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**Kierkegaard and Moral Guilt:
Can the Ethical Forgive Significant
Ethical Failure?**

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Abstract

Assuming both a Christian and a Kantian perspective, Kierkegaard argues that our moral lives aim at perfection and that we must of necessity fail to achieve that perfection. This consequent failure in ethical life make possible the existential choice of faith in God as the Person who can forgive such ethical failure.

Against Kierkegaard's usage of the quotation from the Gospel according to Matthew: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (NIV, Matt 5:48),' this paper follows scripture scholars who have found that 'Be perfect' means not 'Be morally flawless, but to love as God does, maturely and compassionately, without partiality,' a command that is possible to realize at times. Against Kierkegaard's assumption of a Kantian ethics that demands perfection, this paper takes up Kierkegaard's own suggestion that an Aristotelian ethics need not aim at an impossible perfection in its definition of virtue. Furthermore, the paper finds a deep emphasis upon compassion in Aristotle's analysis of friendship of the virtuous, suggesting that forgiveness of a friend for a moral flaw is possible for the sake of helping a friend to become virtuous again.

The paper then considers more fully Kierkegaard's arguments (1) that everyone fails the ethical and (2) that the ethical sphere cannot forgive significant ethical failure. In final response, the paper argues that it is reasonable to conclude that the ethical level can incorporate loving forgiveness as a basic attitude towards self and others which brings about personal growth.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Guilt, Forgiveness

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Kierkegaard identifies the ethical stage of life as an absolute requirement for choosing the religious stage of life in that a person must have passed through the ethical stage and failed at it so profoundly that one needs to choose to believe in God as the only way of forgiving one's sin (Kierkegaard, 1941, 347 and 26). This point might be easy for some persons to affirm for themselves since they may believe that they have committed an unforgiveable sin and that only God can forgive them. However, Kierkegaard's argument is intended to be universally applicable to every human. He argues that every person must seek the ethical and necessarily fail in doing so. As he writes: 'The ethical begins straightaway with this requirement to every person: you *shall* be perfect; if you are not, it is immediately charged to you as guilt (Kierkegaard, 1967, 998).'

First, from a Christian perspective and then, from a Kantian perspective, Kierkegaard assumes that ethics deals with the attainment of perfection. The quotation on perfection is from Jesus in Matthew 5:48, as the New International Version states: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (NIV, Matt 5:48).' However, this Kierkegaardian interpretation, although it fits with what many others interpret, does not fit with all Biblical scholarship. Fred B. Craddock, professor of preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, comments:

It helps to attend more carefully to the word "perfect." The word does not mean morally flawless but rather mature, complete, full grown, not partial. Luke uses the word to speak of fruit maturing (8:14) and a course being finished (13:32). John uses it to describe the fully realized unity of Jesus' followers (17:23) and James employs the same word to characterize works as the completion of faith (2:22). Paul's favorite use of the word is to portray the quality of maturity among Christians (I Cor. 2:6; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:12, 15). However, this command to be perfect comes most clearly into focus and into the realm of reasonable expectation when viewed within its context. First, the call to perfection comes within a discussion of relationships. Second, Jesus rejects for his followers relationships that are based on the double standard of love for the neighbor and hatred for the enemy. . . .

. . . God does not react, but acts out of love toward the just and unjust, the good and the evil. God is thus portrayed as perfect in relationships, that is, complete: not partial but impartial. God's perfection in this context is, therefore, love offered without partiality.

Jesus calls on his followers to be children of God in this same quality. "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, you must love without partiality, as God does. Thus understood, perfection is not only possible but actually realized whenever and wherever our relationships come under the reign of God (Craddock, 123).

