

THE CHALLENGE TO THE SELF: ON KIERKEGAARD'S ACCOUNT OF *ANFÆGTELSE* AS EXISTENTIAL TRIAL

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This paper focuses on an important yet underexplored concept of existential trial, expressed by the notion of *Anfægtelse*, in Kierkegaard's account of the human self. I argue that there are three kinds of existential trials, corresponding to the three major existential spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, and the Christian-religious. Each existential trial involves an essential conflict between two constitutive elements of the relevant sphere, and reveals the problem inherent to one's relation to a certain 'other' in that sphere. The possibility of existential trials highlights the Kierkegaardian idea that the human self is not self-grounding or self-sufficient, which in turn points to the need for divine assistance in one's self-development. Furthermore, I show that the religious *Anfægtelse* can mean two different but closely related things. It sometimes refers to a spiritual temptation that distracts one from engaging in an absolute God-relationship, and sometimes a spiritual trial to which the spiritual temptation pertains only as a part.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; *Anfægtelse*; existential trial; self; existential spheres; God-relationship

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1. Introduction

In many of his journal entries, Kierkegaard repeatedly laments that the discussion of *Anfægtelse* has disappeared altogether in contemporaneous Christendom.¹ ‘Nowadays in Christendom, there is never a hint about spiritual trials [*Anfægtelser*],’ he writes, ‘for the religious is not taken seriously’ (SKS 21: NB9:22 / JP 4372).² Yet the word *anfægte*, whose basic meaning is to challenge or to attack someone, is quite an uncommon word in everyday Danish. In contrast to its German cognate *anfechten* that has occupied an important place in the German Lutheran tradition,³ the Danish term *Anfægtelse* never occurs in the Danish Bible, and rarely draws people’s attention in Danish Christendom. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard insists that *Anfægtelse* should be restored as a concept essential to Christianity.⁴

In the current literature, some attention has been paid to this concept, but its importance has generally been understated. While it is included in passing in some discussions on religiousness, there has been a dearth of literature locating it within the larger web of Kierkegaard’s philosophical concepts.⁵ Simon D. Podmore is the only scholar who has offered an extensive treatment of *Anfægtelse*.⁶ But he, like others, treats it as a merely religious concept—as ‘spiritual trial’, as it is usually translated, which is a kind of religious struggle—across all the relevant writings of Kierkegaard’s.

The religious, ‘spiritual’ trial is certainly a very important kind of *Anfægtelse*. However, this assumption that *Anfægtelse* refers only to such a spiritual trial

1. SKS 21: NB9:22 / JP 4372; SKS 22: NB12:94 / JP 4: 4023; SKS 23: NB17:111 / JP 4: 4950; SKS 26: NB32:111 / JP 4: 4382. For citations of Kierkegaard’s primary texts, references are given to both *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* and to standard English translations. I use the following abbreviations for Kierkegaard’s primary texts: CA = *The Concept of Anxiety*; CUP₁ = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Volume I; EO₂ = *Either/Or: Part II*; FT = *Fear and Trembling*; PC = *Practice in Christianity*; PF = *Philosophical Fragment*; SUD = *The Sickness Unto Death*; WL = *Works of Love*; JP = *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*; SKS = *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*. Readers should read the reference in the following way. For Kierkegaard’s works: SKS volume: page / English translation: page. For Kierkegaard’s journals and papers: SKS volume: entry number / English translation: entry number.

2. All the translations of Kierkegaard’s journal entries are my own.

3. The verb “*anfechten*” has been used by Luther to describe his own anguished religious struggle, and the noun “*Anfechtung*” also appears several times in the Lutheran Bible. See *Hiob* 9:22–24, *Jesaja* 28:18–20, *Matthaeus* 26:40–42, *Lukas* 8:12–14, *Lukas* 22:27–29, *Lukas* 22:39–41, *Lukas* 22:45–47, *Apostelgeschichte* 20:18–20, *Galater* 4:13–15, *Jakobus* 1:1–3, *1 Petrus* 1:5–7.

4. There has been some literature on Luther’s influence on Kierkegaard’s conception of *Anfægtelse*. I will not tackle this topic in detail here, but for those who are interested, see, for instance, Coe (2020) and Podmore (2006). For literature specifically on Luther’s conception of *Anfechtung*, see Scaer (1983).

5. See, for example, Dargan (2013); Clair (1997); Kjær (2000); Reed (2019); Söderquist (2024); (Keeley, 1997); (Turchin 2013). Note that Dargan’s entry, unlike the rest of the literature listed here, briefly distinguishes between the ethical and the religious *Anfægtelse*.

6. See Podmore (2006), Podmore (2017).

is problematic for two reasons. First, *Anfægtelse* has a meaning broader than a merely religious one in Kierkegaard's writings. As we shall see, it refers to an esthetic struggle between self-love and the love for another in *Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard 1987), whereas in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard 1983), it refers to an ethical conflict. Second, even within the religious category, *Anfægtelse* has a much more nuanced meaning than scholars have acknowledged. As I will argue, it sometimes means a kind of *temptation* that distracts one from an absolute God-relationship, and sometimes signifies a *trial* to which temptation pertains only as a part. These two meanings need to be distinguished for a clearer account of Kierkegaard's religious psychology. While spiritual temptation represents the more passive component the individual suffers, the spiritual trial calls for active decisions by the individual to constantly resist the spiritual temptation that she faces. Only in such a way can the individual 'go through' the spiritual trial, as Kierkegaard sometimes puts it.⁷

In this paper, I propose a more holistic interpretation of *Anfægtelse*. I suggest that *Anfægtelse*, when used loosely by Kierkegaard, refer to the general category of *existential trial*. In general, in an existential trial, an individual is confronted with a conflict that can facilitate her progress towards full selfhood if she responds to this conflict in a sincere way.⁸ However, this loose usage does not tell us much about what existential trial really looks like beyond its formal characteristics. In order to better understand *Anfægtelse*, we need to look at each type of existential trial in its specific sphere. I argue that there are three kinds of existential trials, corresponding to the three major existential spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, and the Christian-religious. To differentiate these three, I will render them as 'esthetic trial', 'ethical trial', and 'spiritual trial' (or 'spiritual temptation', depending on the context) respectively.⁹ On the basis of this distinction, I will argue for the following claims: (1) All three existential trials involve a conflict between two constitutive elements of the relevant sphere; (2) this general account can be further fleshed out: the esthetic trial arises out of the antagonism between self-love and the love for another. The ethical trial occurs when the individual struggles to express the universality of the ethical due to the presence of a conflict. This conflict can be one between an ethical duty and an esthetic desire, but it can also be one between two ethical duties. The spiritual trial is a result of

