

The Perils of Overcoming “Worldliness” in Kierkegaard and Heidegger

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In discussing Søren Kierkegaard’s “retroactive power” (*tilbagevirkende Kraft*) of death,¹ George Connell claims that it “is very like Heidegger’s notion of authenticity and resoluteness in the face of death.”² What Connell has in mind about Kierkegaard’s account is the way in which an individual’s death, rather than simply annihilating this individual’s life, meaningfully impacts this life while it is still being lived. Heidegger, like Kierkegaard before him, provides an anti-Epicurean account in which “you are and death also is.”³

the fact that even everyday Dasein already is *towards* its end – that is to say, is constantly coming to grips with its death . . . shows that this end . . . is not something to which Dasein ultimately comes only in its demise. In Dasein, as being towards its death, its own uttermost “not-yet” has already been included.⁴

Without getting into the still murky issue of Heidegger’s actual debts to Kierkegaard’s writings, it is safe to say that these two have much in common when it comes to the employment of death in their work. Despite this kinship, there have been numerous efforts both from the Kierkegaardian camp and from Heidegger himself to distinguish sharply the one from the other. While Heidegger makes several somewhat condescending comments about Kierkegaard’s endeavors, some observers (both avowed Kierkegaardians, and those just interested in criticizing Heidegger) explain why the Dane would not, or even should

not, be interested in pursuing a Heideggerian project. After a brief description of their largely shared philosophy of death, I would like to consider what I take to be the most significant complaint from each side and suggest a more nuanced understanding of their relationship.

THE EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF DEATH

The story of the similarity between Kierkegaard's death project and the role of death in *Being and Time* is a complicated one with roots going back over two millennia.⁵ But one need not explore all of the details to see that Heidegger shares both particular concepts with Kierkegaard, and also a purpose in overcoming the Epicurean view and encouraging an existence closely intertwined with death.⁶ In Kierkegaardian terms, the goal here is dying to the world as exemplified by Christ, described in the epistles (e.g. Rom. 6:6-8; 2 Cor. 4:10-12, 5:14-19), and passed down, more or (occasionally) less authentically, by a series of Christian thinkers.⁷ It is crucial to realize that Heidegger is involved in developing a secularized version of this Christian sense of dying to the world. Iain Thomson describes death in *Being and Time* as a "movement in which we turn away from the world, recover ourselves, and then turn back to the world, a world we now see anew, with eyes that have been opened."⁸ Following in Paul's footsteps, dying to one's "worldly" ways makes possible a "rebirth" that brings with it a new way of viewing existence.

Hubert L. Dreyfus is surely onto something when, in discussing the Kierkegaardian notion of dying to immediacy, he states, "for Heidegger being-unto-death, then, is dying to *all* immediacy."⁹ Just as Kierkegaard is critical of all ways of relating to oneself that are dictated by human understanding of the world, since they forego or prevent a genuinely faithful relationship with Christ, Heidegger is interested in severing the connections to one's existence that have been unquestioningly received from "the they" in everydayness, because these connections prevent grasping who one "authentically" is.¹⁰ One must die to the distracting ways of existing that one just happens to have "fallen" into and must do so in order to focus upon what is most properly one's own.¹¹ Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger describe the distractions handed down by

the everyday world as “accidental” or “incidental” (Danish: *tilfældige*, German: *zufällige*) in the sense that there is nothing that one can receive from this everydayness that is absolutely essential to one’s existence.¹²

Whereas the world tends to focus on *what* can be accomplished or actualized in a given period of chronological time (which of course can never be guaranteed, rendering all actualization merely accidental), Kierkegaard and Heidegger emphasize that for the kairological moment (Danish: *Øjeblikket*, German: *Augenblick*; both literally mean “the blink of an eye”)¹³ *how* one relates to the possible (regardless of the chronological time available) is what really matters.¹⁴ Both in his own name and under pseudonym, Kierkegaard describes the new sense of time that Christianity introduces as the intersection of eternity with worldly temporality in a “present” moment that reconciles the fallen condition one comes from with the salvation one runs toward. For example, the pseudonym Haufniensis states that “the fullness of time is the moment as the eternal, and yet this eternal is also the future and the past.”¹⁵ To put it another way: in a movement that transcends any common sense of temporality one comes to participate in the past, yet timeless, act of cleansing sacrifice (the crucifixion) and thereby receives another chance for the future.¹⁶ With ever-present anxiety and vigilance one renews or repeats one’s commitment to the divine in repentance of sins and longing for mercy. The moment of life comes to take on an eternal significance by constantly shaking loose from lostness in a highly contingent temporal worldliness.