Furthermore, there is another version of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5: 48, which appears in Luke's Sermon on the Plain, Luke 6:36, and is closer to the original Aramaic of Jesus: 'Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate (CEB, Luke 6:36).' Richard Gula points out that '*Compassion* comes from the [Aramaic] word for "womb" (Gula, 103) He also notes that 'Elizabeth Johnson further illuminates divine compassion to be like a mother moved by concern for the children of her womb (Gula, 103).' This translation of Luke certainly brings out the all-encompassing, impartial love which God has for all, both the just and the unjust, and which is to be the model for human behavior and fits very well with the insightful commentary of Craddock on Matthew's usage of the word 'perfection.' The point is not the absurd demand that humans be perfected in every moral detail of their lives, but that humans be compassionate as their Father is, a command that is possible to realize at times.

However, when Kierkegaard argues for a strict notion of perfection as something which humans are called to do, but which it is impossible for them to do, he is also assuming a Kantian ethics. Ethics is like the law, a strict disciplinarian that demands absolute obedience to the difficult command of perfection, but which is an impossibility (Kierkegaard, 1980, 16-17).¹ However, Kierkegaard himself points out that Aristotelian ethics does not aim at an impossible perfection in its definition of virtue (Kierkegaard, 1980, 16-17).

Let us then examine Aristotle's concept of virtue as achievable for humans. He says, 'Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it (Aristotle, NE, 2, 6).' In striving to develop the virtues as habits, it is obvious to Aristotle that the individual will make some mistakes in either excess or defect, and then gradually find that mean between excess and defect appropriate to her as an individual. Of course, Aristotle points out that there are some actions and feelings such as murder or jealousy which have no mean (Aristotle, NE, 2, 6). But very little of his ethics is devoted to a consideration of these actions and feelings evil in themselves. Rather the whole thrust of his ethics is to create ways of being happy that are respectful of all citizens, especially through justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom. Moreover, the largest portion of his ethics, namely two books out of ten, is devoted to a rich analysis of friendship as a virtue. He gives the highest praise to and deepest analysis of friendship of virtue. Note this rich analysis by one commentator:

¹Wollheim calls this Kantian perfectionism "the *asceticism* of morality. . . . the unwillingness to take seriously the actual material on which it is exercised: the embodied person. Perfection, for instance, is considered as though it were a part of the genuine aspirations of morality." Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984) p.202.

Friendship between A and B is a good for A (an aspect of his flourishing) and a good for B, too. But to be a friend, A must act substantially for B's good (not his own, A's) and must value B's good for the sake of B (rather than for the sake of what he, A, can get out of the friendship); in other words, A must treat B's own good as an aspect of his (A's) good. Yet at the same time, B must value A's good for the sake of A, and treat A's good as an aspect of his (B's) own good (Finnis, 148-149).

When these two friends act for the good of themselves and each other, they have certainly transcended selfishness and have a true compassion for each other, like that of a mother for the child of her womb (Aristotle NE, 9:4). And like a mother, they will put their lives on the line into order to protect the life of their friend, even unto death (Aristotle, NE, 9, 8). The ideals of the best kind of friendship, friendship of virtue, are not an impossible ethics for Aristotle. This ethics is realizable through the joint efforts of two friends who are friends for the sake of realizing virtue in each other, and the best proof of the reality of this kind of friendship is found in the actions of those who would die for their friends. As Aristotle affirms,

It is true of the good man too that he does many acts for the sake of his friends and his country, and if necessary dies for them; for he will throw away both wealth and honours and in general the goods that are objects of competition, gaining for himself nobility; since he would prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long one of mild enjoyment, a twelvemonth of noble life to many years of humdrum existence, and one great and noble action to many trivial ones. Now those who die for others doubtless attain this result; it is therefore a great prize that they choose for themselves (Aristotle, NE, 9, 8)

Kierkegaardian Ethics

In summary, Kierkegaard has assumed both that Christian ethics and Kantian ethics demand an impossible perfection, but I have developed an analysis of Christian ethics that is not aimed at an impossible perfection, but at a realizable compassion, and I have also developed Kierkegaard's own suggestion to look at the Aristotelian concept of ethics as rooted in virtue and the realistic possibilities of attaining virtue. Nevertheless, in this next part of the paper I will look at the foundation of ethics for Kierkegaard and see whether or not he can establish a more solid basis for an ethics dedicated to an impossible ideal of perfection.