7. SKS 22: NB12:94 / JP 4: 4023.

8. This characterization of the general kind of *Anfægtelse* was suggested to me by an anonymous referee.

9. There are several reasons for resisting rendering *Anfægtelse* as 'spiritual trial' whenever it occurs. First, it is unclear how erotic love's *Anfægtelse* can be spiritual, for in erotic love, no spirit has been, or can be, established (see, for example, SKS 3: 176 / EO2: 180). It would also be odd to translate the ethical *Anfægtelse* as 'spiritual trial', for it is not defined by its spirituality but by its universality. Among the three, it is only the religious trial that is truly spiritual for Kierkegaard, for it alone involves a relation to God that defines the spirituality of human beings.

the opposition between a spiritual temptation and a proper God-relationship. (3) These three trials, representing three forms of existential conflict, pose critical challenges to one's vision of one's own self by revealing the problem inherent to one's relation to a certain 'other' in different existential spheres.

Through these claims, I wish to show that the possibility of existential trial in every sphere highlights the Kierkegaardian idea that human beings are not self-grounding or self-sufficient, thus pointing to the need for divine assistance and the struggle towards the path of faith. It also explains Kierkegaard's peculiar emphasis on the religious significance of *Anfægtelse*. Since for him, the existence of a human being is consummated at the religious level, in which alone the self can truly establish itself through a relation to God, it follows that the religious *Anfægtelse* represents the challenge *to the self* in the highest and most proper sense.¹⁰

Note that claim (3) above presupposes the following claim: (4) The self of each sphere can be defined in terms of its relation to a certain 'other'. This claim has not been made explicit in the literature, so I will explain and motivate it in Section 2. After that, in Sections 3, 4, and 5, I will discuss the esthetic trial, the ethical trial, and the spiritual trial respectively. Section 5 will also offer an analysis of the distinction between spiritual temptation and spiritual trial, together with the importance of this distinction to Kierkegaard's account of the Christian-religious.

2. The Relational Aspect of The Kierkegaardian Self

The Sickness Unto Death (Kierkegaard 1980) begins with the famous formulation of the human self: 'A human being is a synthesis . . . The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another' (*SKS* 11: 129 / *SUD*: 13–14). There are three aspects to this formulation. It claims that a human self consists in (1) a synthesis, (2) a reflexive relation, and (3) a relation to another. While there is an abundance of literature on all three, my analysis of existential trial aims to contribute to the discussion of the third. For the sake of clarity, let's call (3) *the Relational Claim*.

In interpreting the Relational Claim, scholars tend to identify 'the other' in question as referring to God specifically.¹¹ The reason for this is straightforward: the idea that God is the ultimate source of power grounding human existence is a central theme, if not *the* central theme, of many of Kierkegaard's writings. There is certainly evident textual support for taking God to be the other that sufficiently establishes the human self. This, however, does not justify the claim

10. *SKS* 7: 417 / *CUP*1: 458.

11. Evans makes the same observation in Evans (1997: 8).

that God is the *only* 'other' to which human selves relate, and should relate, in their self-relation.¹² In fact, such an exclusive reading overlooks many important Kierkegaardian themes by problematically rendering Kierkegaard more individualistic than he actually is. On this reading, it would be perfectly fine if one were to relate only to God and never to other human beings. Such an individualistic picture has been contested in the literature, especially in the face of the growing interest in his account of neighborly love and social relations. Many scholars have pointed out that Kierkegaard has a much more positive attitude towards sociality than readers once assumed.¹³ Moreover, the exclusive reading has a problem of being only able to account for the religious self but not the esthetic and the ethical ones, except negatively, as a kind of failure. But as Kierkegaard explicitly writes in *Works of Love*, even preferential love, which is furthest away from the religious sphere, can be 'life's most beautiful happiness' and 'the greatest temporal good' (SKS 9: 266 / WL: 267). This means that there is a need for an account of the non-religious selves that reflects their positive features and worth.

For these reasons, I suggest that we should read the Relational Claim as a more inclusive claim. 'The other' in question can refer to God or to other human beings.¹⁴ In this way, although it is only the religious self that pursues the absolute *telos* by relating to God, the non-religious selves can also have a more or less meaningful existence by relating to other human beings in their own distinct ways. Furthermore, I suggest that this inclusive reading should not only be descriptive, specifying the possibilities of human relations, but also normative in the sense that how one relates to 'the other' in turn offers a criterion for determining what kind of self one has.¹⁵

In the course of this paper, I will flesh out the formulation of the self specific to the relevant sphere by examining different kinds of existential trials. The esthetic self is defined by its relation to a beloved other as the object of immediate, preferential love (Section 3). The ethical self is defined by its relation to the

12. I am not denying that God-relationship is the only kind of relationship that can *free human beings from despair*. What I am suggesting is that there are other non-God-relationships that can participate in and define human beings' self-relation, despite their insufficiency. Thus this inclusive sense of the self might be a bit loose for *The Sickness Unto Death* specifically, given that its analysis intends to ascertain what one ought to do in order not to be in despair. But there are good reasons to think that the Kierkegaardian self in general should not be restricted to this narrow sense, both on the ground of his own attitude towards the pseudonym Anti-Climacus (namely, that it represents a more Christian perspective than Kierkegaard himself has), and on the basis of what I suggest later in this paragraph.

13. See, for example, Ferreira (2001); Krishek (2009).

14. An inclusive reading of the Relational Claim like this is not completely new in the literature, but it is far less extensively discussed compared to other readings. See, for instance, Evans (1997); Fremstedal (2022: 23–25, 45–46).

15. This point is explicitly made in *Sickness Unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling*. See, SKS 11: 194 / SUD: 80; SKS 4: 113 / FT: 16.

social others through duties and norms (Section 4). The religious self is defined by its relation to God through faith (Section 5). These three relations definitive of each existential sphere become more salient when the corresponding existential trial arises, in which those relations are put into serious crisis.

3. Esthetic Trial: The Unhappy Love

Erotic love, *Elskov* in Danish, is for Kierkegaard a form of preferential love, which is the paradigmatic passion of the esthetic sphere. A *preferential* love involves an affection for the beloved that distinguishes the latter from other individuals that one interacts with. If esthetic passion is relational in the sense that it relates the individual to an object of love, then erotic love is more particularly interpersonal, for its object of love is another human being.