Despite Heidegger’s apparently dismissive claim that Kierkegaard could not see the “more primordial temporality”¹⁷ that underlies the theological view of the moment in terms of the eternal, the de-theologized account that Heidegger provides shows many signs of benefiting from Kierkegaard’s work on this topic. Heidegger is also interested in something like a lived synthesis of Dasein’s past and future – Dasein is a projecting ahead of itself based on limitations it has fallen (or been thrown) into. In owning up to the possibilities that are available to it given the situation, and responsibly choosing from among them which to pursue (the resolute repeating of inherited or past possibilities into

the future), Dasein pulls itself out of its standard (in the sense of a default-setting) fallenness and takes possession of itself.¹⁸ Among the many such descriptions Heidegger provides, consider the following:

to the anticipation which goes with resoluteness, there belongs a Present in accordance with which a resolution discloses the Situation. In resoluteness, the Present is not only brought back from distraction with the objects of one's closest concern, but it gets held in the future and in having been. That *Present* which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is *authentic* itself, we call the '*moment of vision*.'¹⁹

when its heritage is thus handed down to itself, its 'birth' is *caught up into its existence* in coming back from the possibility of death (the possibility which is not to be outstripped), if only so that this existence may accept the thrownness of its own 'there' in a way which is more free from Illusion.²⁰

Like Kierkegaard, Heidegger is looking for a way out (albeit not necessarily one that is easily maintained) of an unreflective and deficient state that prioritizes contingent worldly accomplishment and the quantifiable temporality that such accomplishment requires. According to their view, anything that is qualified purely by this everyday chronological sense of time is necessarily a distraction aimed at aiding one in trying to flee one's essential responsibility to be oneself (whether before God or not).²¹

It is their shared concern about the chronologically accidental and interest in avoiding it that leads both Kierkegaard and Heidegger to describe this process (of avoiding it) in terms of death. Physical death, while not ultimately what they are focused upon, provides an important "formal indication" of essential features of human existence and a deeper sense of dying.²² For both Kierkegaard and Heidegger there is no other occasion that better demonstrates the contingency of all

attachments to and ways of understanding one's place in the world; the image of death is employed because it is the best way to awaken someone from the complacent slumber of a thoughtless existence (e.g. as a merely cultural Christian, or a "they"-self) that is not essentially and necessarily theirs.²³ That one will die signifies that existence has to be given up one way or another, and realizing this already has a way of weakening the bonds of meaning that are passed down to us merely by existing in the world.²⁴ But what is more, the uncertainty with regard to the when of physical demise suggests a general indefiniteness in existence, particularly in connection with worldly endeavors and understanding.²⁵ Given this structural indefiniteness one need not feel constrained to interpret existence strictly as a function of the specific projects, relationships, and goals that the everyday world recommends. Without such constraints, both Kierkegaard and Heidegger believe that it is possible to appropriate meaning for oneself in the light of one's contingent, and admittedly culturally-textured, situation.

HEIDEGGER'S "ATHEISM" AND THE THEOLOGY OF KIERKEGAARD

Although they have much in common on death-related issues, Heidegger clearly does not share the theological concerns at the heart of Kierkegaard's account of dying to the world. At least during the few years leading up through the writing of *Being and Time*, Heidegger holds that there is a "fundamental atheism indigenous to philosophy."²⁶ This atheism is necessary in order to distinguish philosophy from the ontic science of theology: philosophy is absorbed in ontology, which is an inquiry into Being in general, while theology merely posits some basic regional idea about the nature (or being) of God – or, according to Heidegger, the nature of the Christian connection to God²⁷ – and inquires into matters pertaining to what it posits.²⁸ In order for philosophy to retain its status as the more primordial, general, and pure form of inquiry, it cannot allow itself to be contaminated by theological concerns. Because Heidegger is engaged with fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*, he must maintain a 'methodological atheism' throughout his consideration of death and related issues.²⁹

For Heidegger, Kierkegaard is a theologian because he simply posits humans as derived from the Christian God, and then proceeds to consider the particulars of relating to this God.⁵⁰ He is a great theologian because, unlike so many others, he joins Martin Luther in emphasizing faith alone as the difficult, but proper way of appropriating and existing in this relationship, to the exclusion of a diluted theology that relies on reason to explain away and soften any difficulty.⁵¹ It would be hard to deny the accuracy of Heidegger's assessment of Kierkegaard's theological propensities given that Kierkegaard himself states, "I have never broken with Christianity. . . from the time it was possible to speak of the application of my powers, I had firmly resolved to employ everything to defend it, or in any case to present it in its true form."⁵² But if he is indeed a theologian of some sort, it seems that Kierkegaard's theological treatments of human guilt, anxiety, conscience, and even death cannot provide the primordial ontological understanding of these matters that Heidegger seeks in *Being and Time*. Thus, according to Heidegger, Kierkegaard's works are mostly just interesting ontical analyses that might provide helpful starting points for a more penetrating investigation into what underlies the derivative phenomena of religious experience.⁵³ While Heidegger seems to rely on these starting points quite heavily, particularly on the topic of death, he does apparently remove specific ideas in several of Kierkegaard's works from their theological trappings, and push them further until these ideas become more broadly relevant (i.e. to the non-religious).

