

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 33 | Issue 3

Article 4

7-1-2016

"A Human Being's Highest Perfection": The Grammar and Vocabulary of Virtue in Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses

Pieter H. Vos

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Vos, Pieter H. (2016) "'A Human Being's Highest Perfection': The Grammar and Vocabulary of Virtue in Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol33/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.



“A HUMAN BEING’S HIGHEST PERFECTION”: THE GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY OF VIRTUE IN KIERKEGAARD’S UPBUILDING DISCOURSES

Pieter H. Vos

Focusing on the grammar and vocabulary of virtue in Kierkegaard’s upbuilding works, it is argued that the Danish philosopher represents a Christian conception of the moral life that is distinct from but—contrary to Alasdair MacIntyre’s claim—not completely opposed to Aristotelian and Thomistic virtue ethics. Although the realities of sin and salvation transcend virtue ethics based purely on human nature, it is demonstrated that this does not prevent Kierkegaard from speaking constructively about human nature, its teleology (a teleological conception of the self) and about the virtues. Yet, from a Christian “upbuilding” perspective, general features of human nature must be transformed profoundly, which implies more than a harmonious perfection or completion of nature (Aquinas), but less than the complete replacement of nature by grace. Since this can be seen as a particular contribution to virtue ethics, in this specific sense, Kierkegaard may be called a virtue ethicist.

Several attempts have been made to open up a dialogue between Søren Kierkegaard and virtue ethics in general and Alasdair MacIntyre’s contemporary account of virtue ethics in particular. Many of those who contributed to this dialogue criticized MacIntyre’s portrayal of Kierkegaard as an advocate of an irrational “criterionless choice”¹ by outlining Kierkegaard’s account of the nature of choice and rationality in the ethical sphere.² Others offered explorations of similarities and differences between both thinkers on various themes, e.g., their valuation of modern ethics, their understanding of character formation and selfhood, and the status of moral rationality in relation to divine revelation.³

However, MacIntyre himself stays skeptical about the possibility of connecting Kierkegaardian existential ethics and Aristotelian-Thomistic

¹MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39.

²Davenport, “The Meaning of Kierkegaard’s Choice” and Rudd, “Reason in Ethics.”

³Roberts, “Existence, Emotion, and Virtue”; Marino, “The Place of Reason in Kierkegaard’s Ethics”; Lillegard, “Thinking with Kierkegaard and MacIntyre”; Mooney, “The Perils of Polarity.”



virtue ethics.⁴ In his concluding chapter to the volume *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, he points to two important issues. First, although he admits that his portrayal of Kierkegaard was mistaken in several respects—he “ignored the complexity of the relationships between the choice of the ethical, the self that makes that choice, and the self that is constituted by that choice”⁵—MacIntyre seems to insist that according to Kierkegaard the only way to make the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical (and from the ethical to the religious) is by way of a criterionless choice.⁶ On the other hand, very interestingly, MacIntyre suggests that a different interpretation is possible as well, an interpretation in which the ethical continuity between the aesthetic (in a negative sense) and the ethical is acknowledged.

Hence, it is the second issue that creates the real gap between MacIntyre and Kierkegaard, a gap stemming from large differences between any Aristotelian-Thomistic position on the one hand and Kierkegaard’s theological conceptions of revelation and faith as opposed to human reason and nature on the other. Contrary to Kierkegaard, MacIntyre insists that, “prior to and independently of revelation and of the gift of faith, we do have a conception of the human good adequate to provide direction for our actions and a knowledge of the corresponding precepts of natural law that we can be held accountable by God.”⁷ Whereas in Aquinas’s view grace presupposes and builds upon nature, in Kierkegaard’s view there seems no relationship between the moral and intellectual virtues on the one hand and theological virtues on the other. Moreover, Kierkegaard presupposes a very different set of relationships between the will, reason, and the passions from those described by either Aristotle or Aquinas. According to MacIntyre, Kierkegaard has no place for rational choice (*pro-hairesis* or *electio*) as condition of how the virtues determine the character of our actions. His ethics is focused on “the categorical imperative of the will.”⁸ In conclusion, “the gap between an Aristotelian or Thomist ethics of the virtues and a Kierkegaardian ethics is just too great.”⁹

However, in this essay I will argue that Kierkegaard is to be located in a Christian moral tradition—in line with Augustine and the Reformation—that is distinct from but not completely opposed to Aristotelianism and Thomism. As some other Kierkegaard scholars have pointed out, Kierkegaard sees an essential divide between antiquity, including classical virtue ethics, and Christianity, a tension MacIntyre seems to under-rate. Kierkegaard’s Christian religiousness depends on a Augustinian

⁴MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 339–355.

⁵MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 340.

⁶MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 341.

⁷MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 351.

⁸MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 355.

⁹MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 353.

recognition of the rift between Greek philosophy and Christianity.¹⁰ Although in Kierkegaard's thought the realities of the Christian drama of sin and salvation decisively criticize and transcend an Aristotelian moral theory based on "human nature," this criticism does not prevent him from speaking in a positive way about human nature, its teleology, and the virtues. Yet, from a Christian perspective such general features of human nature must be *transformed* profoundly, i.e., a qualitative transformation of character is needed, as I will demonstrate in an analysis of some of Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses. In this respect, Kierkegaard also disagrees with a Thomistic model of grace completing or perfecting nature, as adopted by MacIntyre.

Therefore, the question is if and in what respect Kierkegaard can be regarded as a "virtue ethicist."¹¹ The answer to this question depends on what we consider a proper definition of "virtue ethics." As Christine Swanton has demonstrated, definitions that identify virtue ethics with just one tradition, for instance Aristotelian eudaimonism or Thomism, or a single exemplar, for instance Aristotle or Aquinas, do not suffice, since they would exclude other traditions and figures that have a claim to be understood in virtue-ethical terms.¹² Therefore, even if Kierkegaard appears not to be very Aristotelian or Thomistic, it is still an open question whether Kierkegaard can be considered a virtue ethicist, and if so, what kind of virtue ethicist he may be, or to put it a little differently: what specific contribution he could offer to virtue ethics.

