

# Kierkegaard's Inverse Dialectic

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Distinctive to Kierkegaard's thought is a form of dialectic which he called "inverse dialectic" (*omvendt Dialektik*) or "the dialectic of inversion" (*Omvendthedens Dialektik*).<sup>1</sup> In *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* Kierkegaard interpreted both Religiousness A and B in terms of the general formula for this dialectic, contrasting them to the aesthetic and the "directness" (*Lige-fremhed*) which characterizes that sphere.<sup>2</sup> In later writings Kierkegaard associated inverse dialectic specifically with Christianity (*det Christelige*), while continuing to acknowledge a certain amount of analogy to the Christian dialectic in other religious forms.<sup>3</sup> Inverse dialectic thus played a crucial role in Kierkegaard's effort to delineate the various stages of existence and to determine the distinctiveness of Christian existence. It provided a form whereby Kierkegaard could indicate both the similarity and the difference, the continuity and the discontinuity between the ethico-religious and the Christian. The intent here is to indicate the structure and function of this form of dialectic in Kierkegaard's thought as it emerges in his understanding of dialectic, as it appears in his writings, and as it applies to the relation between ethico-religious and Christian existence.

## I.

It is widely recognized that Kierkegaard distinguished existential or qualitative dialectic from logical and quantitative dialectic and that he emphasized the

1 *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, ed. by P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, vols. I–XI (København: Gyldendal, 1909–48); vols. XII–XVI, ed. by Niels Thulstrup (København: Gyldendal, 1969–78), VIII 1 A 84, VIII 1 A 492, X 2 A 549, X 4 A 456. See also X 2 A 560, X 2 A 609, X 3 A 302, X 3 A 482, X 3 A 783, X 5 A 11. Hereafter cited as *Pap.*

2 *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 3d ed., edited by A. B. Drachman, J. L. Heiberg, and H. O. Lange, 20 vols. (København: Gyldendal, 1962–64), 10: 120. Hereafter cited as *S. V.*

3 *Pap.* X 5 A 11, X 5 A 39.

former in his thought. Existential dialectic comes to expression in the awareness of a qualitative contradiction between one's present condition and one's existential *telos* and between the different qualities, capacities, or conditions that may be realized in human existence. The specific terms of qualitative dialectic thus vary, but they may be described in general as being either "positive" or "negative." By "positive" Kierkegaard understood what should be "posited" (*sat*) or actualized in existence. The positive is associated with the infinite and the eternal, along with the concrete qualities which express these in existence. Not everything that is actually posited constitutes the positive. In *Sydommen til Døden*, for example sin is viewed as a "position," meaning that it is not a given or constitutional condition in humanity, but something posited by human action.<sup>4</sup> While sin is not a "negation," indicating some lack of being, limitation, or definity in humanity, it is an act which should be "negated" by being overcome in existence.

Generally in a dialectical process one negates one thing in order to posit and affirm something else. In *Om Begrebet Ironi* Kierkegaard accepts Schleiermacher's contention that Socrates was the "founder of dialectic" (*Stifter af Dialectiken*), but he qualifies this claim by insisting that Socrates introduced only "negative dialectic" (*negative Dialectik*) in the form of irony.<sup>5</sup> Defining irony as "infinite absolute negativity" (*uendelige absolute Negativitet*), Kierkegaard shows in his dissertation that Socrates' irony was no mere rhetorical device, but constituted his essential standpoint toward existence.<sup>6</sup> Through irony Socrates was able to emancipate himself from the state or the established order of his time, but he was unable to posit anything by his negation. He possessed the beginning of infinite knowledge, but only in the form of possibility and as a limit. That is, he knew *that* the eternal is, but not *what* it is.<sup>7</sup> The positive was constantly insinuated through his negativity, but it was continually restrained so as to remain wholly abstract, never receiving determinate form or becoming concrete.

Thus Kierkegaard concludes that Socrates possessed "the idea of dialectic" (*Dialectikens Idee*) – the recognition that it involves both the negative and the positive – but not "the dialectic of the Idea" (*Ideens Dialectik*) – a

4 S. V. 15: 148.

5 S. V. 1: 202, 186.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 274, 276.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

conception of the eternal in its positivity as well as in its negativity.<sup>8</sup> Drawing support for his interpretation from Hegel, Kierkegaard claims that when Hegel called Socrates “the founder of morality” (*Stifter af Moralens*), this did not signify any positivity in Socrates.<sup>9</sup> Inasmuch as Socrates’ moralizing was only an individual activity and was essentially negative in character, emancipating the individual from the determinate, Kierkegaard thinks it belonged under Hegel’s category of *Moralität*, not of *Sittlichkeit*, the higher ethic wherein the individual is positively free.<sup>10</sup> The latter constitutes what Kierkegaard, in agreement with Hegel, calls “the deeper positivity” (*den dybere Positivitet*), a positive state in which the individual is not merely freed from the finite, but freed in such a way that he or she is consciously and freely able to affirm.<sup>11</sup> In Kierkegaard’s opinion, Socrates never achieved this deeper positivity. It was Plato who gave Socrates “the Idea” (*Ideen*), thereby transforming his irony into a negative power in service to the positive and investing his thought with positive content.<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard accuses Hegel of gravitating toward a Platonic conception of Socrates through his claim that Socrates *arrived at* the Idea of the good in the form of the law. What Hegel failed to see, according to Kierkegaard, was that Socrates’ whole life was engaged in *coming to* the good, that the irony by which he negated the finite so as to arrive at the good was not a “mastered moment” (*behersket Moment*), but a continuous, life-long activity, the *telos* and significance of his existence.<sup>13</sup>