For example, consider "At a Graveside," where Kierkegaard demonstrates the importance of thinking about death without explicitly attempting to secure this importance by appealing to very much in the way of theology. Despite its relative silence on the matter, it is not as though God never comes up. Assuming for the moment that Heidegger is in fact indebted to this discourse for its impact on his own views on death,⁵⁴ he would still likely complain that it is not sufficiently free of the theological. It is not just a discussion of God, however, that Heidegger jettisons; ultimately, it seems that even Kierkegaard's least religious discussion of death can only be properly motivated by appealing

to the "infinite significance" of the divine.⁵⁵ Unless one shares Kierkegaard's Christian interests, it will remain unclear why his approach to life through death is preferable to other possible attitudes. In contrast, because Heidegger treats death without such theological commitments, it seems that he needs only appeal to what it is to be Dasein in order to make his account of death compelling.

THE EMPTINESS OF ANTICIPATORY RESOLUTENESS

While Heidegger clearly sees the limitations of Kierkegaard's attempt at a religious-existential philosophy of death, it remains to be seen what Kierkegaard might think of Heidegger's more secular version. Some commentators have wondered whether there is not something about offering an account as general as Heidegger's that Kierkegaard would find particularly problematic.⁵⁶ Kierkegaard has a well-known aversion to any abstract system-building and, although it is debatable whether this is what Heidegger is up to, it could simply be the case that despite Heidegger's condescension there is something about Kierkegaard's formulation of the existential philosophy of death that points to a shortcoming in Heidegger's.

There is no denying, for example, that Heidegger strips away so much content from his consideration of what it is to exist that he cannot even allow himself to speak about humans. The primary point of raising the objection that he is excessively formal and abstract, though, is to suggest that when one detaches from (or dies to) so many of the "everyday" specifics of the world in which we have to live, as Heidegger seems to in his discussion of authenticity and anticipatory resoluteness, it becomes difficult to reconnect to any specifics at all.⁵⁷ Furthermore, his attempt to describe such reconnection is, according to some, so vague that it remains hard to see by what means one can ever come to determine *what* to do when all that has been laid out is about *how* one should do it. Commentators such as Daniel Berthold-Bond and Patricia J. Huntington claim that Kierkegaard would be unsatisfied by the empty formality that Heidegger provides. On their view, Kierkegaard argues that one needs some sense of *what* one ought to do if there is to

be any genuine meaning to one's existence. Bare authenticity does not provide such meaning and neither does Heideggerian openness.

In making a connection between Heidegger's emphasis on formality and his questionable politics, both Berthold-Bond and Huntington debate the value of anticipatory resoluteness. For example, Berthold-Bond states, "it seems that we are thrown back onto a criterion for action and authentic existence which is so formal, abstract, and indefinite that the prospects for non-arbitrary action in the concrete situations we face in the world are quite problematic."³⁸ Huntington, relying on Berthold-Bond, claims that "Heidegger's abstract account of authentic resolve, because empty, provides no material criteria for political action."³⁹ Because Kierkegaard does not go so far out of his way to sever his notion of authentic existence from the aesthetic realm, according to Berthold-Bond, and the ethical, according to Huntington, he has easier access to the sort of normative criteria that might rule out something like membership in the Nazi party. What Berthold-Bond and Huntington apparently want in an account of human existence are "signposts" that motivate or lead one to behave in certain ways rather than others.⁴⁰

On Berthold-Bond's view, Heidegger's notion of the distracting curiosity characteristic of inauthenticity is very much like Kierkegaard's understanding of the aesthetic realm of existence in which one makes no commitment to anything in particular and simply drifts from one amusing diversion to another.⁴¹ While both of them treat this frivolous way of existence with a great deal of suspicion and scorn, Berthold-Bond points out that according to several of Kierkegaard's early pseudonyms, the aesthetic is not to be disregarded in moving to a higher sphere of existence, but transformed and its possibilities understood in a new light. It is from these possibilities, which have been taken over from the aesthetic sphere, that one is able to choose concrete courses of action in an authentic ethical or religious manner. Because Heidegger never offers a similar redemption of curiosity, but rather perseveres in disparaging it, he seems to lose touch with its vast stores of specific possibilities that could be re-appropriated in the formal authentic manner he describes. Thus, Berthold-Bond states, "Kierkegaard's theory of the

sublimation of the aesthetic through authentic repetition presents a way to resolve the abstract and formal character of Heidegger's phenomenology of authentic being."⁴²

There seem to be two problems with Berthold-Bond's account, however. First, when considering Kierkegaard's later more explicitly Christian writings, as I do when demonstrating the similarity between Kierkegaard and Heidegger on dying to the world, it is not at all clear that the sympathetic understanding of the aesthetic that Berthold-Bond relies on is maintained. If there is in fact good reason not to rely too heavily on what certain early pseudonyms have to say when comparing Kierkegaard and Heidegger, then Berthold-Bond's account of what separates the two might be called into question. Second, I believe that Berthold-Bond is less than charitable in his assessment of Heidegger's abstractness due to "dislocation" from concrete possibilities. While Heidegger is surely critical of the attitude of curiosity (which he associates with the "idle talk" of the "they"),⁴⁵ he does not disparage the particular possibilities that are made available in curiosity by one's thrown situation (even if discussing them is not his priority). If anything, Heidegger might be more open to the possibilities of curiosity, if authentically appropriated, than Kierkegaard would be from a more strictly Christian perspective. Berthold-Bond certainly acknowledges that Heidegger means "to allow for a recovery of the world in a transformed way" based on a "criterion for choice [that] can only be made by concrete reference to the past."⁴⁴ Yet for some reason that continues to elude me, he seems to believe that this description of what Heidegger is up to is more abstract and ungrounded than what Kierkegaard supposedly takes from the "aesthetic 'theatre of infinite possibility.'"⁴⁵

