

# Kierkegaard's Deep Diversity: The One and the Many

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## Introduction

What if we approached Kierkegaard's philosophy with the classic metaphysical theme of "the One and the Many" in mind? Doing so, I contend, can help us see how Kierkegaard embraces a form of diversity that runs even deeper than the "deep diversity" of which Charles Taylor has written.<sup>1</sup> This is because Kierkegaard's diversity is able to admit values that are not only irreducible but also, at times, incompatible. More than this, he sees their incompatibility as paradoxical, and in a way which supports a creativity that, I shall argue, is able to respond constructively to some of our most intractable ethical dilemmas.

As I conceive of "the One and the Many," it is chiefly concerned with the *degree of connection* between beings: Are they cohesive and so, together, exhibit a oneness, thereby constituting a unity, or are they disconnected and fragmented, thereby constituting a plurality? Or are they, somehow, both? Kierkegaard is drawn to this latter possibility, since it is the one that embodies the kind of paradox he would have us place at the centre of our lives. Even though he himself sometimes fails to live up to this ideal, its power should be evident, as I will show by concluding with a brief examination of perhaps the most difficult issue in contemporary just war theory. The question is as follows: Must we continue to fight justly even when confronted by what Michael Walzer has called a "supreme emergency," that is, when we believe our community faces an imminent threat to its most fundamental values, indeed to its very existence?

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor introduced the idea of deep diversity in support of his argument for how the different national communities within Canada – those of the English-speaking Canadians, French-speaking Quebecers, and Aborigines – conceive of their belonging to the country in different ways: "Shared and Divergent Values," in *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, ed. Guy Laforest (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 183. See also my "On Charles Taylor's 'Deep Diversity'," in Ursula Lehmkuhl and Elisabeth Tutschek, eds., *150 Years of Canada: Grappling with Diversity since 1867* (Münster, Germany: Waxmann Verlag GmbH, 2020).

## I. Kierkegaard's "Pluramorphism"

According to Kierkegaard, the kind of reflection characteristic of disengaged spectators has led us to a passionless age of nihilistic levelling, one in which all qualitative distinctions have been undermined. Not that this nihilism is ontological; when it comes to ontology, it is pluralist rather than nihilist, since it is the product of a "*negatively unifying principle*." It can be considered ethically nihilistic, though, because of its relativism. Kierkegaard recognizes that his contemporaries affirm many different kinds of values, but since the structures necessary for ranking them have been eroded, nothing really matters. And so nothing really happens. True, individuals occasionally exhibit momentary enthusiasms – but sooner or later these all fade, followed by a return to indolence.<sup>2</sup>

So it is that, in order to avoid the despair induced by this ranking-free pluralism, people sometimes try to unify their values by making a total commitment to a single sphere of existence. "Purity of heart," writes Kierkegaard somewhat ironically, "is to will one thing."<sup>3</sup>

The first sphere, which he calls "the aesthetic," is where all who look to enjoy themselves are to be found. Those who live the aesthetic life to its fullest will, however, eventually discover that it breaks down, throwing them back into pluralism and despair – that is, until they avoid this reality by leaping into the next sphere, "the ethical." This is where people do good by fulfilling their social roles. Yet the ethical, too, ultimately breaks down, requiring a leap into "the religious." Its first form, "Religiousness A," embraces both the natural spirituality of ancient Greek paganism and the ersatz Christianity exemplified by Hegelian dialectics. But Religiousness A's monism fails to be true to all of reality, which is why Kierkegaard awards it "second place"<sup>4</sup> alongside, and in tension with, the plural fragments remaining from the aesthetic and ethical spheres. So it is the combination of the unity of the former with the plurality of the latter that produces the paradox of "Religiousness B," which for Kierkegaard is genuine Christianity. Only by embracing it can we achieve the openness to revelation that makes way for God's saving grace. Now whether or not Kierkegaard

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<sup>2</sup> See Kierkegaard, "The Present Age," in *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), esp. p. 81 for "*negatively unifying principle*."

<sup>3</sup> *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), part I.

<sup>4</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. Alasdair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 465–66, 468.

is right about this – and as we’ll see, he’s not – we should describe the paradox it involves as “pluramontist.” Because instead of unifying one and many into some new version of the one, it upholds both, separately and together.