Walter Sikes evaluates Kierkegaard as offering a freely chosen, existential commitment to the fundamental moral law of the ethical sphere of life, writing:

There is no law of necessity that moves the possible into the actual. The passage from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere of existence is not made by way of some bridge between the two. There is no bridge but instead a great gulf. The transition is always a “leap” that is never devoid of reflection though never produced by reflection. It is an “internal decision in which the individual puts an end to mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it.” The leap by which one actualizes existence in the ethical sphere consists of a radical decisive act—a passionate choice. (Sikes, 1968, 57; see also Kierkegaard, 1941, 302; 304, footnote).¹

Kierkegaard has reinterpreted ‘Know thyself’ as ‘Choose thyself (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, 260).’ The Socratic commitment to the examined way of life is the central ethical commitment in an individual’s life. Kierkegaard has emphasized this commitment as a choice. Hence he has placed the responsibility upon the individual in the ethical sphere for succeeding or failing in his moral life. If the individual does not know himself or if the individual does not do the morally correct action, it is because he has chosen not to know himself and/or not to be morally good (Kierkegaard, 1954, S unto D, 225).²

Because Kierkegaard has emphasized choice both in establishing and in achieving the ethical commitment, the individual’s ethical reflection:

¹See also A. J. Rudd, “Kierkegaard and the Skeptics,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 6:1, p. 86-87: ‘This is the point of the Kierkegaardian dialectic of the “stages of life”. What drives—or may drive—the existentially concerned individual from the aesthetic to the ethical, and on to the religious, is a sense of something lacking in her life, a need for meaning that is unmet within her current way of life. When Kierkegaard describes the transition from one stage to another as a “leap”, this is in opposition to the view that there is necessity [or rational demonstrability] to the process, that one cannot help moving through the stages in a set order. . . . “But how,” the sceptic responds, “do we know that there really is a God, or that there are real moral demands?” to which the answer, objectively speaking, is that even if such notions were intelligible, we could never be sure they were valid. The ethico-religious individual believes in the reality of the Good because he or she feels an unsatisfied hunger for it. “But could this hunger not just be an illusion, a product of social conditioning or personal neurosis?” Yes, it could. There are no “objective” guarantees beyond the individual’s felt sense of need for the good.’ In this light, we may argue that Kierkegaard’s existential choice of the foundations of his ethics could lead us to reasonably question his assumption that the Good that we existentially define is an Absolute Perfection that is impossible to achieve, thereby making us inevitably guilty for failure to attain Absolute Perfection.

²Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death in Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1954) p. 225. Kierkegaard has an interesting psychological analysis of the interplay between knowledge and choice of the ethical. Suppose after one has reflected and determined what the moral ideal requires one to do that . . . one does not do it immediately, ‘but the will lets some time pass, there is an interim, that means, “We’ll see about that tomorrow.” All this while the intelligence becomes more and more obscured and the lower nature triumphs more and more. For alas, the good must be done—at once, the moment it is known. . . . And then when the intelligence has become duly darkened [due to the will’s delaying tactics], the intelligence and will can understand one another better, for the intelligence has gone over to the side of the will’

. . . makes the individual realize two things: (1) his distance from the ethical ideal and (2) the need for a free decision to attain the eternal ideal. (1) Ethical reflection dissolves the esthetic dream that the individual man naturally coincides with the conditions of his enduring happiness. (2) Ethical reflection dissolves the esthetic dream that the individual can avoid the strenuous (Collins, 1962, *Three Paths in Philosophy*).

It is only free choice in the form of a lasting commitment which can free the individual from the aesthetic dream that human fulfillment lies in the momentary and the immediate. It is only free choice in the form of a whole-hearted commitment which can lead the individual to the attainment of the ideal. However, here precisely is where the problem lies for Kierkegaard. The individual by one's own free effort cannot live up to the moral ideal which one has chosen. Collins explains:

Despite his emphasis upon decisive moral action, the ethical person is likely to become lost in endless reflection upon the unconditional demands of the moral law and the inadequacy of his human resources. This comparison between the moral norm and particular human actions brings the purely ethical life to a standstill—via an “overdose of repentance.” The unique feature of this repentance, however, is that it does not concern past deeds so much as future attempts to achieve the moral ideals (Collins, 1962, *Three Paths in Philosophy*).