Without rejecting Berthold-Bond's account, Huntington tries a slightly different approach. Her argument relies on a purported difference between Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's respective treatments of the social realm and its normativity. Kierkegaard's authentic individual rejects the thoughtless mass known as "the crowd" as a kind of inauthentic community, but does not distance him- or herself from one's essential sociality in itself, or rule out "the possibility of a true community of 'individuals.'"⁴⁶

Such a community would “embody a set of norms without absolutizing” them and “without lapsing into a herd-like communitarianism.”⁴⁷ Heidegger, on the other hand, fails to distinguish “between inauthentic participation in ‘everydayness’ and social life per se,” which makes it possible to see the authentic individual in near complete opposition to “the public world of norms.”⁴⁸ In other words, Heidegger apparently associates social normativity with the everydayness that is to be overcome (so far as possible), and thereby loses touch with such normativity. In the absence of norms that could direct his actions, he seems to advocate an empty and arbitrary “decisionism” that leaves him open to, among other things, “involvement in National Socialism.”⁴⁹

Given that their approaches to offering a Kierkegaardian critique of Heidegger are quite similar, it should come as no surprise that I have roughly the same two problems with Huntington’s account that I had with Berthold-Bond’s. The first is of course the fact that she pays little attention to the specifically Christian ideas in Kierkegaard’s later writings, where one can find important parallels with Heidegger’s version of dying to the world. Without this attention, Huntington’s portrayal of Kierkegaard and sociality fails to take note of his more “community-hostile” views and thereby remains *at least* in tension with his later thought.⁵⁰ Considering that this portrayal is central to her explanation of what Kierkegaard has and Heidegger lacks, such tension renders her entire comparison of the two questionable. But even if this were not the case, I would still suggest that she is less than fair in her description of Heidegger’s “antinormative” and anti-social tendencies.⁵¹ There is no reason to see Heidegger’s emphasis on the formal aspects of individual self-mastery as a rejection of one’s communal and ethical relationships.⁵² In fact, he is quite similar to Kierkegaard in arguing that the individualizing capacity of dying to the world is the prerequisite for the authentic “re-taking” of communal relationships and the normativity that comes with community.⁵³ Although such relationships are derived from, and in some sense secondary to, Heidegger’s “existential ‘solipsism,’” this establishment of order does not distinguish him in any profound way from Kierkegaard.⁵⁴

While I disagree with much of what Berthold-Bond and Huntington have to say, their primary point is not one that I would necessarily dispute. It does indeed seem that Kierkegaard would reject the empty formality and abstractness of Heidegger's notion of anticipatory resoluteness, but on religious – and specifically Christian – grounds rather than on aesthetic or ethical grounds. Although Kierkegaard dramatically emphasizes the more formal *how* aspects of Christian existence, which indeed makes him look very similar to Heidegger, it would not be *Christian* existence without some notion of *what* Christianity is and *what* it demands.⁵⁵ It is precisely such a *what* that provides the sort of content and specific direction to existence that Heidegger's account lacks. Whereas for Kierkegaard dying to the world has a concrete purpose in leading to Christian rebirth, for Heidegger dying to the world leads to an open-ended self-possession that seems like it could manifest itself in a diverse range of concretions that might include apparently contradictory possibilities such as Nazism and pacifism. In fact, it is conceivable that on Heidegger's view one might even find it necessary to switch from one to the other given serious enough oscillations in the situation one encounters. This self-determination of a somewhat tentative content might be the best that one can do in trying to attribute specific meaning to one's existence according to Heidegger, but Kierkegaard would likely see a certain bankruptcy in trying to find meaning in such an arbitrary and potentially transient way. It is only through participation in something eternal – the relationship with the divine – that one can find a more solid sense of meaning and avoid this almost nihilistic bankruptcy.

A MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

With this Kierkegaardian criticism of the sort of dying to the world found in Heidegger, the best shot from each camp has been fired. While Kierkegaard is too ontically narrow for Heidegger, Heidegger is too abstract and arbitrary for Kierkegaard. But is there perhaps another way to understand what seems to be a fundamental disagreement? I believe that the key to such an understanding lies in the peculiar way

that Kierkegaard explains the development of the necessary relationship with the divine.