Focusing on the grammar and vocabulary of virtue in Kierkegaard's upbuilding works, I will argue that Kierkegaard can be understood as virtue ethicist in the sense that he clearly uses the language of virtue, the virtues and character formation, but that he can not be identified as Aristotelian or Thomist. Precisely by emphasizing the need of radical transformation of human nature before God, Kierkegaard offers a specific contribution to virtue ethics that reaches beyond Aristotelianism and Thomism. First of all, I will shortly address MacIntyre's criticism of the ethical as a "criterionless choice" by arguing that Kierkegaard's understanding of the self is teleological and that the aesthetic and the ethical as well as the transition from the former to the latter should be understood within a teleologically-structured anthropological framework that underlies all of Kierkegaard's writings. Next, I will investigate how Kierkegaard explicitly refers to Aristotelian (and Thomistic) virtue-ethical concepts, and

¹⁰Johnson, "Neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche," points out that Kierkegaard's Religiousness B is beyond MacIntyre's famous "Aristotle or Nietzsche." Carr, "After Paganism," argues that Kierkegaard does not present an emotivism *avant la lettre*, but rather joins a long line of Christian theology that is suspicious of natural theology because this tradition shows a tendency to dilute or remove the absoluteness of revelation. Kierkegaard joins those theologians in the Christian tradition that oppose Platonic and Aristotelian rationalism.

¹¹Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 48: "I am arguing . . . that Kierkegaard is pre-eminently a 'virtue ethicist.'"

¹²Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," 316–319.

argue that Kierkegaard both values important classical virtue-ethical elements and emphasizes the need for radical transformation. I will proceed by explaining the nature of this need in an analysis of how the language of perfection and perfectability is completely inverted from independency to dependency on God, and from striving for excellence to “becoming nothing.” Finally, it will be demonstrated that a grammar of virtue is present in the upbuilding discourses, and that therefore, Kierkegaard’s transformative account of virtue and the virtues should indeed be conceived as a contribution to virtue ethics. In this specific sense, Kierkegaard may be called a virtue ethicist.

“A Human Being’s Highest Perfection”: A Teleological Conception of the Self

Let us start with a brief examination of MacIntyre’s criticism of what he calls “criterionless choice.” In his contribution to the volume *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, MacIntyre first argues that *Either/Or* denies the possibility of mediation between the aesthetic and the ethical, which implies an exclusion of thought and reason and *a fortiori* of philosophy. There may be good ethical reasons to make the transition, but from the aesthetic point of view one has attitudes and beliefs that seem to disable the aesthete from evaluating and appreciating those views. One has to have already chosen oneself as an ethical subject in order to be able to appreciate those reasons. It can only retrospectively be understood as rationally justifiable, not prospectively.¹³

At the same time MacIntyre seems to agree with Peter J. Mehl, John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd¹⁴ that Kierkegaard’s anthropology entails a central teleological view of human nature and “that it does indeed follow from that view that there are good reasons for individuals to move from the aesthetic to the ethical and not merely good-reasons-from the standpoint-of-the-ethical.”¹⁵ Moreover, Norman Lillegard’s contribution to the volume helps MacIntyre to discover a different possible interpretation of the nature of the aesthetic: suppose that the aesthetic personality can be viewed as one that is engaged in unacknowledged resistance to the ethical, “so that the aesthetic life requires a silent, but determined refusal of the ethical” and as such is already engaged with the ethical.¹⁶ Whereas the dominant interpretation emphasizes the discontinuity between the aesthetic and the ethical, this strand of interpretation points to the continuities in the subtext.

In my view, MacIntyre’s intuition is right, but he is not able to conceptualize it properly because he limits himself to analyses of what Kierkegaard later calls “the aesthetic authorship” and doesn’t take into account that

¹³MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 344.

¹⁴Mehl, “Kierkegaard and the Relativist Challenge to Practical Philosophy,” Davenport, “The Meaning of Kierkegaard’s Choice,” and Rudd, “Reason in Ethics,” respectively.

¹⁵MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 344.

¹⁶MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” 348.

an anthropological framework in which human nature is directed towards an ethical-religious *telos* underlies all Kierkegaard's works. In fact, this framework centers on what MacIntyre calls a conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*.¹⁷ The teleologically-structured anthropological view is not just a perspective within the ethical sphere, as presented in *Either/Or II*, but is part of Kierkegaard's anthropological framework that underlies all his elaborations of existential spheres and the figures that represent these spheres in the pseudonymous works, and culminates in the formula of the self in *The Sickness unto Death* and the way this formula functions in the topology of the various manifestations of despair. Thus, the various existential spheres and their individual expressions in *actuality* are to be distinguished from this anthropological framework as human *potentiality*. Mehl makes a similar claim by pointing to the distinction between "ethical reality" as the general *potential* of becoming and being a person on the one hand, and the "subjectively actual" that refers to the *actual* or existential maintaining of this ethical reality by an individual in his concrete existence, on the other.¹⁸ The former designates a potential that every individual possesses as a human being. It may be characterized as a "natural predisposition," in a sense akin to a (neo)Aristotelian conception of human nature. Whereas the ethical in the latter sense may be conceived of as a stage or life-sphere, the ethical in the former sense is not a stage but qualifies human nature/the self as such. MacIntyre's interpretation ignores that this distinction is explicit in Kierkegaard's works, resulting in contradictory evaluations of the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical.

A concept of the human being as a potentiality for development into a deeper self runs through Kierkegaard's oeuvre from *Either/Or* to *The Sickness unto Death*,¹⁹ and underlies the upbuilding works as well. In *Either/Or* this potentiality is described in terms of choice: the self chooses himself, not in his initial state of immediacy but in his "eternal validity."²⁰ In the 1844

¹⁷MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 40–41.

¹⁸Mehl, "Kierkegaard and the Relativist Challenge to Practical Philosophy," 14. I take this as a more appropriate distinction than Davenport's between (1) the cognitive awareness of the objective authority of moral principles, a condition shared by both the aesthete and the ethicist, and (2) volitional identification which gives one's actions personal significance, a condition only satisfied by the ethicist (Davenport, "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice," 82–83). *Either/Or II* is not so much about "the objective authority of moral principles" as about "ethical subjectivity" as a precondition for ethics.

¹⁹Evans speaks of "a teleological view of human nature" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 21) that is "fleshed out in a proper Aristotelian way with reference to capacities that are both universally human and distinctive in the way that humans exemplify them" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 19). Whereas other works, like *Fear and Trembling*, are more akin to a divine command ethics, the Aristotelian view is present in the core idea of becoming oneself, for instance in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where Johannes Climacus says that it is "every individual's task to become a whole person" (346/SKS 7, 316). [SKS refers to *Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter*.]