Although Kierkegaard did not think that irony was ever a “mastered moment” in the life of Socrates, he did believe that it should be mastered, that only then does irony acquire its “proper significance and true validity” (*rette Betydning og sande Gyldighed*) and the life of the individual become “correctly oriented” (*rigtig stillet*).<sup>14</sup> “Irony,” he says, “is like the negative way, not the truth but the way” (*Ironien er som det Negative Veien; ikke Sandheden, men Veien*).<sup>15</sup> As Kierkegaard developed his theory of existential dialectic in the stages of life, therefore, he envisioned a progressive, successive

8 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 163.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

movement out of the aesthetic through the negative, via irony, to the deeper positivity of the ethical, where one affirms one's existence in its eternal validity and seeks to actualize the eternal in one's life.

In respect to the form and direction of this movement, Kierkegaard's view may be said to resemble that of Hegel. But Kierkegaard strongly disagreed with Hegel regarding the necessity of existential movement and regarding the way in which the deeper or higher positivity is brought about. As Kierkegaard rightly notes in *Begrebet Angest*, for Hegel negation is "the motive power which brings movement into everything" (*den fremskyndende Magt, der bringer Bevægelse i Alt*), both in logic and in existence.<sup>16</sup> Earlier, in *Om Begrebet Ironi*, Kierkegaard admitted that in the sphere of reflection it is true that every thesis passes over into its opposite, but he maintained that in existence the process of reflection is often stopped in course by the particular subject, who may never make the next movement.<sup>17</sup> Nothing happens in existence by necessity. Moreover, in *Begrebet Angest* Kierkegaard denies that any real movement takes place in logic, for everything logical simply *is*. The activity of becoming obtains only in existence. Logic contains at best only "immanent movement" (*immanent Bevægelse*), which in a deeper sense is really no movement, since, according to Kierkegaard's conception of logic, it remains within the category of thought, and the negative becomes a "vanishing factor" (*det Forsvindende*), i.e., it is annulled in the affirmation of a higher positive.<sup>18</sup> Thus Kierkegaard denies that anything happens (*skeer*) or is posited (*sat*) in logic or in reality by negation. (The ironist, one may recall, "does not have the new within his power" (*Ironikereren ikke har det Nye i sin Magt*), but possesses it only in the form of possibility.)<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard charges that Hegel, by erroneously regarding the negative as the producer of the higher positive, makes the negative a "counterposition" (*Contra-Position*).<sup>20</sup> This relativizes the opposition between the terms of dialectic, whereas, in Kierkegaard's view, it should be uncompromisingly maintained.

16 S. V. 6: 111.

17 S. V. 1: 231.

18 S. V. 6: 112.

19 S. V. 1: 277.

20 S. V. 6: 112.

## II.

Inverse dialectic appears in Kierkegaard's thought as the form taken by existential dialectic in the sphere of the ethical (understood broadly as encompassing the ethico-religious and the Christian modes of existence). Here the expression of the negative is neither an infinite activity, as in Socrates, nor a moment of passage, void of positivity and followed by the positive, as in Kierkegaard's view of the movement from the aesthetic to the ethical. Rather, in the ethical sphere the negative is a constant and indirectly positive factor. The positive does not appear directly as the positive but is viewed as being *in* or recognized *by* the negative. A positive relation to the eternal is expressed and known through negative or converse forms. The positive is neither immediately present in the negative nor contained in it implicitly, as in Hegel's view. The negative is a sign, not a producer, of the positive. It constitutes the medium through which the eternal is affirmed as a *telos* or experienced in human existence.

The designation "inverse dialectic" for this form of dialectic appears only in Kierkegaard's journals, although in *Tvende ethisk-religieuse Smaa-Afhandlinger* he does refer to existential dialectic as having "direct" and "inverse" scales:

Som der paa et Thermometer er en Plus- og en Minus-Scala, saaledes er der ogsaa i det Dialektiske en ligefrem Scala og en Omvendthedens Scala. Men saaledes omvendt seer man sjeldent eller aldrig det Dialektiske benyttet i Menneskenes Tænkning over det at handle i Livet; man kommer ikke til det egentlige Problem. Menneskene kjende fordetmeste kun det ligefremme Dialektiske.<sup>21</sup>

The formula for inverse dialectic first appears in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, where Johannes Climacus states that in the religious or ethico-religious sphere "the positive is recognized by the negative" (*det Positive er kjendeligt paa det Negative*).<sup>22</sup> Climacus claims that "the religious sphere constantly uses the negative as its essential form" (*det Religiøuse bruger bestandigt det Negative som den væsentlige Form*); "the negative does not appear once for all, and then the positive" (*Det Negative er ikke eengang for*