In a short preface to the pseudonymous *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard, in his role as editor, states that “the requirement should be heard . . . so that I might learn not only to resort to *grace* but to resort to it in relation to the use of *grace*.”⁵⁶ He believes that this requirement, which ought to be associated, at least in part, with the stripping away of one’s worldly meaning in dying to the world, is so difficult that no human can meet it on his or her own.⁵⁷ It is therefore necessary for something beyond human to step in and offer assistance if one is to die to the ways of the world and fill up one’s cleansed and empty existence with divine meaning. As John D. Caputo puts it, one must quit “the illusion that a man can make himself whole by his own powers, then a healing power from without can intervene.”⁵⁸ Humans do not come to God, having earned his mercy; God comes to humans out of compassion for such impotent beings, and offers them the eternal religious meaning – which Kierkegaard sees in participating in Christ’s death – purely by grace. The sacrifice of God’s son is an act of divine mercy, but even our own ability on some level to imitate Christ’s dying to the world is the result of the divine gift of faith – a receptivity that would not be possible without the “Spirit working within us.”

The problem with reliance on divine assistance for the sake of attributing meaning to one’s existence is that one is left with no possibility of meaning if one finds faith to be a nonviable or unappetizing way of life. This view of faith seems to be especially compelling in modernity when the various articles of Christian dogma begin to look more and more foolish under the light of scientific and technological advances. Kierkegaard understands the trends of modernity and argues that increasing doubt with respect to the objective “facts” of Christianity should have little impact on a genuinely striving Christian who cultivates a subjective relationship with Christ.⁵⁹ Heidegger, on the other hand, chooses a different approach to the search for meaning in the modern situation.⁶⁰ Rather than refocusing one’s religious endeavors in dying to the world, he suggests a version of ‘dying to’ that sets

aside the problematic religious issue. Heidegger describes the process of redeeming oneself by stripping away all of the ordinary meaning that comes from simply having fallen into the world, and rebuilding a new meaning by critically taking over what is available in one's thrown state. Thus, as McCarthy points out, Heidegger comes to play the role of a sort of "Pelagius to Kierkegaard's Augustine."⁶¹

In a world in which Christian absolutes no longer seem tenable, however, the meaning that Heidegger gives to himself is not meaning "in the positive Kierkegaardian sense that . . . gives Dasein a self-definition in terms of something specific."⁶² It may be that without these kinds of absolutes, there is necessarily going to be the sort of indeterminacy, albeit within a determined range of specifics, which Heidegger's account suggests. Although disappointing to thinkers such as Berthold-Bond and Huntington, there may be no definitive signposts hammered in, but only a series of well-worn paths that one can somewhat arbitrarily choose between. While this choice is necessarily conditioned by the world and its norms, it is the choice itself that gives certain norms priority over others and allows them to provide a specific meaning to existence that remains open to revision.⁶³ And this might just be the best that a modern irreligious world can do once the power of grace to render some particular choice enduringly significant is off the table.

This understanding of the existential philosophy of death in which the goal is to gain a certain mastery over the meaning of one's existence (as opposed to being mastered by the meaning of the world one happens to be thrown into), either through option A (with God's help – redeemed sinfulness) or option B (without such help – anticipatory resoluteness), suggests a sense of "agreeing to disagree." Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger seem aware of the difficulties that individuals are up against in their search for significance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Interestingly, the disagreement between their respective responses to these difficulties as I have laid them out finds a close parallel in Thomas Miles' work on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.⁶⁴ Over the last few pages of his paper, Miles describes a Kierkegaard that seems to hold out hope for a more substantial and incontrovertible meaning than Nietzsche seems

to think is possible.⁶⁵ Nietzsche argues against a descent into nihilism but, like Heidegger, refuses to resort to religious faith in divine assistance in order to avoid such a descent. While Kierkegaard would not be happy with the result of Nietzsche's efforts, Miles seems to conclude that they must each concede that the other's point of view cannot be easily ruled out.⁶⁶ Although Christian faith may be an extreme and, in a certain sense, unjustifiable option, its renunciation of such justification means that it need not defend itself from Nietzsche's criticisms. And although Nietzschean self-mastery (like its Heideggerian counterpart) has its limitations, one can certainly appreciate its value if it is the alternative to a risky and desperate leap of faith. I would suggest that a similar concession must ultimately be made in the case of dying to the world according to Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

In fact, certain developments in the views of both Kierkegaard and Heidegger suggest that they do come around to making such a concession. It is no secret that Kierkegaard realizes how miserable, uncertain, and dangerous a true Christian existence can be. After all, he spends much of his later authorship trying to make these perils clear.⁶⁷ Although he has the hopeful recourse of grace and divine mercy to rely upon, he does not want to repeat what he sees as Luther's mistake.⁶⁸ Hence, he cautions his readers against making too much of this consolation – there is work to be done and it will not be pleasant so long as one exists in the world. It is because grace does not excuse an individual from striving in existence that Kierkegaard even expresses concerns about the preface to *Practice* that I quoted from above. Without a willingness to die to worldly ways, which includes admitting one's failure to do so, "one does not have the right to draw on grace."⁶⁹