²⁰Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 211/SKS 3, 203. On the one hand, the idea of the absolute makes the self qualitatively different from how he existed before. On the other hand, choosing himself in his eternal validity does not mean that the self becomes someone other

upbuilding discourse “To Need God is a Human Being’s Highest Perfection” a similar distinction is made, but in a somewhat different setting. The discourse speaks of a “first self” that must develop into a “deeper self.” The relation between these two “selves” is portrayed as an inner struggle, a dialogue. Kierkegaard emphasizes the dynamics and development of the process of becoming oneself. In this upbuilding discourse he even uses the language of sickness and becoming healthy that is so characteristic of his later work: the deeper self is like a physician at the bedside of the sick, knowing that “this sickness is not unto death but unto life.”²¹ Whereas the first self is turned outward in seeking after the surrounding world as object of identification, the deeper self is aimed at turning the first self away from immediacy and externality to true self-knowledge.²² This does not mean that the conditions of the first self are completely worthless. In the end, when the first self submits to the deeper self, they are “reconciled.”

Since becoming a free responsible person is a potentiality that belongs to each individual’s natural capacity, *knowledge* of the human *telos* is a matter of each individual’s self-reflexive relationship to him- or herself. Basically, the human potential of personhood that belongs to each individual’s natural capacity is *itself* the normative standard by which to measure one’s own existence. In order to acquire a true conception of oneself, one must be like a teacher in relation to oneself as a learner, as one of the discourses expresses it.²³ In this sense, the ethical choice, as the affirmation of the task to actualize oneself as this definite individual, is not criterionless. It is an affirmation of oneself as a responsible human agent. The upbuilding discourse “To Need God is a Human Being’s Highest Perfection” expresses the central meaning of self-knowledge by emphasizing that the task is to know oneself not in relation to something else, but in relation to oneself.²⁴ To be sure, the discourse also directs the reader to the self “before God,” which makes a significant difference. I will return to this after an examination of Kierkegaard’s use of virtue-ethical language in general.

The Vocabulary of Character and Virtue

Although Kierkegaard’s anthropological scheme is teleologically structured, the vocabulary of “self,” “existence,” “choice,” and “subjectivity,” to which I referred in the preceding section, is apparently a modern one. What about virtue ethical concepts like “character” and “virtue”—how are they actually present in Kierkegaard’s works?

than he was before, but that he becomes himself, that is, that he chooses or, more correctly, receives himself as someone who existed before as this specific being who he is and no other (*Either/Or II*, 177, 215/SKS 3, 172–173, 206–207).

²¹Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 315/SKS 5, 307.

²²Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 309/SKS 5, 301.

²³Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, 60/SKS 5, 434.

²⁴Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 313/SKS 5, 305.

Kierkegaard does indeed employ the term "character." Whereas "subjectivity" functions in contrast with the interest of speculative philosophy, and "individual" is defined in contrast with a life oriented to and by "the crowd," and "self" designates the spiritual task of becoming oneself as opposed to being in anxiety or despair, and all these concepts are mainly directed towards modern phenomena, "character" refers to a classical virtue-ethical background. In *A Literary Review* it is used in contrast with the personality formation typical of the present age: "Morality is character; character is something engraved ($\chi\alpha\rho\alpha\sigma\sigma\omega$); but the sea has no character, nor does the sand, nor abstract common sense, either, for character is inwardness."²⁵ Here, Kierkegaard refers to the etymology of the concept, which we also find in classical virtue ethical accounts. With Robert C. Roberts, Kierkegaard's concept of character may be described as "sustained dispositional ethical . . . interest" or "commitment."²⁶

Moreover, character is a matter of formation. In *The Book on Adler* Kierkegaard refers approvingly to the importance of character formation: "In antiquity the importance of a person's upbringing was valued very highly, and it was understood as a harmonious development of that which will carry the various gifts and talents and the disposition of the personality ethically in the direction of character."²⁷ Unfortunately, this "ethical education of character," is replaced in modernity by an emphasis on "instruction" and the child is supposed to be able to bring up himself, which is "a great mistake."²⁸

In the upbuilding discourses the term "character" is absent, but as the quotation from *A Literary Review* indicates, "inwardness," which is frequently used in the discourses, functions more or less as its equivalent. Although this term is often contrasted with the outer world, its meaning is not limited to "a turn inward" or a "private interiority," but means something like "basic concern." This becomes clear in the upbuilding discourse "Strengthening in the Inner Being," where Kierkegaard writes about a person to whom not just a concern for things in the world awakens, but "a concern about what meaning the world has for him and he for the world . . . only then does the inner being announce its presence in this concern."²⁹

Furthermore, inwardness as long-term and intensive concern is closely related to another concept: passion. In *A Literary Review* Kierkegaard speaks of an "essential passion" (*vaesentlige Lidenskab*),³⁰ which David J. Gouwens describes as "an extensive interest that shapes a person's life in

²⁵Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 77–78/SKS 8, 75.

²⁶Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue," 180.

²⁷Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 133/SKS 15, 286.

²⁸Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 133/SKS 15, 286.

²⁹Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 86/SKS 5, 93. I agree with Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 97, that the juxtaposition of "inner being" and "concern" is central here.

³⁰Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 62/SKS 8, 61.

great breadth."³¹ Inwardness as intensive concern finds its counterpart in passion as extensive interest. This does not mean that every passion or emotion is capable of integrating personality into a moral character, only "essential passion" is. It is more than just an emotion, it is a uniting "idea" to which a person is passionately related, for instance a passion for justice, which encompasses a person's entire life as characterized by "seeking justice."³² In short, both inwardness and essential passion are constitutive of Kierkegaard's concept of "character." The idea of an essential passion and commitment is similar to classical conceptions, probably more to Platonic *eros* than to the (neo)Aristotelian idea of *telos*. At least, essential passion as a "uniting idea" is more "rational" than MacIntyre presupposes in his criticism of Kierkegaard's supposed voluntaristic view of morality.

The same holds for Kierkegaard's treatment of continuity or stability of character. In *A Literary Review* Kierkegaard explains that whereas a person without character is an "unstable emptiness," a person with character has something to "dwell upon."³³ In the discourse "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection," constancy is what the "deeper self" offers amidst the changing reality and inconstancy of the "first self."³⁴ In a sense, the occasional discourse on "Purity of Heart" is dedicated to an exploration of constancy of character: purity of heart is to will one thing. Kierkegaard argues that only "the good" is truly one. Only by taking on the essential character of the *object* of his willing (the good) can the self be pure in heart, i.e., one. On the other hand, he can be one only when he *wills* the good.³⁵ Interestingly, it is precisely this thought—purity of heart is to will one thing—which MacIntyre approvingly quotes and explicitly relates to the (neo)Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of "integrity" or "constancy," i.e., "singleness of purpose in a whole life."³⁶ In doing so, he in fact presupposes the teleological meaning of Kierkegaard's argument in this discourse.