Erotic love or preferential love in general is characterized by its immediacy and unreflectiveness in choosing its object. That is why '[e]rotic love and friendship are good fortune', as Kierkegaard remarks in *Works of Love* (SKS 9: 57 / WL: 50). Whether or not one can find their loved one is something accidental and cannot be forced. It is not grounded in any higher level reflective consideration either.¹⁶ Furthermore, as Kierkegaard points out, the crucial element of the poetic or esthetic depiction of erotic love is its emphasis on the unification of two individuals in love, together with their desire to preserve this unification. It involves an inclination where 'the I [is] intoxicated in the *other I*' (SKS 9: 62 / WL: 56). That is, it involves a form of intimate connection and unification between two individuals that strives to overcome the narrow focus on one's own self, or one's selfish self-love. It is precisely this desire to preserve the love relationship that separates erotic love from childishness or mere lust, as the latter is satisfied the moment its desired object is obtained.¹⁷

Nevertheless, in erotic love's most distinct mark lies the possibility of its own downfall. Precisely because of its immediacy and the lack of reflection that erotic love does not have a means to sustain itself beyond mere passion. The bond of

16. One might worry that this account of erotic love applies only to the non-reflective kind and not to the reflective one (for example, the seducer's erotic project in *Either/Or I*). Two things can be said here. First, even for the reflective esthete, whose erotic project can to some extent be planned, her fundamental motive is still grounded in her erotic passion and never in any higher level reflection, and is thus still essentially immediate. Westphal makes a similar point in Westphal (1996: 23). Second, the reflective esthete ceases to instantiate true erotic love and its immediacy once she views the object of her love as a mere possession and calculates how to obtain it. This is because, as I suggest later in this paragraph, that the calculating kind lacks the genuine desire to preserve the love relationship that a true love requires.

17. This is why Judge William writes in the first letter that true love, unlike lust, 'bears a stamp of eternity' (SKS 3: 30 / EO2: 21). I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

commitment that can provide a sense of stability requires the individual to go beyond immediate feelings and is hence not available to erotic love as such. The unification between the two lovers is hence unstable and vulnerable to changes. This is what Johannes Climacus talks about in *Philosophical Fragments* when he describes the unhappy love that becomes erotic love's trial:

Self-love lies at the basis of love, but at its peak its paradoxical passion wills its own downfall. Erotic love also wills this, and therefore these two forces are in mutual understanding in the moment of passion, and this passion is precisely erotic love. Why, then, should the lover not be able to think this, even though the person who in self-love shrinks from erotic love can neither comprehend it nor dare to venture it, since it is indeed his downfall. So it is with the passion of erotic love. To be sure, self-love has foundered, but nevertheless it is not annihilated but is taken captive and is erotic love's *spolia opima*. But it can come to life again, and this becomes erotic love's trial [*Anfægtelse*]. (SKS 4: 252 / PF: 48; translation modified)

This passage contains a detailed description of the dynamic of erotic love. As is suggested, erotic love is constituted by two elements: a self-love that goes to the basis of all love, and another impulse that strives towards the opposite direction, the love for another. Ordinarily, in erotic love, self-love is present, but has been transformed and integrated into erotic love's disposition to love another—it becomes the disposition to love the other *as oneself*. This is the 'mutual understanding' between the two constituents of erotic love, where self-love and the love for another *prima facie* get harmonized and unified. In this sense, the initial self-love meets its own 'downfall', as it is elevated into a form different from the love of *oneself* as such. It now devotes oneself to another.¹⁸ Yet this unification cannot be fully established in erotic love, for self-love cannot transcend itself within the esthetic category. This is manifested by the possibility of esthetic trial.

The esthetic trial comes when self-love wants to posit itself as a single force again, undermining the unification's immediacy and effortlessness. When this happens, a collision occurs between self-love and the love for another, where the equilibrium is destroyed, and the individual finds herself between two opposite dispositions. In this esthetic trial, either self-love gives up its right and once again submits itself to the love for another, or erotic love as a higher unity breaks down in one's obsession with oneself. The esthetic trial is hence the occasion where the lover encounters the possibility of the destruction of her essential passion in an antagonistic collision between erotic love's constitutive elements. In the face of this collision, the individual either returns to her previous state of mere self-love

18. Cf. SKS 6: 109 / SLW: 115.

and loses her identity as the lover, or she endures it and re-establishes the foundation of her erotic passion.

But even if the esthetic individual restores her passion of erotic love and thus regains her status as the lover, the reconciliation is still a temporary one, because the fundamental problem underlying erotic love remains unsolved. The fundamental problem is that the esthetic individual can never relate to the other in their genuine alterity. To recognize the other's alterity means, as Grøn (2023: 479) puts it, to '[see] that [the other] is in herself, apart from us, beyond her relation to us'.¹⁹ But the lover is not able to do this, because erotic love and preferential love in general is no more than another form of self-love. The erotic lover loves the other with preferences that are explained not by the independent other but by her own desire and interest. Even if she intoxicates herself in the other I, she is still viewing the other as an extension of herself, instead of treating the other as an independent being. Accordingly, the passion of the love for another does not have a means to sustain and actualize itself that is not whimsical, and 'the revolution of self-love is by no means profound enough from the ground up' (SKS 9: 266 / WL: 267).²⁰ Hence the unity between self-love and the love for another is always so fragile within the esthetic sphere, for the limitation of *self-love* is never surpassed. Seemingly interpersonal, the esthetic relationship is actually intrapersonal.

Thus the possibility of esthetic trial is inherent to the relation based on erotic love. The esthetic trial is only the occasion to highlight the insufficiency of the esthetic relation between the lover and the beloved. Nevertheless, it bears pointing out that this by no means indicates that erotic love and esthetic relation are worthless. In fact, Kierkegaard is well aware that the esthetic passion is an indispensable part of human psychology and is required for any serious commitment. As we will see, it will be preserved in the ethical sphere, transformed and stabilized through the mediation of ethical duties. It cannot be forsaken in the religious sphere either. There, it will be elevated into faith as a devotion to God.

4. Ethical Trial: The Sacrifice of Tragic Heroes

The idea of the ethical *Anfægtelse*, or the ethical trial as I translate it, is the focal point of *Fear and Trembling*, written under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio.

19. See also, Lippitt (2013: 18); Ferreira (2001: 44).

20. What I am suggesting here might sound incompatible with Kierkegaard's claim that there is only one kind of love (WL: 143 / SKS 9: 145), for my reading seems to imply that self-love and erotic love are radically different from Christian love. I think that there are different ways to reconcile this apparent incompatibility. A detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but to point to one possibility offered by Krishek (2009), one could argue that although there is only one kind of love, namely, the love that God implants in us, preferential love and neighborly love are nevertheless different *works* of love. See also, Ferreira (2001); Davenport (2017); Hanson (2013); (Krishek 2010).