21 S. V. 15: 28.

22 S. V. 10: 120, 205, 206.

*alle og saa det Positive*); rather, “the positive is constantly in the negative” (*det Positive er bestandigt i det Negative*).<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, Climacus views religious pathos as coming to expression in ethico-religious subjectivity or Religiousness A through the negative forms of resignation, suffering, and the consciousness of guilt. While the ideal task in life is to affirm both the finite and the infinite simultaneously, each with the appropriate passion, the religious individual seeks first to establish an absolute relation to the eternal through a renunciation of the finite (e.g., selfishness and worldliness), or what Climacus calls “dying away from immediacy” (*Afdøen fra Umiddelbarheden*).<sup>24</sup> Suffering becomes the essential expression of pathos in this attempt inasmuch as one is continually faced with the task of resignation. For as soon as one has succeeded in renouncing one’s selfish attachment to relative or worldly ends, the process must be repeated; it is as though one gets no further along by one’s effort. Suffering thus expresses the religious individual’s sense of failure in bringing his or her existence into conformity with the eternal, as well as in finding a satisfactory external expression for the relationship to it. This consciousness of impotence culminates in “self-annihilation” (*Selvtilintetgjørelsen*), or the attempt, as it were, to put oneself out of the recognition that one is nothing before God – that one can do absolutely nothing of oneself to positively effect one’s own self-transformation.<sup>25</sup> The consciousness of guilt becomes the decisive expression for such a relation to the eternal, manifesting that the relation takes the form of a misrelation. That is, in the consciousness of guilt one recognizes that one is not related to the eternal in such a way as to be close to it, but as remote as possible from it.

This sense of failure, impotence, and distance is intensified and qualified in Religiousness B through the consciousness of sin and the possibility of offense. Climacus points out that the difficulty for the religious individual lies not so much in the constant failure to combine the absolute and the finite, but in annulling the illusion that he or she *can* do it.<sup>26</sup> So long as one assumes an immanent relation to the eternal this illusion is not absolutely dispelled. In Religiousness B one encounters the eternal as a reality outside

23 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

the self, no longer as a potentiality within oneself. This creates the possibility of offense inasmuch as it contradicts one's understanding of both the eternal and one's essential relation to it. In the consciousness of sin one recognizes an absolute breach between oneself and the eternal, signifying that one's relation to the eternal is informed by a radical misrelation.

As inverse dialectic applies in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, therefore, the negative signifies a relation to the eternal, but in negative form. One experiences eternal blessedness by way of anticipation, holding on to it in Religiousness A via an assumed immanence of the eternal and becoming eternal in Religiousness B via a relationship to the deity in time. In both Religiousness A and B the relation to the eternal underlies or sustains the misrelation to it, but there is little development in this work of the positive aspects. Although Climacus characterizes Religiousness B as "paradoxical religiousness," its paradoxicality has to do with the fact that one is related to the eternal in time, not with an inverse relation between the positive and the negative.

In his later work and journals Kierkegaard developed a more paradoxical conceptions of inverse dialectic and applied it specifically, though not exclusively, to Christianity. In his journal Kierkegaard states that "the formula for the Christian is: the Christian is always the positive, which is recognized by the negative" (*Formelen for det Christelige [er]: det Christelige er altid det Positive, der er kjendeligt paa det Negative*).<sup>27</sup> In another entry the formula is given as being "to relate oneself to a Higher so that the relation becomes suffering" (*at forholde sig til et Høiere saaledes at Forholdet bliver Lidelse*), followed by the recognition that non-Christians may also sustain such a relation:

Enhver derfor, der forholder sig til eet eller andet Høiere (selv om dette ikke er Christendommen) saaledes, at han lider derfor, han har en Analogie til det Christelige; men Christendommen er det naturligviis ikke, thi til Christendommen fordres, at det Høiere, for hvilket man lider, er Christendommen.<sup>28</sup>

A broad association of inverse dialectic seems also to apply in *Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand* (in *En Leiligheds-Tale*) – composed in an ethical

27 *Pap. X 4 A 456.*

28 *Pap. X 5 A 11.*

mode which does not distinguish between the ethico-religious and the Christian – where “the individual” (*den Enkelte*) is characterized as a person whose vision has been formed so as “to look upon everything as inverted” (*at betragte Alt omvendt*).<sup>29</sup> In *Christelige Taler* one finds him saying virtually the same thing in a specifically Christian context: “Eternity knows only one method: to look at everything as inverted” (*Evigheden kjender kun een Fremgangsmaade: at betragte Alt omvendt*).<sup>30</sup>

In this inverse perspective Christianity's understanding of what constitutes the positive and the negative is seen to be diametrically opposite to that of the immediate (natural, merely human, pagan, worldly) understanding. What “the world” regards as positive, the Christian views as really negative, and what appears as negative to others is indirectly positive for the Christian.<sup>31</sup> It is through the latter sort of “negative” that the positive Christian characteristics are recognized and expressed. Kierkegaard devotes a number of discourses specifically to the elucidation of this aspect of inverse dialectic, contrasting the Christian and worldly conceptions of poverty and wealth, lowliness and highness, weakness and strength, loss and gain, misfortune and good fortune.<sup>32</sup> The Christian is called upon to exercise “double awareness” (*Dobbelt-Tanke*) and “double vision” (*Dobbeltsynet*), seeing exaltation in lowliness, strength in weakness, etc.<sup>33</sup>

This has the effect of qualifying the process of reduplication (*Fordoblelse*) in Christianity. In general, reduplication means to exist in what one thinks, i.e., to express the content of one's understanding in one's actions, so as to realize a fusion of thought and being in existence, not merely conceptually or abstractly, but actually.<sup>34</sup> Reduplication of the Christian qualities and conditions takes the form of an inverse dialectical movement in which one literally “works against oneself” at the same time one works to actualize a positive condition in one's life:

Enhver Stræben, der i at arbeide ikke anvender  $1/4 \ 1/3 \ 2/3$  (o: s: v:) af sin Kraft paa systematisk at modarbeide sig selv er væsentlig verdslig Stræben, i ethvert Fald ubetinget ikke reformatorisk.