Valuing and Transcending Aristotle's Realism

All these elements reflect important features of the virtue-ethical tradition, but for the most part rather implicitly. It is still a question to what extent Kierkegaard actually derives his concepts from Aristotle and other virtue-ethical representatives. An adequate way to answer this question is to trace how Kierkegaard explicitly values key representatives of virtue ethics like Aristotle and Aquinas and their virtue ethical concepts. From his

³¹Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 97.

³²Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 97.

³³Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 54/SKS 8, 54. See also Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue," 180.

³⁴Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 314/SKS 5, 306.

³⁵See Connell, *To Be One Thing*, 160–161.

³⁶MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 203, as well as his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 165, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, 143.

Notebooks we know that Kierkegaard read the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but he did not show any serious interest in Aquinas. Since at the time Hegelians were the only people that sympathized with Aquinas, in Kierkegaard's perception, Aquinas was under the verdict of being an "objective thinker." Moreover, as a Lutheran, Kierkegaard was theologically on a different track, as we will see.³⁷ Therefore, let's turn to his reading of Aristotle.

Kierkegaard read the *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1842. In Notebook 13 we find a collection of interesting entries on Aristotle's *Ethics*,³⁸ which Kierkegaard apparently read both in German and Greek, but quickly and superficially, as Håvard Løkke argues, for "it did not make a great impression on Kierkegaard."³⁹ Løkke analyzes that Kierkegaard's notes, together with other instances in his works where he refers to Aristotle's ethics, are concerned with two themes: first, with how an agent's ignorance bears on the agent's act being voluntary or not, second, with the human being as social, especially in terms of friendship.

If I limit myself to the first theme, Kierkegaard correctly observes that Aristotle regards the voluntary as a wider category than προαίρεσις (*pro-hairesis*). However, it is striking, as Løkke demonstrates, that Kierkegaard translates the latter by "intention" (*Forsæt*) instead of "choice" or "decision." Løkke concludes that Kierkegaard did not discover that choice is a key notion in Aristotle's ethics.⁴⁰ This may be correct, but does not mean that Kierkegaard and Aristotle do not have much in common on this concept (although there are differences in how each thinker relates reason, will, and the passions).

Furthermore, in my view, Løkke's overall evaluation of Kierkegaard's treatment of Aristotle is too limited. For it is noteworthy that Kierkegaard is on Aristotle's side against Socrates and Plato in rejecting the view that we are entirely governed by reason. According to Kierkegaard, Aristotle dismisses their "idealistic view . . . that all sin is ignorance." Nevertheless, Aristotle too "does not eliminate the difficulty, because he merely ends in a realistic counterposition."⁴¹ Løkke interprets this realistic position in the sense that, according to Kierkegaard, Aristotle limits himself to concrete cases and situations, in particular that whether something happens or not depends on one's choice,⁴² while, for Løkke, Kierkegaard fails to understand

³⁷See Olivares Bøgeskov, "Thomas Aquinas: Kierkegaard's View Based on Scattered and Uncertain Sources," 183–206.

³⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3, 385–386/SKS 19, 387–389; Not13:10–21.

³⁹Håvard Løkke, "Nicomachean Ethics," 47–49, quote on 49.

⁴⁰Håvard Løkke, "Nicomachean Ethics," 53.

⁴¹Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3, 385–386/SKS 19, 387–388; Not13:15.

⁴²Løkke, "Nicomachean Ethics," 54, who quotes Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 17 note/SKS 4, 225, where the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus dwells on Greek thought: "The depraved person and the virtuous person presumably do not have the power over their moral condition, but in the beginning they have the power to become the one or the other, just as the person who throws a stone has power over it before he throws it but not when he has thrown it' (Aristotle)." This quote seems to refer to *Nicomachean Ethics* 1114a 12–19.

Aristotle's point that the choice is not merely directed to concrete actions, but to becoming a virtuous person, a good character. I think that this is a speculative interpretation of Kierkegaard's comments. In my interpretation, Kierkegaard regards Aristotle's realistic position as a better alternative to the intellectual psychology of Socrates and Plato, because Aristotle stresses the voluntary nature of "sin," "such that something can be voluntary without being intended,"⁴³ as Kierkegaard remarks in the entry immediately preceding the one on Aristotle's counterposition to Socrates/Plato. At the same time, this is still not a solution, because in Aristotle's account the problem of sin is not *solved*. These remarks clearly reveal Kierkegaard's own position in regard of Aristotelian virtue ethics: Aristotle rightly holds a *realistic* view of human shortcomings and sin in comparison with the ideal of moral excellence, but cannot solve the problem of sin. Since human fallibility is a core problem, from Kierkegaard's approach any virtue ethics needs a theological basis that marks the human being's dependency on God and His forgiveness, as we will see.

Meanwhile, Kierkegaard's notes reveal that he was aware of some important classical virtue-ethical presuppositions. First, he acknowledges the importance of the Aristotelian μεσότης (*mesotès*) or *mean* in the moral virtues, such as courage, temperance, generosity and justice, and underlines its correctness, for desire and disinclination as the things with which the moral virtues struggle are neither good nor evil in themselves. He also observes that the mean is not used in Aristotle's conception of the intellectual virtues, and mentions these virtues: τέχνη (*technè*), ἐπιστήμη (*epistèmè*), σωφροσύνη (*soophrosunè*), νοῦς (*nous*), σοφία (*sophia*), though it is a mistake to mention σωφροσύνη here instead of the very important Aristotelian virtue of φρόνησις (*phronèsis*). Second, Kierkegaard emphasizes that virtue is to be seen as an *attitude or acquired ability* (ἕξις, *heksis*), which brings continuity in one's acting. Third, notwithstanding Kierkegaard's wrong translation, he observes the centrality of προαίρεσις in Aristotle and, contrary to MacIntyre's claim that I referred to in the introduction, the idea that our lives are morally formed by our previous deliberate choices is present in Kierkegaard's reading of Aristotle and arguably in his own thought as well, as I will illustrate in my analysis of one of the upbuilding discourses. Fourth, Kierkegaard is aware of the importance of the distinction between ποιεῖν (*poiein*) and πραττεῖν (*prattein*) in Aristotle, albeit that his interest is limited to how they function in poetry and art. Fifth, Kierkegaard understands the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* or happiness as an activity that is desirable in itself. Finally, Kierkegaard adopts the Aristotelian definition of motion (κίνησις, *kinèsis*) as a transition from possibility to actuality and this is a central point of departure for his thinking about freedom, the development of the self, and actuality.⁴⁴

⁴³Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3, 386/SKS 19, 388; Not13:14.