There, it plays an essential role in differentiating ‘the knight of faith’, as exemplified by Abraham, from what Johannes de Silentio calls ‘the tragic hero’ (SKS 4: 170 / FT: 78). The latter is certainly praiseworthy, but is not as great as Abraham. The tragic hero occupies an ethical point of view and thus does not have God as the criterion for greatness, whereas Abraham risks everything in faith.²¹

In contrast to the esthetic category, which is the domain of bare immediacy, the ethical point of view (or, more specifically, the immanent-ethical, which is distinguished from the kind of ethics that is established by Christian-religiousness) presented in *Fear and Trembling* is such that a sufficiently ethical individual’s choice should be based on reasoning that has the character of universality. There are certainly many facets to this claim, but one crucial feature of the ethical universality is the requirement of social intelligibility embedded in duties and norms. Compared to the absolute duty to God, which consists in a private God-relationship that absolutely excludes the involvement of other human beings, duties stipulated by ethical reasoning are in principle transparent to every human being in a given community, and are thus interpersonal and social.²²

Nevertheless, the fulfillment of ethical duty does not merely consist in following what reason and society stipulate in one’s social relation. It also requires the individual to have a full-hearted commitment to one’s ethical principles. This idea is articulated in a footnote in the second Problema, where Johannes de Silentio specifies the ethical reality the tragic hero lives in. He writes, ‘for most men the task in life is simply to adhere to their duty and to transform it by their enthusiasm into their wish’ (SKS 4: 170 / FT: 78). This transformation is then called ‘passionate concentration’ (SKS 4: 170 / FT: 78). As the cultivation and discipline of one’s passion, it is necessary for the unification and concretization of the ethical self.

This passionate concentration is also the central theme of the two letters in *Either/Or II*, published in the same year as *Fear and Trembling*. Judge William constantly stresses that the fulfillment of ethical duty requires one’s esthetic passion to be in line with one’s ethical choice. Otherwise, ‘the ethical is still abstract and cannot be fully actualized because it lies outside the individual. Not until the individual himself is the universal, not until then can the ethical be actualized’ (SKS 3: 244 / EO2: 255). The deficient, ‘abstract’ view deems it as sufficient for an individual to be ethical if she can perform her duty.²³ It does not matter if one’s external performance of duty is abstracted and separated from her internal

21. SKS 4: 113 / FT: 16.

22. Johannes de Silentio at one point defines the ethical as ‘social morality [*det Sædelige*]’ (SKS 4: 149 / FT: 55). Many scholars have examined the Hegelian connection to this ethical view, especially its similarity to the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*. See, for example, Carlisle (2015); Stewart (2003).

23. SKS 3: 242 / EO2: 254.

phenomenology. It does not matter if one chooses the right act by accident or with careful reasoning, with indifference or with passion.

There are two problems with such an abstract account. The first is that ethical obligation has not been internalized within the individual and is thus not concretized. The worry is that at the moment of choice, the ethical duty is not present among the possible objects of desire, or even is in opposition to the latter. The individual who holds this abstract view of ethics would lack sufficient motivation to commit to the ethical command and be easily enticed to follow her immediate desires that have a stronger basis in passion.²⁴ Hence Judge William further remarks, ‘he who lives ethically has himself as his task. His self in its immediacy is defined by accidental characteristics; the task is to work the accidental and the universal together into a whole’ (*SKS* 3: 244 / *EO*2: 256). The task of the ethical individual is to integrate her immediacy in accordance with ethical principles and thus provide the latter with sufficient dispositional and motivational ground. When the person is properly put together, there would not be oppositions between the esthetic and the ethical.

The second concern is that duty without the element of passion is too empty and indifferent. It lacks the substance that can bring duty to life. As an interpersonal system, the ethical not only requires the individual to relate herself to other fellow human beings through the bond of duty, but also to genuinely love or care for the other she has a duty towards.²⁵ Esthetic passion also needs the ethical to overcome its own immediacy, which has the weakness of transience and accidentality. Through the bond of duty, esthetic passion is given ‘security and joy’—it is transformed and stabilized (*SKS* 3: 89 / *EO*2: 86). That is why Judge William insists that marriage as an ethical relation is able to and even must preserve the esthetic element of erotic love, and erotic love in turn needs marriage in order to be brought into actualization.²⁶

With this ethical picture on the table, let’s now turn to ethical trial. Ethical trial arises when the individual struggles to express the universality of the ethical due to the presence of a conflict. The conflict can be one between an ethical duty and an esthetic desire, or one between two ethical duties. The esthetic-ethical conflict is less intense, as its solution is more obvious: one just needs to recognize the inferiority of the esthetic desire and give it up. In this case, what one needs to resist is, so to speak, the temptation to an apparent evil.²⁷ The latter, more intense form, however, is trickier and requires further analysis.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Cf. *SKS* 3: 40 / *EO*2: 32.

26. *SKS* 3: 43 / *EO*2: 35.

27. This is also the kind of ethical trial that Abraham’s case would fall into according to the immanent-ethical picture. That is, the idea of sacrificing his son Isaac is only a nasty impulse towards filicide, a temptation to evil. This alternative, ethical interpretation of Abraham’s story

When the intense kind of ethical trial arises, there exists an apparent conflict between two ethical duties, both of which the individual is wholeheartedly committed to. In this conflict, one's vision of what it means to be an ethical individual is seriously challenged, for there is no way to fulfill both duties simultaneously and to preserve the integrity of one's ethical outlook. Her ethical bond with the relevant individuals is at risk as well. Moreover, the predicament is intensified because of the presence of the esthetic element within the ethical. Not only will she lose the ethical connection with the individuals in question; precisely because of that, she will become unable to bring her affection towards them into actualization. Her predicament thus has two parts: ethical incompatibility and esthetic impotence.

The only way out of this intense form of ethical trial is to subordinate one ethical duty to the other one, so that they are no longer normative equals. In this way, its solution resembles the one of the esthetic-ethical conflict: one ought to follow the higher ethical duty, because it is the higher duty that truly represents the universality of the ethical. Yet since the passion integrated into the lower duty is usually not annihilated along with its normative force, this choice is still painful.