29 *S. V.* 11: 123.

30 *S. V.* 13: 145.

31 *S. V.* 17: 131–132.

32 *S. V.* 13: 20–152.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 55. See also *S. V.* 16: 188; *S. V.* 17: 133.

34 *Pap.* IX A 207.



Det (i) at arbejde (tillige) at modarbejde sig er Reduplicationen, er ligesom det Tryk paa Ploven, som bestemmer Furens Dybde, medens en Stræben, der ikke i at arbejde (tillige) modarbejder sig selv blot er en Glattenover . . . Det er atter her Forskjellen mellem det Lige fremme og det Omvendte, hvilket er det Dialektiske. Lige frem at arbejde eller stræbe er at arbejde og stræbe. Omvendt er det: i at arbejde tillige at modarbejde sig selv.<sup>35</sup>

Thus in Christianity one does not strive directly to realize the eternal, but indirectly and inversely, striving in such a manner that Christian exaltation, for example, is gained by becoming lowly in the eyes of the world. Humanly understood, Christian striving seems to produce the opposite of the effect or condition desired. But Christianly understood, to work against oneself means to work against one's goal only in the sense that one goes about attaining and expressing it in an opposite manner than the world would recommend or follow. A corollary of this is that one brings upon oneself opposition from the world as one succeeds in actualizing the Christian qualities in this indirect and inverse manner. Thus the more one becomes a Christian, the worse it will go for one in the world, and the less one will appear in the eyes of the world to be achieving or embodying that for which one strives.

Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian existence is almost never simple or direct but complex, indirect, inverse, and dialectical, incorporating both positive and negative determinants which are related in a complementary manner. In its positive definition Christian existence is principally characterized by the consciousness of forgiveness, new life and hope, faith, love, joy, and consolation. But these are always experienced and recognized through negative determinants – the possibility of offense, the consciousness of sin, self-renunciation or dying away from the world, and suffering. Kierkegaard's main critique of Christendom was that it had collapsed the dialectic of Christianity, viewing Christian existence directly and superficially as the positive while virtually eliminating the negative factors that are essential in becoming a Christian. Consequently he sought to reintroduce the negative determinants or "subordinate clauses" (*Undersætningen*) through which the

35 *Pap.* X 2 A 560. See also X 3 A 28; *S.V.* 18: 67, note 1; *S.V.* 17: 99–100, where Kierkegaard characterizes Christ as working against himself and indicates that this is also the way of the Christian; and *S.V.* 12: 26–27, where Christian reduplication is associated with self-renunciation.

positive characteristics of Christian existence must be seen and expressed.<sup>36</sup> These can be considered here only in the barest outline, to illustrate their inverse dialectical significance in Kierkegaard's later writings.

1. *The Possibility of Offense*. Ultimately Kierkegaard views Christianity as being entirely positive, offering love and forgiveness to humanity; but in its "first form," or the form in which Christianity is first encountered in existence, it presents the possibility of offense, threatening to drive people away by the absolute, contradictory, and heterogeneous nature of Christ and Christian existence.

Christ presents the possibility of offense in basically two ways, by constituting a "sign of contradiction" (*Modsigelsens Tegn*) through the composite and qualitatively contradictory make-up of his being and by colliding with the established order of his time.<sup>37</sup> The latter was an accidental, vanishing form of offense, existing only for his contemporaries, though it receives a kind of vicarious continuation among his followers any time they resist the established order's tendency toward self-deification and its insistence upon external conformity to its laws. The former possibility of offense in relation to Christ is essential, requiring that one sense that Christ is not what he immediately appears to be, a lowly man, but qualitatively the inverse, the exalted deity. Neither lowliness nor loftiness in itself is offensive. Christ raises the possibility of offense only by the fact that his lowliness is inversely a sign of loftiness.

The Christian life also poses the possibility of offense, both to the Christian striver and to others. The remedy that Christ prescribes as salvation from offense constitutes the very thing which occasions the possibility of offense. For Christ's help appears as affliction, his relief as a burden.<sup>38</sup> One could perhaps understand life going badly for the offended person, but the dialectic of offense in Christianity is such that it is the believer for whom things go badly. Thus all the proper relationships and conditions are inverted.<sup>39</sup> The believer's understanding is brought to a standstill in that he or she cannot understand the inverseness of Christian existence, the why and wherefore of the requirements in relation to the benefits, for there seem to be no "where-

36 *S. V.* 17: 68.

37 *S. V.* 16: 86–87, 122.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

fore" and no benefits.<sup>40</sup> Just this stage of puzzlement is necessary before a person can be helped by Christ in the manner in which he offers help. Only when one is willing to accept Christianity on any terms, no matter if it is a help or a torment, does one properly attach oneself to Christ and perceive the benefits of the Christian life.<sup>41</sup>

Faith in this context means, on the one hand, to believe in possibility, and, on the other hand, to let go of probability. Defined ideally, faith is the opposite of despair and sin, constituting a self in which these conditions have been eradicated.<sup>42</sup> But in existence faith always assumes a dialectical character, including in its definition the element of negativity in the form of an antithesis to human understanding. Faith comes to expression in the will to believe. But what one is asked to believe is that with God all things are possible, and more specifically that forgiveness is possible, precisely at the moment when one is brought to the utmost extremity where, humanly speaking, no possibility exists.<sup>43</sup> In one sense, then, faith is the inverse of human understanding and expectation, but it also incorporates that understanding as a dialectical factor in itself. That is, faith is not merely to believe against the understanding. It is to fight for possibility, to have the will to procure possibility or the will to believe, even though salvation seems impossible.<sup>44</sup> One does not believe rightly or have a grasp of what is implied in a belief in possibility unless a sense of the impossibility of possibility is contained in that belief. Faith arises out of the tension of this dialectical moment and is maintained in the "double vision" (*Dobbelt-Syn*) of the content of faith as being, on the one hand, the negative absurd for one's own reason and, on the other hand, the positive and true source of eternal blessedness.<sup>45</sup>