⁴⁴Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3, 385–386, 393/SKS 19, 387–389, 396; Not13: 10–21, 27.

Yet, it is questionable whether these Aristotelian concepts really had a deep impact on Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard also offers criticism of Aristotle, which reveals important differences between Aristotle and his own approach. In his notes of 1842, he criticizes Aristotle for his limited, aesthetic understanding of the human self as directed to happiness in the sense of intellectual contemplation. The contemplative life is understood in aesthetic terms and as isolation and not in terms of becoming spirit: "the happiness of the divine doesn't consist in contemplation but in eternal communication."⁴⁵ Surely, Løkke is right that Kierkegaard here posits something beyond Aristotle for which the latter should not be blamed. However, when Løkke describes Kierkegaard's criticism as being that "Aristotle's only fault in this regard is that he was born too early,"⁴⁶ such a qualification ignores that Kierkegaard here reveals how he envisions the relationship between Greek and Christian thought, namely that a philosopher like Aristotle may provide us with a valuable concept of virtue, formation and its teleological structure, but that he "lacks the category needed to *complete* the movement."⁴⁷ Christian categories do not *oppose* or replace ancient categories, but indeed add something crucial to these categories, and *transform* them in a profound way. This is precisely how Kierkegaard deals with classical virtue ethics: the whole perspective changes as soon as character and virtue are conceived as *before God*.

In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard explains the difference in approach between a classical virtue-ethical approach and his own Protestant view:

Luther says, It is not good works that make a good man, but a good man who does good works, i.e. the man is what has become habitual, something more than all individual actions. And, indeed, according to Luther, one becomes a good man through faith. Thus, first comes faith. It is not through a virtuous life, good works, and the like, that one attains faith. No, it is faith that causes one truly to do good works.⁴⁸

The main difference does not concern the formal description of virtue, for Aristotle too emphasizes that the good man is the one who has acquired good attitudes, which are more than individual actions. The point is that in Luther's Christian conception the source of the virtues differs: faith rather than what a human being himself accomplishes. This conviction is reflected in the famous remark in *The Sickness unto Death* that "the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith,"⁴⁹ which is not intended as an entire disqualification of virtue, but as an acknowledgement of the difference

⁴⁵Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3, 387/SKS 19, 389; Not13:20.

⁴⁶Løkke, "Nicomachean Ethics," 58.

⁴⁷Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3, 387/SKS 19, 389; Not13:20 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁸Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 6, 373/SKS 22, 369; NB14:42.

⁴⁹Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 82/SKS 11, 196.

in grammar and tradition between antiquity and Christianity.⁵⁰ At this point, we could say that although Kierkegaard does not explicitly refer to Aquinas, his Lutheran conception of faith based virtue is in line with the *theological* nature of a Thomistic virtue ethics. Yet, as I will show, Kierkegaard also differs from Aquinas, especially in regard of the latter's harmonious view of nature and grace. Kierkegaard's Lutheran model does not build grace upon nature, but asks for a complete renouncement of natural capacities in order to rest on grace.

In sum, Kierkegaard concurs in many respects with Aristotle (and Aquinas), but, as far as I can see, none of the Aristotelian concepts Kierkegaard mentions in his notes on the *Nicomachean Ethics* plays a decisive role in his published works. There are only a few references to these concepts, such as the notion of the mean in *The Sickness unto Death*, which, however, he understands in a non-Aristotelian way as *ne quid nimis*, "mediocrity," and as such criticizes it.⁵¹ Explicit references to Aristotelian concepts like *prohairesis*, *eudaimonia* or *praxis* are absent, which does not imply that Kierkegaardian concepts like "decision" or "choice," "eternal happiness" and "existence" do not show commonality with these Aristotelian concepts. In conclusion, what we find in Kierkegaard's works are no more and no less than classical virtue-ethical *traces*. However, an analysis of how some virtues and virtue-ethical elements appear in his upbuilding works will demonstrate that Kierkegaard's contribution consists in what he adds to the virtue ethical tradition.

"To Need God . . .": The Inverted Language of Perfection

Let us first observe the appearance of the word "virtue" in the upbuilding discourses. It is not frequently used, but whenever Kierkegaard speaks about virtue (*Dyd*) it is in a positive way. The concept of virtue is appropriate to the purpose of upbuilding. In one of the discourses in "The Gospel of Sufferings" Kierkegaard speaks of "the road of virtue," which we cannot precisely locate but consists in "*how* it is walked."⁵² Another discourse emphasizes: "It is true and always will be true that virtue is the highest sagacity"⁵³ and speaks of "the beautiful virtue of conciliatory spirit."⁵⁴ In the discourse "Against Cowardliness" virtue is called a "sacred word."⁵⁵ Kierkegaard quotes Ludwig de Ponte saying that it is wretched "to have an abundance of intentions and a poverty of action, to be rich in truths and poor in virtues."⁵⁶ This utterance functions in an argument about the

⁵⁰See Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein," 151.

⁵¹Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 86–87/SKS 11, 200.

⁵²Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 289/SKS 8, 384.

⁵³Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 380/SKS 5, 363.

⁵⁴Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 380/SKS 5, 364. Note that on the same page *duty* too functions in being dedicated to willing and practicing the good.

⁵⁵Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 370/SKS 5, 355.

⁵⁶Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 350/SKS 5, 337.

virtue of courage, meaning to act in the face of danger instead of avoiding action like a coward. In courageous action, the good is seen as "the goal," as "the truly great and noble," though it only takes on concrete meaning as something particular in relation to an individual's particularity.⁵⁷ Besides these clearly virtue-ethical explications, Kierkegaard speaks of various vices that have to be conquered in the ethical task of becoming oneself, which includes overcoming oneself. In one's inner being there may be "the temptations of glory and temptations of fear and temptations of despondency, of pride and of defiance and of sensuality."⁵⁸ In these and several other instances, the language of virtue appears to be appropriate for the upbuilding task. Although virtue itself does not function as a core concept in the discourses but rather serves the upbuilding aim, Kierkegaard's use of it is in line with traditional virtue ethical language.