Admittedly, the analysis so far has been rather abstract. To understand the intense kind of ethical trial more concretely, let's look at Johannes de Silentio's discussion of the case of Agamemnon (*SKS* 4: 151 / *FT*: 57). In the story, Agamemnon is asked to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia so that the no-wind condition hindering their sailing for Troy would end. Here, the conflict is between Agamemnon's fatherly duty to love and protect his daughter and his duty as a king to act for the good of his nation. Agamemnon eventually chooses to sacrifice Iphigenia. What is assumed in his decision is that the fatherly duty becomes inferior in comparison to the duty for one's nation, which is in accordance with the norms and expectations of his society. Yet the recognition of the inferiority of familial bond in comparison to the higher, political duty does not eliminate Agamemnon's love for Iphigenia. His love remains, but only in the form of a wish, without sufficient ethical justification. Hence Johannes de Silentio remarks, once this decision is made, 'we have wish and duty face to face with each other. . . . The tragic hero gives up his wish in order to fulfill this duty' (*SKS* 4: 170 / *FT*: 78).

If my interpretation of the immanent-ethical is correct, that is, if, within the ethical system, the esthetic passion is transformed into a stable interpersonal relation through norms and duties, then the possibility of the intense kind of ethical trial reveals the ultimate bankruptcy of that picture. It shows that the duty one values so much can be easily overridden by the presence of another duty,

appears multiple times in *Fear and Trembling*. See, for example, *SKS* 4: 151 / *FT*: 56–57; *SKS* 4: 153 / *FT*: 60. Kirkconnell (2008: 65) has a brief comment on this kind of ethical trial (using the translation 'spiritual trial') as involving a temptation to evil.

and the latter's presence is not always predictable. The successful fulfillment of one's ethical values thus hinges on contingent facts outside of one's control. In other words, the possibility of an intense ethical trial shows the surprising accidentality of the ethical sphere, which ethicists like Judge William would think they have already surpassed. As a result, one's relation to one's cherished others through ethical mediation is not secure either. By virtue of the lack of control over external conditions, the individual's passionate ethical commitment can reach a dead end at any moment. Accident can occur with a change in social norms, an occurrence of an unexpected event, or even what Krishek (2009) calls 'essential loss'—the fact that everything temporal, including our relation with other finite human beings, will cease to exist at a certain point. Once those external conditions arise, our ethical relation with others is either at risk of being terminated or cannot but be terminated.

In summary, the insufficiency of the ethical system is exposed through the ethical trial, in which a breach appears between the desire to fulfill one's duty and the existence of certain accidental external conditions. So far, all kinds of human-relationships fail to be self-sufficient and self-grounding in a way that can render itself stable and immune from accidentality. Accordingly, the kind of self they define is also vulnerable to changes that are beyond one's control.

Now, our last hope seems to lie in the religious sphere. Would God-relationship help us establish our selves in a secure manner? As I will argue in the next section, the answer is both yes and no. In a sense, God-relationship puts us in contact with eternity, and thus grants us a stable ground; however, that by no means guarantees happiness and peace of mind in the ordinary sense. Quite the contrary, through spiritual trials, God-relationship imposes sufferings that are even more severe—if not infinitely more severe—than we can experience in the esthetic and the ethical spheres. That is the decisive dialectic of the Christian-religious.

5. Spiritual Trial and Spiritual Temptation: Getting Involved with God

As many scholars have pointed out, the Lutheran influence on Kierkegaard's account of spiritual trial is evident. For Luther, spiritual trial, or *Anfechtung* in German, embodies the critical contradiction that can arise in Christian-religious experiences. In *Anfechtungen*, 'the Christian is confronted with the destructive forces of his adversaries over which the Gospel has informed him he already has victory' (Scaer 1983: 16). When *Anfechtungen* arise, phenomena such as apparent evil are experienced by an already religious individual, inducing immense uncertainty and suffering within her. In that way, the possibility and actuality

of *Anfechtungen* seem to contradict various core beliefs of Christianity, including the benevolence of God and faith as the secure path towards salvation.

Kierkegaard himself has explicitly commented on Luther's usage of the term in some of his journal entries.²⁸ Although disagreeing with Luther on various points, Kierkegaard is clearly on board with him concerning the essential features of spiritual trials. For both, spiritual trials are the loci of Christian dialectic that present the believers with irreconcilable religious paradoxes. As we shall see, for Kierkegaard, spiritual trials are the location where the most religious individuals—and only they—will be tried. Spiritual trials reveal to them the deepest insecurity inherent in the Christian-religious that 'the believer continually lies out on the deep, has 70,000 fathoms of water beneath him' (SKS 6: 411 / SLW: 444). Yet what preeminently separates the religious individual from the esthetic and the ethical individuals is her awareness of such inevitable insecurity in human existence, and her willingness to undergo this hardship in faith.²⁹

5.1 *Spiritual temptation: The ignored sense of Anfægtelse*

Before exploring the analysis of spiritual trial, a conceptual clarification is necessary, for the religious *Anfægtelse* does not always mean spiritual *trial*, as scholars typically assume. In this section, I will show that there is another, often ignored aspect to Kierkegaard's usage of the term in the religious context, in which *Anfægtelse* refers not to any kind of trial but to a specific kind of temptation.

That there should be two senses of *Anfægtelse* is most evident in *Postscript*, where the Hongs' translation also renders it sometimes as 'temptation', and sometimes as 'spiritual trial'. This distinction might be subtle, but is not unsubstantial, and overlooking it would lead to interpretive and philosophical

28. For instance, in SKS 21: NB7:35 / JP 1: 486.

29. As is well-known to readers of Kierkegaard, towards the end of *Postscript*, Climacus makes a distinction between two kinds of religiousness: religiousness A, which is the immanent-religiousness that is continuous with the ethical realm, and religiousness B, which is the religiousness unique to Christianity as a revealed religion. Although I will focus only on the Christian-religious *Anfægtelse* below, one might reasonably wonder whether religiousness A also has its own distinct *Anfægtelse*. To this, I would like to first note that the distinction between religiousness A and B is not consistently maintained outside the context of *Postscript*. It seems that Kierkegaard does not have much to say about religiousness A as such, so one might not include it as one of the *major* existential spheres. That being said, in *Postscript*, religiousness A certainly does contain *Anfægtelse*, but its *Anfægtelse* shares the same structural feature as that of religiousness B by both being religiousness. For these two reasons, and considering the limited space, I have decided not to discuss the case of religiousness A separately. However, it is worth emphasizing that religiousness B is decisively different from religiousness A in that it has its own unique spiritual trial in the relation to the absolute paradox, which religiousness A by definition lacks access to.

problems.³⁰ The most obvious problem is that, for some texts, it just wouldn't make sense to render *Anfægtelse* as spiritual trial or as any kind of trial. One example occurs in the chapter 'A Glance at Danish Literature' of *Postscript*. There, in commenting on Johannes de Silentio's discussion of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes Climacus writes: '*The Ethical is Anfægtelsen; the relationship with God has come into existence; the immanence of the ethical despair has been broken; the leap has been posited; the absurd is the notification [Det Ethiske er Anfægtelsen; Guds-Forholdet blevet til; den etiske Fortvivlelses Immanents brudt; Springet sat; det Absurde Notifikationen]*' (SKS 7: 238 / CUP1: 262). Here, *Anfægtelse* cannot be read as the ethical trial, not only because the ethical as a larger category is not identical to the event of ethical trial, but also because the ethical trial does not establish any God-relationship. It would also be mistaken to treat it as a religious, 'spiritual' trial, because a spiritual trial does not belong to the ethical category. Considering the context of *Fear and Trembling*, what this means is rather that the ethical can become a factor that distracts the religious individual from a proper God-relationship.