Inasmuch as becoming a Christian is to enter a way of life which may bring hardship and defeat just as much as victory and success, one must be prepared for either, letting go one's human expectation of directly positive benefits to accrue from the Christian life in acceptance of whatever comes. In fact, the probability that holds in relation to Christian faith is that one will be defeated by the world. If after encountering the possibilities of offense a

40 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

42 *S. V.* 15: 136.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Pap. X 2 A* 592.

person still desires to come to Christ and to be helped by him in the manner in which his help is offered, then he or she will find the consolation, joy, and benefits of the Christian life. The possibility of offense assures, however, that these positive aspects of Christianity are not understood as the world understands them and that it is only after the human understanding has been confounded by the inverseness of Christ and Christian existence that the positive appears indirectly in the negative. The possibility of offense thus plays an indirectly positive role in bringing one to faith and remains a constant factor in it. Only by facing and overcoming the possibility of offense throughout life does one exist in faith.

2. *The Consciousness of Sin.* The consciousness of sin, like the possibility of offense, is dialectical in nature. It may function in either a negative or an indirectly positive capacity, leading one away from faith in the continuation and potentiation of sin or figuring importantly in its forgiveness and annihilation. As described in *Sygdommen til Døden*, the consciousness of sin signifies positively that one exists before God or with a conception of God, which serves as the measure of one's projected selfhood.<sup>46</sup> The effect of his awareness, however, is seen to be the establishment of a sense of distance from God, as in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*. The insight to be gained from one's relation to God is not of one's relative likeness to God, but conversely of one's unlikeness to deity. Sin posits an infinite qualitative difference between humanity and God. The consciousness of sin is the consciousness of that difference.

In *Christelige Taler*, however, Kierkegaard introduces a form of "inverse comparison" (*omvendte Sammenligning*) which significantly qualifies the way in which this sense of distance and difference from God is understood in Christianity. Whereas in "direct comparison" (*ligefremme Sammenligning*) "likeness is the point of departure for determining difference" (*Ligheden er Udgangspunktet for Forskjelligheden*), in inverse comparison "everything is inverted" (*Alt er vendt om*) so that "difference is the point of departure for determining likeness" (*Forskjelligheden er Udgangspunktet for Ligheden*).<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, in Kierkegaard's Communion discourses the Christian's sense of distance and difference from God is seen paradoxically as a sign of closeness and likeness. This inversion occurs in the transformation of the consciousness

46 S. V. 15: 133.

47 S. V. 13: 139.

of sin into a contrite consciousness or “anguished conscience” (*ængstende Samvittighed*). In this form the consciousness of sin expresses not merely an acute sense of separation from God but also sorrow over the fact of that separation.<sup>48</sup> The expression of negative pathos in the forms of repentance and confession is, in Kierkegaard’s view, a prerequisite for the forgiveness of sin. Penitence or sorrow over sin is the demand of the gospel; forgiveness is the promise of the gospel.<sup>49</sup> The consciousness of sin does not in itself bring about forgiveness, but is characterized rather by a sense of one’s inability to do anything to attain forgiveness. Corresponding to the realization that one can do “less than nothing” (*mindre end intet*) as regards one’s redemption, however, is the positive assurance that Christ has done everything to secure it.<sup>50</sup> The admission of impotence is a sign that one loves Christ much.<sup>51</sup>

The appropriate posture of penitence is that of a contrite heart that condemns itself, yet it is precisely in such a posture that one most resembles God. For the greatness of humanity is manifested in the greatness of its heart, which consists in being a contrite heart that condemns itself rather than one which elevates itself in direct comparison with God, or which measures the greatness of God on a scale with a positive view of itself.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in recognizing how far away from God one stands and in being humbled by this recognition, one comes near to God.<sup>53</sup> As examples of this paradoxical posture of faith Kierkegaard points particularly to the publican (Luke 18: 13) and the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7: 4).<sup>54</sup> In another discourse he puts forth the latter as the “pattern of piety” (*Forbillede i Henseende til Fromhed*) in her expression of absolute sorrow over her sin.<sup>55</sup>

3. *Self-renunciation and Dying Away from the World.* Kierkegaard views Christian love as coming to expression in self-renunciation, and new life and hope as issuing from dying away from the world. Contrasting Christian love to immediate forms of love, Kierkegaard shows in *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* that Christian love is self-renouncing love, or love in which one renounces

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 251.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

51 *S. V.* 14: 195.

52 *S. V.* 13: 275.

53 *S. V.* 14: 187. See also *S. V.* 13: 275.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 193.