Another virtue-ethical trace can be detected in how Kierkegaard applies the language of perfection (or excellence) in the discourses. At the same time, it becomes clear that unlike Plato and Aristotle, the virtues can not be achieved autonomously by one's own agency. Although the language is reminiscent of virtue ethics, perfection is not a matter of perfectibility of human nature in an Aristotelian sense, but is exclusively interpreted in the religious context of the relationship with God. In the discourse "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection," the self has to be turned away from the external in order to understand in profound self-knowledge that he is "not capable of anything at all."⁵⁹

Here, we find an example of what Kierkegaard calls "inverted dialectic" or "dialectic of reversal,"⁶⁰ which he employs in his upbuilding works to set out how in a Christian sense the positive is characterized by the negative and loss in the worldly sense is gain in a deeper sense, just as "the butterfly *gains* by losing the caterpillar's chrysalis."⁶¹ Thus, perfection is paradoxically present in the acknowledgment of one's *incapability*. The highest a person can achieve is to become fully convinced that he himself is capable of nothing.⁶² The self must "become nothing before God"⁶³ in order to rest in God "who is capable of all things."⁶⁴ Perfection includes the acknowledgment of one's "real self," and is interpreted as dependency on God. Kierkegaard wants to make his reader aware of the gift-like character of the self. In the end, it is not by one's own power that one becomes

⁵⁷Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 357–358/SKS 5, 343–344.

⁵⁸Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 320/SKS 5, 311.

⁵⁹Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 319/SKS 5, 310.

⁶⁰Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 4, 116, 292–293/SKS 20, 194 and 292; NB:194 and NB4:11.

⁶¹Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 4, 292–293/SKS 20, 292; NB4:11.

⁶²Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 307/SKS 5, 300.

⁶³Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 369/SKS 5, 354.

⁶⁴Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 318/SKS 5, 309–310. See also *The Sickness unto Death*, 71/SKS 11, 185.

oneself, since one cannot create oneself.⁶⁵ In this sense, there is no true conception of the self without a corresponding conception of God.⁶⁶ The rather extreme notion of “annihilation before God” is important in order to emphasize the religious moment in which the self becomes aware of the fact that he is not able to realize himself by himself. To need God is precisely the real perfection of man.

How is this theological perspective related to the philosophical-anthropological “natural predisposition” we discovered previously? Interestingly, this discourse still presupposes that a person without the knowledge of dependency on God can still be a self with deep “roots in existence” and profound knowledge of its capabilities and talents which he develops “as much as possible in conformity with his given situation.”⁶⁷ These natural capabilities are acknowledged, but from a religious upbuilding perspective such self-knowledge and self-realization is incomplete and may even be a delusion, since one knows oneself in relation to “something else” instead of knowing oneself in relation to oneself and to God. Hence, the emphasis is put on the inverted conception of perfection as incapability before God, who at the same time makes all things possible.⁶⁸

Notwithstanding this radical transformation, the natural is thus somehow presupposed. That the former does not exclude the latter becomes also clear in the discourse “To Preserve One’s Soul in Patience”: “Let us praise what is truly praiseworthy, the glory of human nature; . . . let us pray that we might be granted the grace to perfect this glory gloriously in a more beautiful and more unambiguous way.”⁶⁹ In one of the Christian discourses of “The Gospel of Sufferings,” Kierkegaard refers to the “moral order of things” that is “easily grasped” and “universally accepted.”⁷⁰ All kinds of earthly ends or goods and related means belong to this order. On the other hand, Kierkegaard speaks of the “infinitely superior” end of “eternal happiness.”⁷¹ This good “beyond all measure”⁷² is decisive, which points to a radical transformation of nature by grace, a “profound change” of what “natural man” wishes or desires.⁷³

⁶⁵See Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 215/SKS 3, 207.

⁶⁶Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 63/SKS 5, 437; *The Sickness unto Death*, 40, 79, 113–114/SKS 11, 155, 193, 225–226; Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 160/SKS 12, 163–164. See Vos, “Self,” 23–28.

⁶⁷Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 313/SKS 5, 304.

⁶⁸Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 313–314/SKS 5, 305–306.

⁶⁹Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 182/SKS 5, 186.

⁷⁰Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 312/SKS 8, 404–405.

⁷¹Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 312/SKS 8, 404–405.

⁷²Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 312/SKS 8, 404–405.

⁷³Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 250/SKS 8, 349. See also 141/SKS 8, 239, where Kierkegaard distinguishes between an eternal understanding in which “the means and the end are one and the same,” and the temporal, mundane understanding in which “the end is considered more important than the means.”

I think that "transformation" is indeed an adequate description of how Christian conceptions of faith and grace relate to natural virtuousness in Kierkegaard's thought. Transformation implies more than just the perfection or completion of nature, but less than the complete replacement of nature by grace. Although Kierkegaard uses the language of perfection, he does not adopt a Thomistic model of *gratia perficit naturam*, since this model would be too harmonious. Rather than by (natural) progress or a Thomistic completion of natural capacities, in this view virtue is marked by transformation that requires "inversion" and "conversion." In the end, this has to do with the radical nature of human fallibility and sin. As Sylvia Walsh states, in Kierkegaard's view human character is formed via a relation to God in Christ, who not only atones for human sin but also constitutes the qualitative criterion and ethical goal for human selfhood, "which is always in the process of being realized due to its infinite character and the continuation of sin."⁷⁴

A Grammar of Virtue

In Kierkegaard's treatment of specific classical and Christian virtues in the upbuilding works we detect similar patterns of both continuity and discontinuity with classical and medieval virtue ethics. Courage, for instance, presupposes that there is some resistance. As in the traditional description, courage is the proper attitude for facing danger and for overcoming anxiety; Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of a rider on a horse. The rider is the courageous one that subdues what is base and shying in him.⁷⁵ On the other hand, courage is understood within a Christian framework of meaning, namely as an attitude that is related to suffering rather than to fighting. The notion that courage is marked by voluntary and avoidable suffering reflects a Christian conceptualization of this virtue. The prime example is not the warrior, as in the Greek conception, but the martyr who is willing to suffer for the good.

Another important virtue in the upbuilding works is patience. Whereas "courage goes freely into the suffering that could be avoided, . . . patience makes itself free in the unavoidable suffering."⁷⁶ Patience perfectly illustrates what virtue is: "a category of freedom" making literally "a virtue of necessity," of what is defined as necessity, namely the unavoidable.⁷⁷ Again Kierkegaard distinguishes between a natural and a Christian conception

⁷⁴Walsh, "Becoming a Person of Character," 92. However, her claim that Kierkegaard may be called an ethicist of character and not a virtue ethicist is not convincing, since this ignores the presence of a grammar of virtue. Walsh emphasizes the discontinuity of Kierkegaard with Aristotelianism and Thomism, but neglects the continuity that is also present in Kierkegaard's works. Moreover, the emphasis on the process of becoming of character and selfhood as such is not contrary to Aristotle and Aquinas, whereas the radical nature of sin and the need for complete redemption is.

⁷⁵Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 118/SKS 8, 119.

⁷⁶Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 119/SKS 8, 220.

