of dread and despair remained at the level of intuition. Though Patricia Huntington refutes this claim in her excellent article »Heidegger's Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited,« she does not show how Kierkegaard's use of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was fundamental to his anthropology. Michael Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Limited, 1954, pp. 24, 82-83; Calvin O. Schrag, *Existence and Freedom*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1961, p. vii; John Wild, *The Challenge of Existentialism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1955, p. 119; Patricia J. Huntington, »Heidegger's Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited: From Ontological Abstraction to Ethical Concretion,« *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, pp: 43-65.
7. Kierkegaard's respect for the Creator/creature distinction here as a way to explain how God and humanity interact shows some affinity to the work of Robert Sokolowski and even Austin Farrer. However, as will be noted, Kierkegaard diverges from these thinkers in his appropriation of the doctrine into the »felt« dynamics of human choice. Robert Sokolowski »Creation and Christian Understanding,« *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn, Notre Dame, Indiana, Notre Dame Press, 1990, pp. 179-192; Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982; Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1967.
8. Malantschuk, »Begreberne Immanens og Transcendens hos Søren Kierkegaard,« pp. 104-105.

9. I say »dialectical« because one phenomenon, human action, requires two different and seemingly contradictory fields of interpretation in order to account fully for that event. Just as both wave and particle theory are required to explain the phenomenon of light comprehensively, so Kierkegaard suggests that human freedom requires a theory of human action together with the doctrine of God's omnipotence. As will be discussed later, this is contrary to Sartre's understanding in which God's omnipotence makes human freedom impossible.
10. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard speaks about the difference between God and humanity being »pantheistically abolished« (SUD 117; SV1 11, 227).
11. Here lies the difference between Kierkegaard and Robert Sokolowski. The latter explicitly states that we do not »feel« the reality of our being created out of nothing whereas Kierkegaard's primary use of the doctrine is in the »felt« dynamics of choice. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, p. 42.
12. John Caputo and James Loder have endeavored to steer Kierkegaard scholarship away from its focus on choice per se and toward the experience of motion within the individual. John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 17; James E. Loder, *Religious Pathology and Christian Faith*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1966, pp. 90-132.
13. In »Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?« C. Stephen Evans defends Kierkegaard's theory of the role of the will in the creation of historical beliefs against Pojman's charge of volitionalism. Although Evans focuses upon the element of »risk« in the creation of beliefs, he does not discuss how Kierkegaard's correlation of our decision making process with God's creation of the world *ex nihilo*. C. Stephen Evans, »Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?«, *Philosophy of Religion* 26 (1989), pp. 173-184.
14. Ronald M. Green is right to show the Kantian influence here, but he does not see that Kierkegaard relates this non-being to *creatio ex nihilo*. It is also the basis for Michael Wyschogrod's comparison of Kierkegaard and Heidegger although he too does not see Kierkegaard's use of *creatio ex nihilo*. Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1992; Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger*.
15. Kierkegaard's statement here could be construed as a rather vague cosmological argument for the existence of God, which would be ironic given that he has denounced any apologetic for God's existence. Yet he merely states that our own decision making »points to« God's causality, not that it proves it.
16. Kierkegaard makes a distinction between »ordinary belief« and Christian belief. Here belief has the historical as its object where Christian belief is focused on finding »life« in Christ (PF 83, 87; SV1 4, 247, 250).
17. Here in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, this *fremskyndende* is meant in a positive light. Kierkegaard also uses the term in *The Concept of Anxiety* to speak of all basis for actions (CA 12; SV1 4, 284).
18. Emphasis added.
19. It is often overlooked that the Danish verb tense is present indicative, which means that self-rationality is not something we need to establish or engage but is something we do already. The same applies to our relationship with God. The verb tense again is present indicative, so it must be the case that we already relate to God in some way, not that we need to begin to relate ourselves to God. Consequently, it is not the absence of a relationship to ourselves and God that is the problem; it is the distortion of each present relationship that is at issue.
20. Although Vincent A. McCarthy makes the connection between possibility and nothingness, my treatment stands in contrast to his because he states that Kierkegaard's analysis of human freedom is not based upon God's being. Vincent A. McCarthy, »Schelling and Kierkegaard on Freedom and Fall,« *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 1985, pp. 89-109. Louis Dupré and George Price have argued as