55 *S. V.* 17: 13.

selfishness in love for one's neighbor.<sup>56</sup> Self-renunciation does not preclude the expression of proper self-love or the forming of special relationships, but it does require that one allows one's God-relation to penetrate and become the middle term in every love relation. The true conception of what it means to love another human being is to help that person to love God. Since in Kierkegaard's view "love is God" (*Kjerligheden er Gud*), this means that the object of every love relationship is love itself rather than either party in the relation.<sup>57</sup> Christianity seeks to transform every love relation into sacrificial love, teaching both the lover and the beloved to help each other to love rather than to seek to be loved through their relation with one another. Christian transformation consists in being made wholly an active power in the service of God or love, of becoming dedicated to the well-being of others rather than to one's own self-elevation and promotion in the world.

This ethic of transformation has the effect of significantly qualifying the Christian dialectic with respect to the natural, pagan, worldly, and merely human. While Christianity stands uncompromisingly opposed to all of these in their unqualified form, the intent of the dialectic points beyond mere differentiation and opposition to an eventual union of the natural and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal, the human and the Christian through the transforming power of self-renouncing love.

On the other hand, serious consequences inevitably result from the attempt to inform one's temporal relationships with Christian love. The Christian faces "double danger" (*Dobbelt-Faren*), or opposition from the world as well as inward spiritual conflict.<sup>58</sup> Thus one finds that Christianity makes life difficult, dangerous, and unhappy. The Christian is able to assert a new vitality over against his or her previous life of selfishness and worldliness and over against both human hope and despair. He or she is able to hold to the possibility of the good, the hope of reconciliation with humanity, and the victory of love in the world. In becoming a new being in Christ, however, one must learn to live in the world as a "deceased person" (*Afdøde*) and voluntarily accept the negative consequences that ensue with the Christian life.<sup>59</sup>

56 S. V. 12: 57, 59.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 186–188.

59 S. V. 17: 116; S. V. 12: 131.

4. *Suffering*. Suffering thus constitutes the crowning mark of Christian existence in inverse form. Suffering is not only a sign that one is related to the eternal, but is the means by which the Christian experiences joy and consolation in the world. One cannot place oneself beyond suffering in life, but one can find internal freedom, victory, and joy within it.<sup>60</sup> These may be gained by patiently accepting suffering, by inverting its meaning so as to take pride in it, and by knowing what suffering signifies – that one has chosen rightly in following Christ, that the burden can be light though the suffering is heavy, that suffering trains for eternity, etc.<sup>61</sup> In *Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand (Lidelsesnes Evangelium)* Kierkegaard finds numerous occasions for joy in the strife of suffering.<sup>62</sup> He continues to sound out “joyful notes” (*Stemninger*) in this strife in the *Christelige Taler*, proclaiming the triumphant edifying, and purifying nature of suffering and expounding the various inversions that characterize Christian suffering – that suffering does not take away hope but recruits it, that the poorer one becomes the richer one makes others and oneself as well, that the weaker one becomes the stronger one becomes, that to lose is to gain, and that misfortune is good fortune.<sup>63</sup> In another discourse from 1849 Kierkegaard envisions the Christian life as not merely combining joy and suffering, but as enabling one to be unconditionally joyful even in times of deepest sorrow.<sup>64</sup>

Just as there is joy to be found in suffering, so also there is consolation for suffering in Christianity, but it is always given in correspondence to the rigorousness of Christianity contained in the requirement that one die away from the world and endure the negative consequences of that act.<sup>65</sup> Then rule becomes: “the greater rigorousness – the more consolation” (*Loven er: jo større Strenghed – jo mere Trøst*).<sup>66</sup> Christian consolation is intended primarily to relieve the anguished conscience over sin; only secondarily does it have to do with the common suffering of life. When consolation is extended for temporal distress it is usually offered for suffering which one endures in the world as a result of one’s God-relation. There is, then, a form of inverse

60 S. V. 11: 110, 284.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 303, 199.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 203–313.

63 S. V. 13: 95–152.

64 S. V. 14: 158–166.

65 *Pap.* X 3 A 166.

66 *Pap.* X 3 A 130. See also X 2 A 185.

dialectic operative in suffering and consolation. One usually turns to Christianity for help in order to bear ordinary suffering in life and then discovers, first, that consolation is not offered for the kind of suffering for which one seeks comfort and relief; and second, that when one acquires a consciousness of sin and seeks Christianity's reassuring word about judgment, one has to suffer because of this comforting word. Thus the opposite of what one would normally expect occurs. The more one succeeds in meeting the requirements of Christianity, the more one has to suffer than be relieved of suffering. Instead of being a comforter, God appears to be a deceiver.<sup>67</sup> Christian consolation thus presents the possibility of offense. In *Christelige Taler* Kierkegaard says:

Thi det Christelige begynder just egentligen der, eller det egentlige Christelige begynder just der, hvor den menneskelige Utaalmodighed, hvad den end havde af virkelig Lidelse at klage over, vilde finde denne uendelig forøget – ved Trøsten, ja – ved Trøsten til at fortvivle over; thi verdsligt er den christelige Trøst langt mere til at fortvivle over end den tungeste jordiske Lidelse og den største timelige Ulykke.<sup>68</sup>

The misery of spiritual suffering over sin, dying away from the world, and the temporal suffering which helps one in the task constitutes a misery which the natural human being would altogether prefer to remain ignorant of and to avoid in life.<sup>69</sup>

If consolation brings suffering, the inversion also obtains that the sufferer is the one most qualified to bring consolation to others. Instead of seeking consolation for oneself, the Christian is admonished to console others in theirs.<sup>70</sup> Yet it is precisely in comforting others that one finds consolation for one's own sorrows. Christ is "absolutely the greatest sufferer of whom it is true ... that he has absolutely no other consolation than this: to console others" (*Den er ubetinget den meest Lidende, om hvem det ... i Sandhed er sandt, at han ubetinget ingen anden Trøst har end den: at trøste Andre*). In him suffering reaches its highest, but also its limit, "where everything is inverted" (*hvor Alt vender sig om*).<sup>71</sup> But the requirement extends to his

67 *Pap.* X 3 A 359.