⁷⁷Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 119/SKS 8, 221.

of patience. In a natural sense patience is beneficial in order to achieve something in life—the expectation, the fulfillment is so to say bound up with temporality. In this case, patience is directed to an external condition, to something that is gained by virtue of patience as a means.⁷⁸ Religiously speaking, patience is required in order to gain and preserve one's soul; moreover, gaining one's soul *is* precisely gaining patience. Finally, patience is defined in terms derived from the Christian tradition. Patience is not just about giving each person and each thing the time they need or waiting for the fulfillment of a wish, but real patience “leaves its expectancy up to God.”⁷⁹

From this perspective it is understandable that an Aristotelian virtue like magnanimity is not seen as a virtue, because of the assumption that it is important that you have much to give. Rather than magnanimity, it is the Christian virtue of mercy that comes to the fore.⁸⁰ For mercifulness consists not in *what* one gives but in *how* one gives.⁸¹ Finally, the discourses show some traces of the trio of faith, hope and love.⁸² These virtues function in keeping a person in the decision to be with the good; as such they are treated by Kierkegaard, like Aquinas, as virtues of the will. On the other hand, we nowhere find the Thomistic conception of infused virtues as habits that enable one to acquire salvation through a supernatural enhancement of one's natural capabilities. It is not by infusion but by receiving redemption and by participating in God's renewal of the self that we may grow in the virtues. In this way, various other virtues are described in language that both reflects elements of a multifaceted history of virtue ethics and emphasizes different elements.

Admittedly, Kierkegaard does not offer a coherent table of cardinal and theological virtues and virtues that can be derived from them, as Aquinas does. Therefore, the proper approach is to examine whether an essential *grammar* of virtue is present in Kierkegaard's treatment of those qualities we usually call virtues. Following Roberts's Wittgensteinian approach, “grammar” in this case means “some kind of internal conceptual order that the virtue possesses.”⁸³ “Grammar” also points to the distinctiveness of a particular language of virtue and the virtues, bringing out “those distinctive concepts in terms of which an exemplifier of these virtues ‘sees the world.’”⁸⁴ Kierkegaard's treatment of the virtues in the upbuilding works displays at least three grammatical rules that may be regarded as constitutive of the grammar of virtue he uses.

⁷⁸Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 161–162/SKS 5, 161–162.

⁷⁹Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 221/SKS 5, 220.

⁸⁰Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 362/SKS 5, 348.

⁸¹Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 327.

⁸²For instance, Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 100–101/SKS 8, 204–205.

⁸³Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein,” 154.

⁸⁴Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein,” 155.

A first grammatical rule is that virtues are not simply described as dispositions to perform actions that follow ethical rules, but rather as *encompassing attitudes of a person* as moral character. In Kierkegaard's description of patience, for instance, a kind of circularity functions that is akin to Aristotle—patience is developed through patient action and the virtue of patience enables one to act patiently—which also underscores that virtue is an encompassing attribute characterizing a person: "The person who grows in patience does indeed grow and develop. What is it that grows in him? It is patience. Consequently, patience grows in him, and how does it grow? Through patience."⁸⁵

A second grammatical rule concerns the *complex psychology of virtue*, in which one virtue is in one way or another *related to other virtues*. In order to be courageous, one has to be prudent as well. It may also require perseverance, hope and other virtues. This aspect is traditionally expressed in the so-called doctrine of "the unity of the virtues." Kierkegaard does not offer an account of such doctrine, but in his treatment of the virtue of meekness or "gentle courage," for instance, he demonstrates that this virtue is at least compounded of other virtues:

There is courage [*Mod*], which bravely defies dangers; there is high-mindedness [*Høimod*], which proudly lifts itself above grievances; there is patience [*Taalmod*], which patiently bears sufferings; but the gentle courage [*sagte Mod*] that carries the heavy burden lightly is still the most wonderful compound.⁸⁶

In "gentle courage" or meekness the strength of courage and the endurance of patience are combined. Moreover, the virtues find their unity in their directedness toward the good. The pursuit of this goal requires other virtues, for instance love, self-control and resoluteness.⁸⁷

A third element belonging to the grammar of virtue is that a *broad range of human capacities* such as knowledge, emotion, will and imagination are involved.⁸⁸ In my view, this applies to Kierkegaard's treatment of the virtues, although not without reserve: in the end the will seems to be decisive. In "Purity of Heart" the relationship between feeling, knowledge, and will becomes clear. In relation to the good, the starting point is "immediate feeling," which is "the vital force" in which "is life," but this feeling "must 'be kept'" in order not to lead to double-mindedness. It must "not be left to its own devices, but . . . be entrusted to the power of something higher that keeps it."⁸⁹ It needs "knowledge of the good," which provides a clear understanding of one's situation. However, knowledge and understanding

⁸⁵Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 169/SKS 5, 168.

⁸⁶Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 239–240/SKS 8, 339.

⁸⁷Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 361/SKS 5, 347: "it is certainly true that the good, the truly great and noble, is different for different people, but resolution, which is the true acknowledgement, is still the same. This is a very upbuilding thought."

⁸⁸Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein," 154–155.

⁸⁹Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 72/SKS 8, 179.

can also deteriorate into double-mindedness, as soon as they call you away from actuality for the sake of obtaining an observer's point of view. Knowledge or understanding must "penetrate time," in a "deliberation" that will not lead to knowledge from the "distance of eternity" but to a real understanding of oneself in actuality.⁹⁰ Therefore, ultimately the will is needed as the most decisive capacity in one's dedication to the good. It even seems that the will completely overrules knowledge and reason: it is double-mindedness to think that not "the will is the mover but that it itself is to be moved . . . and supported by reasons, considerations, the advice of others, experiences, and rules of conduct."⁹¹ Yet, this is only one part of the story. As Roberts has pointed out, the upbuilding discourses repeatedly instruct the reader how to *think* about a particular situation. The key to gaining freedom from all kinds of care, for instance, is not to change one's physical or social circumstances, but to change one's way of thinking about a situation.⁹² It is the "power of thought" that can take away "the thought of possession."⁹³ Consciousness, i.e., a particular way of thinking, is a decisive condition in an upbuilding process in which one also comes to know oneself.⁹⁴ Thus, religious thoughts are the basis for a configuration of emotional responses. These patterns of response may become stable dispositions of the personality.