Heidegger, on the other hand, seems to lose his Pelagian spirit throughout his later work.⁷⁰ Caputo states that "Heidegger later on conceded ... that the transition from inauthenticity to authenticity is not something effected *by* man but rather something effected *in* man by a saving grace."⁷¹ Although there is no reason to think that Heidegger has a specifically Christian sense of grace in mind, he does make several,

telling comments, which support Caputo's general assessment. For example, in an interview released after his death, Heidegger famously asserts:

Philosophy will not be able to bring about a direct change of the present state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all merely human meditations and endeavors. Only a god can still save us. I think the only possibility of salvation left to us is to prepare readiness, through thinking and poetry, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god during the decline; so that we do not, simply put, die meaningless deaths, but that when we decline, we decline in the face of the absent god.⁷²

This is of course an issue that deserves more attention than it can receive here, but the point of mentioning it briefly is to suggest that while Kierkegaard seems to understand the drawbacks of relying on grace to give life meaning, especially when considered from a non-Christian perspective,⁷³ Heidegger might eventually come to appreciate the drawbacks of trying to find meaning through one's own endeavors. Thus, these two pioneers of the existential philosophy of death could ultimately end up with a greater sense of mutual understanding and respect for each other's approach than initially seems possible.⁷⁴

ABBREVIATIONS OF KIERKEGAARD'S WORKS

- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CD *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- FSE *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!* Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 volumes. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978.
- NA *'The Moment' and Late Writings* (Newspaper Articles). Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- PF *Philosophical Fragments; Johannes Climacus*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- PV *The Point of View*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- PC *Practice in Christianity*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- SUD *Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 28 volumes (plus corresponding commentary volumes). Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–2013.
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- WL *Works of Love*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Notes

- 1 TDIO, 97 / SKS 5: 465. It has become common practice to include reference to the new, nearly-finished Danish fourth edition of Kierkegaard's works (SKS) because the complete English edition only provides a concordance with older Danish editions. This inclusion will of course not be possible for volumes that are still in the process of publication.
- 2 George Connell, "Four Funerals: The Experience of Time by the Side of the Grave," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 10, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 436.
- 3 TDIO, 75 / SKS 5: 446.
- 4 SZ 259. The Macquarrie and Robinson translation has been followed throughout.
- 5 Amongst Heidegger's works, I focus primarily on his early magnum opus for several reasons; the two most significant reasons are, first, that death receives its most prominent and developed treatment in this text, and, second, that Kierkegaard's influence wanes dramatically not long after its publication.
- 6 Epicurus famously combats the fear of death with his claim that "the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist" (*The Epicurus Reader*; trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994], 29).
- 7 On his understanding of dying to the world, see, for example, CD, 17, 72, 172, 184, 208, 242-43 / SKS 10: 29, 81, 183, 194-95, 216-17, 248-49; and FSE, 76-85 / SKS 13: 98-105. On his view of the mistakes of even his most promising Christian predecessors and his role as corrective, see, for example, JP 1: 71-72; 2: 354, 368; 3: 82, 101, 467 / SKS 23: 323; 24: 491; 25: 400-01, 432-33; 26: 44.
- 8 Iain Thomson, "Heidegger's Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37, no. 4 (2004): 456. Cf. John van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of*

- the Hidden King* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 158-67, 174-76, 186-89; and Michael Theunissen, "The Upbuilding in the Thought of Death: Traditional Elements, Innovative Ideas, and Unexhausted Possibilities in Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" trans. George Pattison, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 10, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 338-39, 343-46.
- 9 Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 312.
- 10 SZ 262-67.
- 11 Cf. Vincent McCarthy, "Martin Heidegger: Kierkegaard's Influence Hidden and In Full View," in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 9, ed. Jon Stewart (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 108-11; and van Buren, 177-82. Everyday falling into an inauthentic grasp of one's place in the world (like falling into sin on Kierkegaard's view) is a common and unavoidable aspect of Dasein (SZ §51).
- 12 See, for example, TDIO, 75, 96 / SKS 5: 446, 464. Heidegger speaks of becoming "free from the entertaining 'incidentals' [*Zufälligkeiten*] with which busy curiosity keeps providing itself" (SZ 310). Cf. SZ 384, 388, where Heidegger continues to rely on the same Kierkegaardian language of the accidental and "trivial" "what"-concerns about "output."
- 13 Cf. Dreyfus 1991, 321-22; Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's "Being and Time"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 437-38; and van Buren, 190-202.
- 14 Cf. Dan Magurshak, "The Concept of Anxiety: The Keystone of the Kierkegaard-Heidegger Relationship," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 180.
- 15 CA, 90 / SKS 4: 393.
- 16 Van Buren, 192-93.
- 17 SZ 338n.