68 *S. V.* 13: 97.

69 *Pap.* X 3 A 130.

70 *Pap.* X 3 A 131, X 3 A 167, VIII 1 A 493.

71 *S. V.* 14: 177.



followers as well. Consolation consists in consoling rather than in being consoled.

When suffering becomes the sign of a God-relation, it is just then that consolation is most needed. In his journal Kierkegaard says:

“Naar Kjendet paa Guds-Forholdet er Lykke, Medgang, jordisk Velsignelse, i det Høieste med let Islæt af Gjenvordigheder uden hvilke nu engang intet Menneske-Liv er: saa behøves ingen Aand der er Trøsteren.”<sup>72</sup>

But when one must suffer as a result of relating oneself to God, then one needs Christianity's consoling word, which says, “‘think on him,’ for this is precisely what Christ has predicted and what his life expressed” (“*minde ham om,*” *at dette jo er hvad Kristus har forudsagt og hans Liv udtrykt*).<sup>73</sup>

Through its negative determinants Christian existence thus takes on the appearance of being repulsive, unhappy, difficult, dangerous, and painful instead of attractive, pleasant, easy, safe, and carefree. It is a life in which one must constantly work against oneself in the world, losing rather than succeeding, becoming poor rather than rich, giving rather than receiving, loving rather than being loved, consoling rather than being consoled, and accepting new suffering rather than being relieved from the old. Yet from the Christian point of view these negative characteristics and consequences are to be regarded inversely as aids toward willing the good and as a source of strength and deeper insight into the true nature of the eternal, life, love, hope, faith, Christ, and God. The awareness that the negative aspects of Christian existence bear an inverse, paradoxical signification converts the unhappiness, suffering, and rigorousness of life into joy and victory, enabling one to become essentially indifferent to the trials of existence.

### III.

Insofar as both ethico-religious and Christian existence are characterized by inverse dialectic, it provides the form by which the similarity and continuity between these two forms of existence become evident. Both relate to the positive through negative forms; both express a sense of separation and impotence in relation to the eternal; and both involve renunciation and suffering. But Christian existence is also seen by Kierkegaard to be quite different from

<sup>72</sup> *Pap. X 5 A 49.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

the ethico-religious. Inverse dialectic constitutes a means whereby the discontinuity and distinctiveness of Christianity are expressed inasmuch as the ethico-religious does not incorporate the paradoxicality, the intensity, the degree, and the most decisive forms of negative expression found in Christianity.

The distinctiveness of Christian existence is established foremost through the consciousness of sin and the possibility of offense. The consciousness of sin both intensifies religious pathos and introduces a different estimate of the degree of one's breach with the eternal. It incorporates the element of paradoxicality, expressing both separation from the eternal and closeness to it, by taking the form of a contrite consciousness. The possibility of offense is not possible in ethico-religious existence because this form of existence lies within immanence, i.e., it affirms the essential possession of the eternal in the form of potentiality. The possibility of offense, in Kierkegaard's view, results only from an "autopathic collision" (*autopathiske Collision*), or a collision with the eternal outside the self, as occurs in Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

In respect to the other negative determinants of Christianity the uniqueness of Christian existence is not so clearly apparent since the ethico-religious is also characterized by renunciation and suffering. Christian self-renunciation is distinguished from ethico-religious or purely human self-renunciation in two ways, by the purity of motivation with which it is performed and by the courage and willingness with which the act and its consequences are embraced. Like the Christian, the ethico-religious individual is willing to give up selfishness and worldliness for the sake of the good. But as Kierkegaard sees it, the ethico-religious individual expects some positive reward, such as honor and approval, in return for self-sacrifice.<sup>75</sup> The Christian in venturing to express self-renouncing love encounters opposition from the world and receives no reward, or rather, receives as a reward the opposite of what could be expected in the performance of sacrifice – misunderstanding and scorn. Willingness to submit to opposition from the world constitutes the decisive Christian expression of self-renunciation.<sup>76</sup> While the ethico-religious individual may also encounter opposition from the world, a collision is not anticipated, since it is assumed that his or her basic understanding of love is

74 *S. V.* 10: 251.

75 *S. V.* 12: 129, 189.

76 *Ibid.*, pp. 188–189.

essentially held in common with others.<sup>77</sup> The Christian, on the other hand, expresses self-renouncing love with open eyes, fully expecting opposition from the world and freely choosing to submit to it.<sup>78</sup> The Christian not only anticipates collision where the ethico-religious does not; his or her collision is precisely with the purely human conception of love and sacrifice.<sup>79</sup> Kierkegaard regards the ethico-religious as movement “on the way” (*underveis*) toward the expression of true love and sacrifice, but it “gets stuck half way” (*den bliver staaende paa Halvveien*) inasmuch as it remains along with immediacy “within the limits of a finite range of vision” (*indenfor Menneskelighedens Synskreds*).<sup>80</sup> In Christianity self-renunciation and dying away from the world involve not only a dying away from immediacy, but from immanent presuppositions and viewpoints as well. Whereas the ethico-religious culminates in the failure of the individual to achieve inward transformation, in Christianity one is made a new being who manifests transformed vision, vitality, love, and hope.