As a whole, the discourses show an ambiguous evaluation of thought and reason, including what we may call "prudence" or "practical wisdom" in the sense of *phronesis*. Reason can be used both positively and negatively. On the one hand, (religious) thought and understanding definitely have a positive function in how to respond to the vicissitudes of life. On the other hand, reason can operate as *Klogthed*, meaning "shrewdness," "calculating smartness," "sophisticated reasoning," which makes one avoid real dedication to the good and real resoluteness over against those vicissitudes. One must do away with all such calculation, shrewdness and probability, in order to will the good only "because it is the good."⁹⁵ In this respect the Augustinian and Protestant emphasis on the will is indeed prevalent over the acknowledgment of human rational powers. Although Kierkegaard thus gives a particular ordering of the human capacities related to the virtues, he nevertheless does employ what we have called a "grammar of virtue."

⁹⁰Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 73–74/SKS 8, 180–181.

⁹¹Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 75/SKS 8, 182.

⁹²Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue," 190–191.

⁹³Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 26/SKS 10, 38.

⁹⁴Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 314/SKS 5, 306. See also the theme "What Meaning and What Joy There Are in the Thought of Following Christ" (Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 218/SKS 8, 320, italics mine) and the title "Thoughts that Wound from Behind—for Upbuilding" (Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 161/SKS 10, 169, italics mine).

⁹⁵Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 380/SKS 5, 364.

Conclusion

Is Kierkegaard a virtue ethicist? The answer depends on how virtue ethics is defined. In her concise analysis, Swanton argues that neither a concept of virtue ethics as directed to the flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of the possessor of virtue, to excellence and practical wisdom as necessary components, nor a concept of virtue ethics that takes agent-centeredness as its core, but a concept of virtue ethics that centers on virtue notions in general, such as justice or kindness, should be taken to define what is to be regarded as virtue ethics and what not.⁹⁶ If we follow this argument, Kierkegaard is to be regarded as a virtue ethicist, since he explicitly and implicitly refers to both the vocabulary and the grammar of virtue and the virtues. However, in the sense of a pre-eminent representative of the ethical theory that most consider to be virtue ethics *par excellence*, i.e., Aristotelianism and Thomism, Kierkegaard can *not* be regarded as a virtue ethicist without reserve. As a whole, his explicit references to this particular tradition are too limited and his explorations of virtue and the virtues are too different for such a qualification.

Although Kierkegaard's conception of the will and his overall moral psychology differ from Aristotle's and Aquinas's, Kierkegaard's depictions of virtue and the virtues in the upbuilding discourses demonstrate that both a particular vocabulary of virtue and a "grammar of virtue" are clearly present. Precisely because of his specific treatment of virtue and the virtues, Kierkegaard offers a particular contribution to the broad tradition of virtue ethics. In Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses the virtues serve the aim of the upbuilding, i.e., to make the reader aware of him- or herself as existing "before God." The upbuilding can be seen as directed towards the *telos* of selfhood and as such functions in a teleologically structured anthropological view. As MacIntyre himself suggests, what separates him from Kierkegaard is not the lack of teleology, but the different conceptions of reason, deliberate choice and the relationship between the natural and the theological. Whereas MacIntyre, in line with Aquinas, considers revelation to be completely in line with ethical reason and the theological virtues to be *additional* to the natural virtues, in Kierkegaard's Augustinian-Protestant view the necessity of radical *transformation* is pivotal, yet not in such a way that the natural capacities of human nature are completely ruled out. Radical transformation is needed since a human being cannot achieve moral excellence by his own activity, as Kierkegaard already observed in his early remarks on Aristotle's ethics. The importance of this notion is that it recognizes that character formation is deeply frustrated by moral flaws and human shortcomings. Therefore, in his moral striving the human being continuously depends on God's grace as the true source of his perfection.

Protestant Theological University

⁹⁶Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," 315–338.

References

- Carr, Karen L. 2001. "After Paganism: Kierkegaard, Socrates, and the Christian Tradition." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 173–190.
- Connell, George. 1985. *To Be One Thing: Personal Unity in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Mercer University Press).
- Davenport, John J. 2001. "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice between the Aesthetic and the Ethical: A Response to MacIntyre." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 75–112.
- Evans, C. Stephen. 2004. *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press).
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0199272174.001.0001>
- Gouwens, David J. 1996. *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge University Press). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511520112>
- Johnson, Richard. 2001. "Neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 151–172.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1978. *Two Ages*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1985a. *Philosophical Fragments*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1985b. *The Sickness unto Death*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1987. *Either/Or II*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1990. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1991. *Practice in Christianity*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1992. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1993a. *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1993b. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1995. *Works of Love*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1997. *Christian Discourses*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1998. *The Book on Adler*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 2010. *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 3. Edited by Bruce H. Kirmmse and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton University Press).

- Kierkegaard, Søren. 2011. *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 4. Edited by Bruce H. Kirmmse and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 2012. *Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 6. Edited by Bruce H. Kirmmse and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. n.d. *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS) (G.E.C. Gads Forlag).
- Lillegard, Norman. 2001. "Thinking with Kierkegaard and MacIntyre about the Aesthetic, Virtue, and Narrative." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 211–232.
- Løkke, Håvard. 2008. "Nicomachean Ethics: Ignorance and Relationships." In *Kierkegaard and the Greek World: Aristotle and Other Greek Authors*, edited by Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, Vol. 2, Tome II (Ashgate), 46–58.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed.).
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (University of Notre Dame Press).
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press).
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2001. "Once More on Kierkegaard." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*. Edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 339–355.
- Marino, Gordon D. 2001. "The Place of Reason in Kierkegaard's Ethics." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 113–128.
- Mehl, Peter J. 2001. "Kierkegaard and the Relativist Challenge to Practical Philosophy (with a New Postscript)." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 2–38.
- Mooney, Edward F. 2001. "The Perils of Polarity: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre in Search of Moral Truth." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 233–264.
- Olivares Bøgeskov, Benjamín. 2008. "Thomas Aquinas: Kierkegaard's View Based on Scattered and Uncertain Sources." In *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, edited by Jon Stewart. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, Vol. 4 (Ashgate), 183–206.
- Roberts, Robert C. 1995. "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics.'" In *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, edited by Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Indiana University Press), 142–166.
- Roberts, Robert C. 1998. "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge University Press), 177–206.
- Rudd, Anthony. 2001. "Reason in Ethics: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard." In *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Open Court), 131–150.

- Swanton, Christine. 2013. "The Definition of Virtue Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, edited by Daniel C. Russell (Cambridge University Press), 315–338. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCO9780511734786.015>
- Vos, Pieter. 2015. "Self." In *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, Vol. 15, Tome VI (Ashgate), 23–28.
- Walsh, Sylvia. 2016. "On Becoming a Person of Character." In *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*, edited by Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans (Baylor University Press), 75–94.