Using the case of Abraham to illustrate: Abraham is *not* in an ethical trial, but in what Johannes de Silentio calls 'the ordeal' (*Prøvelse*), which consists in a conflict between an ethical duty and a divine duty that is higher than the ethical. (We will see later that such ordeals refer to the same phenomenon as spiritual trials.) In Abraham's ordeal, God demands the sacrifice of his son Isaac. But the ethical duty is making a command in opposition to God's command, that Abraham should love his son, and should not kill him. Thus the ethical command represents the antagonistic force against Abraham's God-relationship. It 'tempts' him away from God, so to speak. Thus the Hong's translation plausibly renders *Anfægtelsen* here as '*the temptation*' (CUP1: 262).³¹

30. Given the discrepancy in the translation within the same work, it is striking that hardly any ink has been spilled to clarify these two senses of *Anfægtelse*. As far as I know, Podmore is the only scholar who has alluded to this distinction. He hints at it when commenting on the idea of *anfægtende Tanker* in Podmore (2013: 65): 'Here it could be said that an attempt is made to distinguish "temptation of thought" from mere "temptation" by emphasizing the mental aspect of *Anfægtelse* over the traditionally carnal connotations of fleshly "temptation". However, once again the centrality of struggle (*fægte*) is diminished; as is the sense of *Anfægtelse* as something more than a diverse or inverted form of temptation'. Namely, there exists a subtle distinction between *Anfægtelse* qua temptation and qua struggle. But Podmore has not treated this distinction systematically or consistently, and sometimes he simply equivocates spiritual trials with higher temptations.

31. One might object that I here render the content of Abraham's ordeal far more intelligible than Johannes de Silentio would want. In response, I want to point out that the unintelligibility at issue consists in the impossibility of an ethical explanation for the action, except by confusing it with some lower, irrational behaviors. This is precisely why Abraham's decision appears to be filicide from the ethical perspective. I take my account to reflect this sense of unintelligibility by emphasizing the possibility that the ethical can be a kind of spiritual temptation that calls the individual back to the terrain of intelligibility. Meanwhile, if the attempt to specify what the two sides of an ordeal are amounts to rendering it too intelligible, then Johannes de Silentio himself would be subject to the same criticism by writing an entire book on it.

Another text worth bringing up is Kierkegaard's journal entry on May 5, 1847, in which he distinguishes between sensuous temptation in relation to sin and the temptation of spiritual trial: 'The difference between sin and spiritual trial . . . is that sin's temptation is with inclination, and spiritual trial's [temptation] is against inclination [*Forskjellen mell. Synd og Anfægtelse . . . er at Syndens Fristelse er med Lyst, Anfægtelsens mod Lyst*]' (SKS 20: NB:203 / JP 4: 4367). Here, he talks about the *temptation of spiritual trial*, indicating that there is a kind of temptation that is a part of spiritual trial. By consequence, spiritual trial and its temptation are not identical. Moreover, spiritual trial's temptation is radically different from the temptation in relation to sin, for temptations in a God-relationship, such as the ethical, are by themselves no sensuous temptations and are actually contrast sharply with them. They become temptations only in relation to a potential God-relationship, where their normative force is downgraded into a mode of temptation. This distinction between sin's temptation and spiritual trial's temptation is thus significant for our discussion of spiritual trial. To better preserve this distinction, in the following discussion, I will translate the temptation sense of *Anfægtelse* as 'spiritual temptation', and *Fristelse* as just 'temptation' or 'lower temptation'.

In general, when used as denoting spiritual temptation, *Anfægtelse* refers to factors that can lead one astray from a proper God-relationship. One set of such spiritual temptations is associated with the tendency to secularize or rationalize faith and God-relationship. The call of ethical duties can function as such a spiritual temptation, as we have seen.³² The tendency to take faith to be within the boundary of understanding is another. For example, towards the beginning of *Postscript*, Climacus remarks: '[The believer] is rather in such a precarious position that much effort, much fear and trembling will be needed lest he fall into spiritual temptation and confuse knowledge with faith' (SKS 7: 36 / CUP1: 29; translation modified). This idea is more clearly spelt out in a later passage: 'Suppose that speculating is a spiritual temptation, the most precarious of all' (SKS 7: 196 / CUP1: 214; translation modified).³³ Both passages concern the attempt to reduce faith to something that would potentially make sense to all, either by turning it into secure knowledge or by integrating it into the systematicity of speculative philosophy.

All of these can be spiritual *temptations* because they point in the opposite direction from the proper path to faith. For Kierkegaard, it is an essential part of Christian-religiousness that one's ordinary way of relating to the world is challenged. Not only does the Christian teaching ask one to 'hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters . . . and even his

32. Cf. SKS 7: 235 / CUP1: 259; SKS 7: 242 / CUP1: 267; SKS 7: 417 / CUP1: 458.

33. Cf. SKS 7: 21 / CUP1: 11; SKS 7: 127 / CUP1: 138; SKS 7: 207 / CUP1: 225; SKS 7: 213 / CUP1: 233; SKS 7: 299 / CUP1: 328.

own life' (Luke 14:26), and thus challenges one's instinctive passion for preferential love, it also presents the understanding with an object that is ungraspable, namely, God as the unknown.³⁴ The proper path to faith thus isolates the individual both from preferential relations that are characteristic of the esthetic sphere, and the universal, communicable rationality that serves as the basis of ethical relations. At the same time, the set of spiritual temptations analyzed above contain distractions that insist on those human needs. While properly relating to God situates the individual in the category of the absurd, human-relationships constantly try to call her back. Spiritual temptations of this sort have their basis in the understanding, the ethical, or even human pity that demands one to care for others in general—in short, anything that is 'human, all too human'.³⁵

The common thread among these spiritual temptations is that they feature an overly close relation to other human beings and thereby distance the individual from God. Another set of spiritual temptations is located at the other extreme—of demanding too much of God. In one journal entry, Kierkegaard writes:

This can be a spiritual temptation but this can also be true: that a person demands too much of God, wants to be far too much spirit, and like this, understood in a certain way, wants to, as it were, love God more or differently than God can allow and wants to bear, if in relation to all his suffering and temptation he constantly wants to be helped only spiritually. (SKS 22: NB11:152 / JP 4: 4373)³⁶

It is not clear which specific phenomenon Kierkegaard has in mind here, but the monastic practice that he often takes issue with is plausibly one of the targets. What is wrong with the monastic is that it seeks to relate to God too abstractly—it tries to live only as a religious spirit without engaging with the finite world.³⁷ In such a way, it seems to obtain a sense of security that is free from finite distractions. Yet ultimately, this monastic picture of faith is, as it were, a fetishization of the movement of infinite resignation that renounces what one values in the world. But this is an extravagant and problematic picture because finitude is a necessary part of being human, the denial of which would only lead to a false vision of oneself. Faith is supposed to elevate human beings as they are, rather

34. Cf. SKS 22: NB11:29 / JP 2: 2489; SKS 4: 249 / PF: 44.

35. For the idea of human pity as a kind of spiritual temptation, see SKS 21: NB7:43 / JP 1: 488; SKS 21: NB9:72 / JP 6: 6323.

36. Another relevant phenomenon Kierkegaard mentions in his journal entries is the biblical phrase 'tempting God [*friste Gud*]', where the individual gets frustrated in her God-relationship and demands proofs from God to show where she is at in her faith. See, for example, SKS 24: NB23:1851 / JP 4: 4378; SKS 25: NB28: 85 / JP 4: 4479. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this reference to me.

37. SKS 7: 365 / CUP1: 401.

than turning them into what they are not. It is not just infinite resignation, but willingly giving everything up while simultaneously retaining one's passion for the finite world. The infinite resignation embodied by the monastic practice is therefore no more than 'a substitution for faith', as Johannes de Silento remarks (SKS 4: 130 / FT: 35).³⁸

5.2 *Spiritual trial: The dialectic of the Christian-Religious*

With the account of spiritual temptation in place, a structural definition of spiritual trial is now possible: spiritual trial consists in an individual's struggle between a spiritual temptation and the proper God-relationship. Given that only faith can establish the proper God-relationship, spiritual trial is also a test of faith. Understood in this sense, it expresses the same idea as ordeal (*Prøvelse*) and test (*Prøve*) within the broader Kierkegaardian framework.³⁹

Since spiritual temptations can take two forms, spiritual trials accordingly can go in two directions. Either the God-relationship is conflicting with the demand of human-relationships, or it is at risk because one has an extravagant and eventually impossible vision of what it means to get involved with God.

That there can be these two forms and directions is no coincidence, for it corresponds to the being of the human self as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal. The human kind of spiritual temptation can be seen as the voice from the finite, temporal side of one's being, demanding one's attention to the mundane world. The extravagant spiritual temptation is correspondingly the overly infinite tendency a self can be misled by, with which one wants to work towards one's eternal happiness without considering one's finite element.

38. Another related phenomenon is the Stoic, which is discussed in *Sickness Unto Death*. Both the Stoics and the monastics have the extravagant desire to live a purely infinite, eternal life without properly recognizing human finitude. What differentiates them is how they attempt to satisfy this desire. The monastics attempt to become pure infinity by denying the external, whereas the Stoics advocate an indifferent attitude, neither negative denial nor positive acceptance, towards the external. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

39. I take it to be an implication of my interpretation given in this section that spiritual trial and ordeal collapse into the same category. Their essential characterization is the same, typical of the Christian-religious sphere. They both consist in the painful adversity that a religious individual struggles with, to endure which requires faith and the strengthening in the inner being. Their structure is also the same, constituted by the opposition between a God-relationship and a factor that tempts one away from God. They both function as an occasion to establish oneself before God by proving one's faith, a faith that is beyond ordinary understanding. It seems to me that the only difference they may have is that the Christian trial contains the absolute paradox as one of its essential elements, while the latter does not. Taylor (1992) makes a similar point.

This suggests that the possibility of spiritual trials resides in human nature as a synthesis of opposite elements. The closer one is to truly establish herself, the more saliently the gap between the two poles of human nature discloses itself. If the right kind of God-relationship is the occasion where the self's synthetic elements are in perfect balance and thereby rest 'transparently in the power that established it' (*SKS* 11: 130 / *SUD*: 14), then spiritual trial is a reminder how easily the balance can be disturbed. Without God, the perfect balance is impossible; but even with God's help, to achieve it is still no easy task.

This delicacy of the synthetic balance grounds the dialectic of Christian-religiousness, according to which suffering is an inevitable element in genuine religious experiences.⁴⁰ In a God-relationship, one is constantly pulled by the two poles of her being. The individual turns to God, but soon she will need to return to the world in order to remain living. This restlessness gives rise to constant distress and suffering. The possibility of spiritual trial thus challenges the assumption of Kierkegaard's contemporaneous Danish Christendom, where most people think that as long as one has baptized and goes to church regularly, the religious requirement would be satisfied and one's eternal happiness secured. For them, turning to God seems to be an easy solution to everything, and faith becomes something everyone has and needs to be sublated.⁴¹ Those people do not realize that the God-relationship is the most strenuous relation of all, and that faith is a lifelong task in which one's whole selfhood is at stake. Faith calls for the same wholehearted commitment and resolute will that define the ethical individual, but in a form that is infinitely more difficult to sustain.

The dialectic of Christian suffering has another crucial feature besides its inevitability: its voluntariness. The faithful individual willingly suffers. This voluntariness has two aspects. First, one willingly becomes the partial cause of the suffering and of spiritual trial by providing a crucial condition of its possibility. The crucial condition in question is the intense involvement with God, that one is willing to place the God-relationship at the center of one's life even if this could invoke danger and tremendous difficulties.⁴² This means that not everyone can enter into spiritual trials. As Kierkegaard writes with his usual sarcasm: 'Never get involved with God so far that spiritual trial can begin, for if you think of God once a week and bow down to him as others do, I assure you that you will never be tried in any spiritual trial' (*SKS* 20: NB:187 / *JP* 2: 1354). If one is only loosely related to God like everyone else is, then spiritual trial would not occur. To put this in a positive way, one's intense relation to God is required for the possibility

40. *SKS* 7: 413 / *CUP*1: 454.

41. Kierkegaard associates this view on faith with speculative philosophy, and especially Hegel. See, for example, *SKS* 4: 208 / *FT*: 121.