- well that Kierkegaard was indebted to Schelling for his theory of human freedom. Louis Dupré, »Of Time and Eternity,« *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 1985, pp. 111-131; George Price, *The Narrow Pass*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1963, pp. 75-76.
21. It is not an accident that we grab onto finitude. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard writes that Adam was, like animals are always, »psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition« (CA 42; SV1 4, 313-314). So in the dizziness of freedom, Adam reaches out for support to that which first offers itself, finitude (UDVS 209; SV1 8, 292).
 22. Kierkegaard uses the idea of being »absorbed« in terms of being fully present in the moment (CD 73; SV1 10, 77).
 23. The Hongs translate this sentence as »there is no earnestness unless the external is ennobled in one's consciousness; in this lies the possibility of illusion.« This way of expressing the process of ennobling could imply that it is something that happens in consciousness instead of consciousness as that which does the »ennobling« of the external. It would be better, then, to translate »dog er der ingen Alvor uden Bevidsthedens Forædling af det Udvortes« as »yet there is no earnestness without consciousness' ennobling of the external.«
 24. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York, Pocket Books, 1971, pp. 33-85.
 25. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 29.
 26. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 36-39.
 27. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 56-58.
 28. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 12-13.
 29. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 19-20, 26-27. Here we see the importance of Gabriel Marcel's claim that contemplation, in its »indwelling« of God, is still an activity of the self because the self must actively yield its will in order to experience God's love. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G.S. Fraser, South Bend, Indiana, St. Augustine's Press, 1950, pp. 122, 166; Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being Volume II: Faith and Reality*, trans. G.S. Fraser, South Bend, Indiana, St. Augustine's Press, 2001, pp. 85-86, 136.
 30. Although Kierkegaard puts »to establish [sætte]« in the past tense, the quote from *Practice in Christianity* given at the beginning of this essay shows that he believed in the continual creation of the world out of nothing, that God's establishing of the world is continual.
 31. Here again it must be stressed that we must take verb tense quite seriously here. Kierkegaard does not write that the self *must* relate [skal forholde sig] or should or ought to relate [at Selvet bør forholde sig] to itself and God, but writes here in the present indicative case to indicate that the self is already and always relating to itself and to God. So it is not a question of initiating a relationship to ourselves and God but of coming into a right relationship with ourselves and God.
 32. Kierkegaard does not give an apologetic for God's existence, as Louis Pojman suggests, but a reasoned argument for our fundamental relationship to God. Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*, Alabama, the University of Alabama Press, 1984, pp. 14-16. George Price sees an apologetic for God's existence in Kierkegaard's work as well. Price, *The Narrow Pass*, pp. 27-32.
 33. Obviously in his later work Sartre tries to place some restrictions on what ideals we can uphold for ourselves, but it is still the case that it is humanity itself that chooses the ideal.
 34. Emphasis added.
 35. Emphasis added.
 36. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to expand upon the radical nature of Kierkegaard's claim here. Although it is biblical, this Christian mystical element has been largely ignored by recent Protestant theology and Kierkegaard scholarship. Both Lindström and Malantschuk state that Kierkegaard rejected mysticism of any sort and so speak instead about our God given vocations. Yet Kierkegaard's understanding of »knowing God« has some affinity with Christian mysticism. In

- a sense, Kierkegaard attempts to show how Christian mysticism and Protestant vocationalism are wholly compatible if we have a proper understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Lindström, »The First Article of the Creed in Kierkegaard's Writings,« p. 44; Gregor Malantschuk, »Begrebet det hellige hos Søren Kierkegaard,« *Kierkegaardiana* 10 (1977), pp. 85-94, pp. 87-88.
37. In stating the relationship between God and humanity in this way, Kierkegaard shows that he should be put in relation to Augustine and Pascal in terms of what George Hendry calls the correlation theory between God and humanity. George S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1956, pp. 96-107; James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1967, pp. 158-159.
 38. Louis Mackey correctly identifies the relation between worship and God as the Good. However, he does not see how Kierkegaard uses the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to correlate the two. Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*, Tallahassee, Florida, Florida State University Press, 1986, pp. 23, 33-34.
 39. That Kierkegaard states that this should be a voluntary submission to God shows that our wills are still active. In the activity of willing to yield we receive the power and presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Here we see the importance, as stated earlier, of Gabriel Marcel's claim against Sartre about the active nature of contemplation of God. Other references to adoration and the need to yield ourselves voluntarily to God are: (*FSE* 67; *SV1* 12, 351); (*SUD* 129; *SV1* 11, 238); (*CD* 178-179; *SV1* 10, 181-182); and (*JP* 3, 3755; *Pap.* X³ A 456).
 40. Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, p. 44; Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*, pp. 76-88; Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, trans. Mary Michelsen, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963, p. 19.
 41. Though not intentional, Mark Taylor's and Nordentoft's respective analyses of Kierkegaard's theory of the stages imply Pelagianism. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975; Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*.
 42. Per Lønning, »Kierkegaard's 'Paradox',« *Kierkegaard Symposium*, Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1955, pp. 156-165, p.164.
 43. N.H. Sørensen, »Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox,« *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. H.A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup, New York, Harper, 1962, pp. 207-219, p. 207.