- 18 According to van Buren, it is through reading Kierkegaard (along with other Christian thinkers, such as Paul and Augustine) that Heidegger develops the notion of conscience as “the call and ‘renewal’ of anxious care” from one’s “authentic self” to one’s inauthentic or fallen self – a call of essential guilt, which must be “chosen and taken up into one’s futural possibility” (van Buren, 185). Cf. also van Buren, 192-95.
- 19 SZ 338.
- 20 SZ 391. Cf. also SZ 384-85.
- 21 See van Buren, 191, 194-95. Cf. Haufniensis’ claim that “the moment sin is posited, temporality is sinfulness.... He sins who lives only in the moment as abstracted from the eternal” (CA, 92-93 / SKS 4: 395-96).
- 22 Briefly, formal indication with respect to death is the process of taking the specific things one can properly say about physical death as suggestive of the form or nature of existence in general.
- 23 This is the sense of wakefulness engendered by the thought of death in *Works of Love* (e.g. WL, 353 / SKS 9: 347) and “At a Graveside” (TDIO, 76, 81-83 / SKS 5: 447, 451-54). In his early lectures, notably from winter semester 1920-21, Heidegger traces this sort of wakefulness from the New Testament notion (later handed down by Augustine, Luther, and Pascal to Kierkegaard) that one must always be prepared – even in the metaphorical darkness of worldly night, when it would just be easier to “fall asleep” and get lost in distraction – to offer an account of oneself because there is no telling when Christ will return (cf. Matt. 25: 13, 26: 40-45). Thus, wakefulness is closely bound not only with the uncertainty of death, but also with the kairological moment of ever-present vigilance. See van Buren, 175, 178, 188-91, 193, 195, 202.
- 24 TDIO, 75, 95 / SKS 5: 446, 463; SZ 250-51, 262-64.
- 25 TDIO, 95-96, 99 / SKS 5: 463-64, 467; SZ 258, 265-66.
- 26 Kiesel, 80.
- 27 Soon after *Being and Time* in 1927 Heidegger states that, “etymologically regarded, theo-logy means: the science of God,” but

- actually, “*what is given for theology (its positum) is Christianness ... theology is the science of faith*” (*Pathmarks*, 43, 45, 48). And on faith: “Luther said, ‘Faith is permitting ourselves to be seized by the things we do not see’ ... faith is an appropriation of revelation that co-constitutes the Christian occurrence ... *Faith is the believing-understanding mode of existing in the history revealed, i.e., occurring, with the Crucified*” (*Pathmarks*, 44-45).
- 28 SZ 8-11, 34-35.
- 29 SZ 247-48.
- 30 See, for example, SUD, 13-17 / SKS 11: 129-33; see also Magurshak, 193. On Heidegger’s view of Kierkegaard’s theological tendencies see SZ 190n; *Off the Beaten Track*, 186; and *The Piety of Thinking*, 195-96.
- 31 Cf. SZ 10. For examples of this sentiment in Kierkegaard, see JP, 1:71-72 / SKS 25: 432-33; FSE, 68 / SKS 13: 90.
- 32 PV, 80.
- 33 See, for example, SZ 338n.
- 34 Among other alleged debts, Theunissen actually suggests that the intentionally limited reliance upon theological matters in “At a Graveside” might have set a precedent for Heidegger’s methodological exclusion of such matters from his own death chapter (Theunissen, 347).
- 35 TDIO, 78 / SKS 5: 448. Cf. Connell, 436.
- 36 E.g. Charles Guignon, “Heidegger and Kierkegaard on Death: The Existentiell and the Existential,” in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 200-01.
- 37 Although acknowledging that Heidegger’s “existential ‘solipsism’” (SZ 188) certainly does not pose the same sorts of problems that plague early-modern philosophy, Daniel Berthold-Bond notes the parallel here with the Cartesian project of getting a world back after doubting it; see Daniel Berthold-Bond, “A Kierkegaardian Critique of Heidegger’s Concept of Authenticity,” *Man and World*, 24 (1991): 126-27. While the issue for Heidegger is

- self-understanding and taking on responsibility for the meaning of one's own existence, Descartes' concern was of a more metaphysical-epistemological nature.
- 38 Berthold-Bond, 128.
- 39 Patricia J. Huntington, "Heidegger's Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited: From Ontological Abstraction to Ethical Concretion," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 56.
- 40 Bertold-Bond, 128-29; Huntington, 47, 59.
- 41 Bertold-Bond, 133-37.
- 42 Ibid., 138.
- 43 SZ 173.
- 44 Bertold-Bond, 130-31.
- 45 Ibid., 137.
- 46 Huntington, 49.
- 47 Ibid., 51.
- 48 Ibid., 50.
- 49 Ibid., 56.
- 50 see e.g. JP 3: 301-02.
- 51 Huntington, 53, 59.
- 52 Cf. Julian Young, "Death and Authenticity," in *Death and Philosophy*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (New York: Routledge, 1998), 192.
- 53 Cf. Merold Westphal's claim that "the need to flee from an inauthentic being-with-others does not deny the possibility of an authentic form of relatedness nor imply that existential loneliness is the highest human achievement. It may be that existential loneliness is but the half-way house required on the path from everyday loneliness to genuine togetherness" (*God, Guilt, and Death* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 98). Charles Guignon provides an excellent account of how Heidegger maintains the bonds of normativity, even if it is not the neat and unyielding sort of normative compulsion that Huntington and Berthold-Bond