If Kierkegaard is correct that every human individual who attempts to live the ethical commitment fails of necessity to do so, then the ethical commitment leads the individual to despair of necessity. The only way in which this despair can be transcended would be through repentance to a personal God who is above the moral law and who thereby can forgive the individual for breaking the universal laws. The ethical ideal as a universal ideal works, Kierkegaard says, when the individual lives by that ideal, that is, when he incarnates the universal into his particular existence. However, ‘when the individual by his guilt has gone outside the universal, he can return to it only by virtue of having come as the individual into an absolute relationship with the absolute [namely, God] (Kierkegaard, 1954, F & T, 108) because, Kierkegaard claims, the moral law as a universal ideal cannot apply to the individual who has placed himself outside the universal. Consequently, ‘as soon as sin makes its appearance ethics comes to grief precisely upon repentance; for repentance is the highest ethical expression, but precisely as such it is the deepest ethical self-contradiction (Kierkegaard, 1954, F & T, 108).’ If every individual must fail in living the ethical commitment, then the highest level of subjectivity, the deepest level of intensification of subjectivity, which the ethical can attain to is to persist through the despair of sin to repentance, but such repentance would be the first stage of the ethical religious way of life.

The assumptions of Kierkegaard which make repentance the next step in the development of the self are: (1) everyone fails to live up to the ethical ideal and (2) the ethical level itself cannot forgive the individual since he has placed himself outside the universal ideal of the ethical. Kierkegaard does not make these assumptions without careful reflection. In the second volume of *Either/Or*, Judge William includes the sermon of an obscure Jutland pastor who ‘has apprehended what I said to you and also what I was desirous of saying (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, 342).’ And the title of the sermon is ‘The Edification Implied in the Thought That as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, 342).’

(1) Everyone Fails the Ethical

Mackey explains how even the good person must consider himself guilty, as stated in point (1) above, as failing to live up to the ethical:

To make his point, the priest examines a relationship between two lovers. Love is the Judge’s specialty, but the priest considers a possibility that never arises in the Assessor’s life or thought. Suppose, he says, a radical conflict between lover and beloved. How can such a conflict be reconciled? Will the lover spend himself computing the rights and wrongs of each party to the relationship? Even if that were not an impossible task, such pettiness would hardly bespeak a deep and sincere love. Will he assert his own right against the beloved. If he does, then it is not the beloved but his own rectitude that he loves. The true lover will neither defend himself nor bargain for advantages; the true lover will without reservation put himself in the wrong that his beloved may be right and their love secured (Mackey, 88).

Kierkegaard points out that we relate differently to those we love and those we do not love. When someone we do not love offends us, Kierkegaard says, ‘Your soul is not callous to the suffering they inflict upon you, but search and examine yourself and are convinced that you are in the right (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, 349).’ But suppose you are offended by one whom you love. If you were to think that you were in the right and the beloved in the wrong, ‘this thought would not tranquilize you, you would explore anew every possibility. . . . You would wish that you might be in the wrong, you would try to find something which might speak in his defense, and if you did not find it, you would first find comfort in the thought that you were in the wrong (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, 349—350).’

There is, Kierkegaard points out, no necessity which requires the lover to admit that he is in the wrong. For the evidence is either clear that the beloved has done wrong or ambiguous about who is at fault (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, 349). The lover does not for the sake of truth has to admit that the lover was at fault. There is no logical necessity demanded by evidence which is clear and forceful. But there is the requirement of love that the lover seek to advance the

good of the beloved, and for this reason the lover is willing to admit that the fault was his. Now, of course, if the beloved is sincere in her love, then she will also admit that the fault was hers in order to secure their union and acceptance. But then we would have to say that this reconciliation of the two lovers is precisely a choice on their part.