42. *SKS* 23: NB17:111 / *JP* 4: 4950. Cf. *SKS* 12: 117 / *PC*: 109; *SKS* 20: NB:187 / *JP* 2: 1354.

of spiritual trial. The need for this requirement is due to the fact that without an intense involvement with God, the factors that constitute spiritual temptations would either not exist or not be a hindrance to one's relation to another. Again, without an intense God-relationship, the monastic ideal as an attempt to preserve such a relation would not come into being. As to the human-all-too-human kind of spiritual temptations, such as the ethical, the understanding, and human pity, they are usually crucial components of a healthy human-relationship, and would not be temptations at all without the God-relationship that relativizes them. Spiritual trial is a challenge that is reserved only for those who are already highly religious.

The second aspect to the voluntariness of spiritual trial is one's willingness to endure. It is always possible to remove oneself from the spiritual trial once it begins, yet the faithful individual is willing to go through it. As Kierkegaard explains:

The inwardness of suffering is the greatest in the dialectic when the sufferer has it in his power to exempt himself from suffering, and yet wants to suffer it, and yet suffers it, while those closest to him, the fellow sufferers, must demand him that he exempt himself from suffering, spare himself when he can. (SKS 20: NB4:95 / JP 4: 4611).

Once the spiritual trial is present, one is free to retreat to the realm of spiritual temptations that is far less strenuous. The human world can offer consolation and sympathy that would help alleviate one's pain, and the monastic world can be a place to escape from the need to struggle with finitude and to gain secure—albeit spurious—religious identity. Thus to remain in the dialectical religiousness of spiritual trial is something one voluntarily chooses. This models Christ's kenotic freedom: as God, Christ is at any point able to stop suffering, but instead, he chooses to suffer humanly.⁴³

Yet note that the voluntariness of spiritual trial should by no means suggest that the faithful individual has control over the occurrence of a spiritual trial. One never knows which part of one's life is going to be put into opposition to God, and how that is going to happen. It is not up to the individual whether, when, or how a spiritual trial begins. What the individual has control over is only her involvement with God as the prerequisite condition, and whether she says 'yes' or 'no' once she is situated in a spiritual trial. While the need for divine assistance to keep the synthetic balance already shows that human beings are not self-sufficient in their self-establishment, this receptivity in spiritual trial

43. SKS 20: NB4:95 / JP 4: 4611. The notion of Christ's kenosis, or 'emptying', derives from Philippians 2:7.

furthermore tells us that the God-relationship is not a fairy-tale solution to the problem. It does not provide the sort of predictability or control over oneself and one's relation to another that has been sought in vain in the ethical sphere and in monastic practice.

Furthermore, having a choice about whether to endure a spiritual trial does not mean that there is a way to avoid it without forsaking one's Christian-religiousness. One cannot escape a spiritual trial without succumbing to spiritual temptations and thus losing one's religious identity. This is what distinguishes spiritual trial from sin and lower temptation, as Kierkegaard frequently emphasizes. Lower temptation represents the power that distracts one from rational resolution, undermining one's personality and virtue. Sin as succumbing to such temptations should consequently be avoided for the sake of one's self-cultivation and self-establishment. Therefore, 'it can be right to fight [sin and lower temptation] by escaping . . . striving not to see nor hear the tempting thing' (SKS 22: NB12:94 / JP 4: 4023).⁴⁴ One can well escape sin and temptation without harming one's esthetic and ethical identities. One is even encouraged to do so, for once esthetic and ethical conflicts arise, whose most extreme case is the esthetical trial and the intense kind of ethical trial, it would be challenging to preserve the integrity of one's esthetic and ethical outlook. But this strategy would not work in the case of spiritual temptation and spiritual trial. Spiritual temptation cannot be avoided without canceling one's involvement with God, and spiritual trial does not intend to undermine but rather is an occasion to prove one's faith. Without enduring spiritual trial, one cannot sufficiently re-relate to God and establish oneself in faith.

6. Conclusion

I have examined Kierkegaard's conception of *Anfægtelse* as the esthetic, the ethical, and the spiritual trial respectively. Each discloses an inherent conflict between the constitutive elements of the relevant sphere, where the human individual's relation to a certain 'other' is challenged. In an esthetic trial, one's identity as the lover is challenged in a revival of self-love. It reveals the deeper deficiency of the esthetic sphere, namely, that the esthetic individual never transcends the solipsistic passion of self-love. Ethical trial can have two forms: it is either a conflict between one's ethical duty and an esthetic desire (the loose form), or between two ethical duties (the intense form). In an intense ethical trial, two duties are put into an apparent conflict. The only way out of this conflict is to subordinate one duty to the other one, so that it becomes clear which duty

44. Cf. SKS 23: NB23:93 / JP 4: 4378.

expresses the ethical. Yet the possibility of such a conflict indicates that, against the conviction of the ethical individual, the fulfillment of one's duty relies on external conditions that are subject to accidental changes.

Finally, the religious *Anfægtelse* brings us to the crisis of the self that is closest to its ultimate fulfillment in faith. I have argued that *Anfægtelse* has two subtly different meanings in the religious category. On the one hand, *Anfægtelse* as spiritual temptation distracts the individual from a proper God-relationship. It can take two forms: either it pulls the individual from the finite, human side, or it pushes the individual to the extreme of fetishizing the infinite. On the other hand, *Anfægtelse* in the sense of spiritual trial is a test of faith in which one must resist spiritual temptations in order to sustain an absolute relation to God. As the locus of a conflict, spiritual trial has a structure similar to esthetic and ethical trials. But it is qualitatively different, for it is beyond the terrain of human understanding and is defined by its involvement with the absolute. Christian-religiousness is characterized by the restless struggle of the synthetic self, the inevitability of voluntary suffering, and the humble receptivity to divine assistance. All of these features make faith a strenuous task and spiritual trial 'the most terrible' kind of trial of the three.

If the interpretation I have provided here is correct, then for Kierkegaard, security and stability are not guaranteed at any stage in the process of becoming a self. The human self as the synthesis of the finite and the infinite constantly finds itself in distress and restlessness. In this process, there is an abiding threat that the self will sink into a deep and devastating crisis. Even those with faith cannot avoid such suffering. As in the esthetic and ethical spheres, they cannot control whether they will face spiritual trials. Worse still, since the absolute God-relationship is private, their suffering cannot be shared, or even understood by others. From the external perspective, what they are undergoing is a mystery, resisting any ethical interpretation. This explains why the God-relationship of the paradigmatic figures of Christian faith is characterized by Kierkegaard as beset by anxiety, and fear and trembling. These conditions are fundamental and essential to genuine Christian-religious experience.⁴⁵

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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