- seem interested in; see Charles Guignon, “Heidegger’s Concept of Freedom, 1927-1930,” in *Interpreting Heidegger*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 97-99.
- 54 Huntington states, “to recover an ethical capacity by no means necessitates the rejection of the very norms that the crowd I resist embraces” (Huntington, 51). Although she takes herself to represent Kierkegaard’s stance in saying this, such a statement seems just as representative of Heidegger’s position. The latter’s point is not necessarily to dismiss any particular norms, but to avoid taking them on uncritically as the “they” does.
- 55 McCarthy notes the “structural joke” (McCarthy, 108) in two of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works where the objective issue (the *what*) is given a comically disproportionate amount of attention as compared to the subjective issue (the *how*). For example, the objective issue of Christianity in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments”* is dealt with in roughly 50 pages while the subjective issue takes up the remaining 550 or so pages. Still, while it might not take much, there must be at least some minimal grasp of *what* subjective Christian existence is based on (cf. PF, 104 / SKS 4: 300). What leads Kierkegaard to downplay the importance of the objective issue is that he sees a world that focuses almost entirely on this Christian *what* (whether in support or criticism) and forgets the importance of subjective appropriation.
- 56 PC, 7 / SKS 12: 15. There are two important points that must be noted with respect to this preface. The first concerns the meaning of the latter part of this quoted passage. Because grace is “a kind of indulgence from the actual imitation of Christ and the actual strenuousness of being Christian” (NA, 69 / SKS 14: 213), one must also rely on Christ’s merciful redemptive act in order to gain forgiveness for even the fact of having to rely on grace and be indulged in this way in the first place. The second point concerns the nature of my use of this preface. It must be noted

that Kierkegaard has a specific target audience for *Practice* – the established church and its leader on the Danish isle of Zealand, the Bishop Jacob Peter Mynster (NA, 69-70 / SKS 14: 213). While he is therefore calling for a very specific confession of inadequacy in attaching his preface to Anti-Climacus' discussion of the rigorous requirement, I believe that Kierkegaard also intends his appeal to be applicable to anyone who associates with Christianity. It is this broader sense of the need for grace that I focus on here.

- 57 See e.g. FSE, 76-77, 81/SKS 13: 97-99, 102.
- 58 John D. Caputo, "Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Foundering of Metaphysics," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 217.
- 59 Cf. Thomas Miles, "David Hume: Kierkegaard and Hume on Reason, Faith, and the Ethics of Philosophy," in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 5, tome 1, ed. Jon Stewart (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009), 23-27.
- 60 I certainly do not mean to suggest that Heidegger sees his *Being and Time* project in precisely these terms, but I do find this description to be both accurate and helpful for understanding his relationship with Kierkegaard.
- 61 McCarthy, 113.
- 62 Dreyfus, 313.
- 63 Guignon, "Heidegger's Concept of Freedom," 97-99.
- 64 It is perhaps not so surprising to find such a parallel as Jean Wahl points out that "it has even been suggested that Heidegger frequents the world of Nietzsche with the feelings of Kierkegaard and the world of Kierkegaard with the feelings of Nietzsche" (*Philosophies of Existence*, trans. F. M. Lory [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969], 103). Just before making this comment, Wahl seems to hint at an interesting question about Heidegger's *Being and Time* project: why would he want to rely so heavily on the language and structure of Christianity when he is explicitly not engaged in a religious endeavor? The answer to this question

seems to be that even though his intended audience may not consist in large part of striving Christians, this is the structure of existence that would surely resonate with his predominantly Western, culturally Christian readers.

- 65 Thomas Miles, “Friedrich Nietzsche: Rival Visions of the Best Way of Life,” in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 9, ed. Jon Stewart (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 283-86.
- 66 Ibid., 286-87.
- 67 See e.g. FSE, 61-62/SKS 13: 84.
- 68 See e.g. JP 3: 82/SKS 23: 323.
- 69 NA, 70 / SKS 14: 213. Kierkegaard’s discussion of removing the preface and its allowance for grace is one instance that is particularly focused on the situation of Mynster. Nonetheless, I once again see a broader application for such statements given the resonance between Kierkegaard’s critique of Danish Christianity and his concern about Luther’s overemphasis on grace.
- 70 Furthermore, in contrast to the *Being and Time* era, Heidegger’s later writings can be partially characterized by an appreciation for the possibilities of some sense of divinity.
- 71 Caputo, 222.
- 72 Martin Heidegger, “The Spiegel Interview,” in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering, 41-78, (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 56-57.
- 73 See, for example, where Anti-Climacus speaks about relying on grace and states that “from any other perspective Christianity must and will appear as madness or horror” (PC, 68 / SKS 12: 80). Of course, Kierkegaard makes even stronger claims along these lines in *For Self-Examination* and other places.
- 74 Thanks to Megan Altman and Charles Guignon for helpful conversations about the issues considered in this paper.