It appears difficult to reconcile the lover's assumption of guilt with Kierkegaard's emphasis upon 'Know thyself' as 'Choose thyself.' If, as Kierkegaard has assumed, the lover was in the right, would we not have to say that the lover is knowing himself falsely when he takes upon himself guilt? If the beloved has free choice in the relationship and is the one who has chosen to do wrong, how is the beloved's self-knowledge advanced when someone else takes the blame? For example, consider the story of the Prodigal Son. When the son returns home and asks forgiveness for his sins against the father, the father does not say that the son was not guilty; rather, the father simply forgives the son. The story would appear to contradict Kierkegaard's analysis of the love which has been wronged.

However, in defense of Kierkegaard we could note that the father may have reflected upon the role he had in his son's wrong-doing. For it was the father who foolishly gave a rich inheritance to a young son who was not mature enough to use it properly. Could the father really assume that he was innocent in the relationship? Surely the evidence would be ambiguous, and unselfish love would require that the father seek forgiveness from the son just as the son seeks forgiveness from the father. But this need for mutual forgiveness takes us to a discussion of the assumption (2) of Kierkegaard, that the ethical level cannot offer forgiveness to the individual outside the ethical. Can the father and son really forgive each other if Kierkegaard is right? This is the next point to be discussed.

(2) The Ethical Cannot Forgive

The key argument of Kierkegaard for claiming that the ethical cannot forgive significant ethical failure is his Kantian assumption that the ethical as the universal cannot apply, that is, forgive, the one who in choice of evil or sin has placed himself outside the universal. As so stated in the abstract, the assumption seems to be true: the universal ideals of morality do not apply to the particular individual who refuses to achieve those ideals. However, we have to remember that the universal ideals of morality include both judgments of moral good and of moral evil. We remember that Judge William himself pointed out that the ethical commitment is a choice of living under the categories of both good and evil (Kierkegaard, 2004, 486)). Hence, one who chooses to be ethical but then fails to live up to that commitment can be subsumed under the category of evil-doer or sinner just as much as the one who lives up to one's ethical commitment can be subsumed under the ethical category of the virtuous person.

Still, we must grant that Kierkegaard's assumption that an abstract universal ideal of morality cannot forgive the evil-doer is absolutely correct.

An abstract ideal cannot forgive anyone, but neither can an abstract ideal honor anyone. The ethical acts of forgiving the evil-doer and of honoring the virtuous person are both acts that must be performed by the individual persons. So Kierkegaard is right that ethical repentance brings the individual into a personal relationship with another person. He claims this other person can only be God, but the other person who forgives could simply be a magnanimous human. For example, if I have offended myself, then in a very real sense I must be another person to myself and summon the courage and compassion to forgive myself. Ethical repentance in this light reveals that truth is subjectivity, that I understand who and what I am and can become only insofar as I become a loving, forgiving person to myself. Also, if I have offended another, that person can discover that truth is subjectivity in that the person has to go beyond the hurt self to the discovery and courageous creation of the loving, forgiving self. Only by developing the resources of one's subjectivity, only by going beyond rigid, unforgiving 'superego' or neurotic moral commands of absolute perfection and by developing flexible 'ego' or reasonable moral ideals, can the individual be one's true self to one's own self and to others.

Therefore, if we conceive Kierkegaard's ethical level of existence as involving the person's relationship to one's own self and to others, it is reasonable to conclude that the ethical level can incorporate loving forgiveness as a basic attitude towards self and others which brings about personal growth. To assume, as Kierkegaard and Kant do, that moral values are best seen as absolute ideals which demand perfection is to bring about the condemnation of all humans as failing to achieve that impossible goal. In contrast, to assume that moral ideals are guidelines meant to bring about gradual human development in both the better knowledge of and the increasing realization of those ideals is to give to humanity a morality that certainly allows for people to forgive each other and even themselves as a better way to develop our human potential.

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