In *Indøvelse i Christendom* Kierkegaard claims that specifically Christian suffering is a “whole musical tone deeper” (*en heel Tonart dybere*) than common human suffering.<sup>81</sup> Christian suffering is distinguished by a number of factors: by the paradoxical interpretation of suffering noted earlier, by the patience and voluntariness with which suffering is endured, by the fact that it is suffering in likeness to Christ for the sake of the Word, and by its contradictory character and consequences, which present the possibility of offense.<sup>82</sup> Christian suffering is external suffering incurred as a result of coming to Christianity, in contradiction to what one would ordinarily expect. For instead of receiving alleviation from suffering as a result of becoming a Christian, one meets with a seemingly endless perpetuation and increase of it. Ethico-religious suffering, by contrast, is internal suffering which results from the religious individual’s failure to bring his or her existence into conformity with the eternal. The Christian also experiences inward religious suffering, but it derives from the recognition that one is a sinful person who is incorrectly related to God, not merely from the fact one is subject to the

77 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 190.

81 *S. V.* 16: 110.

82 *Ibid.*, pp. 109–116, 167.

conditions of temporality, which make the experience of eternal blessedness continually elusive.

Finally, Christian existence acquires an indirect, paradoxical "inverse recognizability" (*omvendte Kendelighed*) through external suffering which serves to distinguish it from both the genuine form of "hidden inwardness" (*skjulte Inderlighed*) in ethico-religious existence and its distorted form in Christendom.<sup>83</sup> The fact of being a Christian is made evident not by external acts and appearances which bring honor and esteem, but by the opposition one suffers in the world. The more truth there is in one's claim to be a Christian, the more opposition one will encounter, and the truth of one's claim is made recognizable by the fact.<sup>84</sup>

In incorporating an external dimension and determination of Christian existence through self-renunciation and suffering, Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity undergoes significant expansion. V. Lindström has suggested that Kierkegaard moved from an internal to an external determination of the Christian life form, and from a positive to a negative conception of Christian self-renunciation.<sup>85</sup> He thinks Kierkegaard gradually came to associate Christian self-renunciation strictly with suffering, while self-renunciation in the form of disinterested service to the good – initially identified, in *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*, as Christian self-renunciation – became relegated to the level of human self-renunciation. Lindström admits that in *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* Kierkegaard views opposition from the world as an unavoidable consequence of Christian self-renunciation; but he does not recognize that already in this book Kierkegaard views voluntary submission to such opposition as constituting the decisive form of Christian self-renunciation. Referring to the "double-danger" of external as well as internal conflict in Christian existence, Kierkegaard maintains that "as soon as the double-mark is missing the self-renunciation is not Christian self-renunciation" (*saasnart Dobbelt-Mærket mangler, saa er Selv-Fornegtelsen ikke christelig Selvfornegtelse*).<sup>86</sup> Certainly the external constitutes a new element in Kierkegaard's writings

83 *Ibid.*, pp. 199–201.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

85 Valter Lindström, *Efterfølgelsens Teologi hos Søren Kierkegaard* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1956), pp. 122–123, 138, 140–141, 147–152, 161.

86 *S.V.* 12: 189. See also *S.V.* 16: 207, which refers to *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* as having defined Christian self-renunciation decisively in terms of "double danger."

after *Afsluttende videnskabelig Efterskrift*, but, strictly speaking, it does not represent a shift or change in Kierkegaard's point of view. Kierkegaard does not discard the inward definition of a Christian self-renunciation and suffering, but adds the external to the internal, the outward response commensurable with inwardness.<sup>87</sup> In like manner, he does not shift from a positive conception of Christian self-renunciation to a negative one. In the context of inverse dialectic, sacrifice and suffering are indirectly positive as well as negative; and disinterested service to the good is (humanly understood) negative and only indirectly positive.

The notion of inverse dialectic thus provides a form whereby Kierkegaard's understanding of the relation between the positive and the negative and between the ethico-religious and the Christian may be considerably clarified. While Kierkegaard wished to claim a qualitative distinctiveness for Christian existence, he did not regard it as being so unique as to have nothing in common with other forms of religious existence. The fundamental similarity between the ethico-religious and the Christian in Kierkegaard's thought consists in the fact that both relate to the eternal through negative forms. However, Kierkegaard came to view the negative in Christianity as constituting, like Christ, a "sign of contradiction," paradoxically signifying the opposite of what it appears. The negative in Christianity also includes forms and aspects which, in Kierkegaard's opinion, are not present in the ethico-religious. While the positive and negative determinants Kierkegaard associates with Christian existence may be characteristic of it (and this is of course open for debate), they may not be as distinctive to Christianity as Kierkegaard thought. Only a rigorous examination of Kierkegaard's thought in the light of modern studies in the history of religions can determine that.

87 Kierkegaard sometimes refers to Christian self-renunciation in terms of dying away from selfishness and worldliness in disinterested service to the good (see *S.V.* 13: 165, 170–172, 177; *S.V.* 17: 115–116, 120; *Pap.* IX A 283); at other places he defines it in terms of voluntary sacrifice and suffering (see *S.V.* 13: 210–219; *S.V.* 16: 207, 210; *S.V.* 17: 224; *Pap.* X 4 A 553). These are not seen as in any way incompatible or contradictory. One may find Kierkegaard speaking of both forms of self-renunciation in the same book, even within the same part of a book.