Kierkegaard’s terminology for supporting these conclusions seems likewise pluramontist. The very idea of “existence-spheres”<sup>5</sup> is pluralist, whether we conceive of them as a plurality of unities, each capable of being metaphorically bounded by a spherical surface, or a plurality of fragments. Either way, there is absolutely Nothing situated between them. This is why they cannot be ranked. It’s also why the leaps into each of them are necessarily irrational, because discontinuous. Yet Kierkegaard also describes the movement between spheres as a progression between “stages,” implying a linear, unified sequence.

Not that this unification is straightforward. True, the aesthetic and ethical spheres (secular, because finite) are associated with the letters A and B, respectively, since this is how the writers defending each existential orientation are identified.<sup>6</sup> But they are followed by the second pair of religious (because infinite<sup>7</sup>) spheres, variations also designated A and B.<sup>8</sup> Why didn’t Kierkegaard choose to label the first sphere of this second pair C, and the one following it D? It seems to me that it’s because he wants us to see that something has gone wrong with the overall sequence, and that we should avoid assuming the latter pair successfully unifies all that has come before them. For their being A<sub>2</sub> and B<sub>2</sub> implies that they incite perhaps-never-fully-successful struggles to be true to themselves, as well as to the values retained from the previous spheres.

Here’s a formula that encapsulates all of this: *spheres (pluralism) + stages (monism) = pluramontist supersessionism*. Needless to say, we should avoid equating it with the monist supersessionism that is Hegelian dialectics. The latter advances by virtue of sublimations (*Aufhebungen*), which are supposed to both cancel the worthless and maintain the valuable aspects

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 476.

<sup>6</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 345, 348, 350, 352. In the last section, “Ultimatum,” we are informed that religious life consists of answering “the call of the infinite.” And in *Stages on Life’s Way*, p. 443, we read that “faith is expressly the infinite.”

<sup>8</sup> See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 465ff. Before this, the spheres were not clearly distinguished, though the sermon at the end of *Either/Or* about why we are always in the wrong in relation to God can be interpreted as contrasting the wrongness as guilt that has its place in Religiousness A with the wrongness as sin that has its place in of Religiousness B. On the latter, see also *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 225.

of the conflicting elements, while the former seems to both progress and regress simultaneously. Think of Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous ethicist, whose prolix claims to have fully incorporated all that is genuine about the aesthetic into his version of the ethical take on a "he doth protest too much" quality. After all, his ethics are so dour that it's hard to see how they have room for much enjoyment; clearly, something valuable has been lost along the way. The judge's claims to embrace Hegelian dialectics while being a genuine Christian also ring hollow.<sup>9</sup>

Many commentators have missed much of the above picture. For example, it is incompatible with Johannes Corrodi Katzenstein's typical claim that "each kind of life-view – aesthetic, ethical, or religious – embodies some 'highest' good(s) valued for the sake of itself."<sup>10</sup> Because the values of the aesthetic are, I would say, not quite "goods," reserving the term for ethics (alas, that ship sailed long ago). And while the aesthetic is indeed valued for its own sake, that is not the case with the ethical; as I'll suggest below, valuing goods for their own sake makes them aesthetic rather than ethical. Finally, at least when the religious sphere takes the form of what Kierkegaard sees as genuine Christianity, it too cannot simply be upheld for its own sake. For there's also, it should go without saying, God's sake.

Or consider Hubert L. Dreyfus, who begins by recognizing how Kierkegaard associates despair with pluralism, how fragmentation can become so threatening that one feels confronted by "the impossible task of getting his or her self together."<sup>11</sup> Yet Dreyfus goes on to misconstrue Kierkegaard's Christianity as a means of unifying the self, and so as a way of exchanging the despair of this pluralism for the bliss of monism. Here's how. When Kierkegaard stipulates that "a synthesis is a relation between two," he is referring to the pairs of opposing factors or terms that make up a human being who is nevertheless "still not a self." To explain:

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If,

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 264, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Katzenstein, *God and Passion in Kierkegaard's Climacus* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Dreyfus, "Christianity without Onto-Theology: Kierkegaard's Account of the Self's Movement from Despair to Bliss," in *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 237.

however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.<sup>12</sup>

Cryptic as this passage is, it should nevertheless be evident that the “third” the relation represents can be *either* a “negative unity” (an expression referring not to the unity of Hegelian dialectics, as many interpreters assert, but, again, to disunity as plurality) *or* a “positive third” (that is, a unity) when relating itself to itself. So it is only when the two are present together that we get that paradoxical entity “the human self,”<sup>13</sup> which is paradoxical precisely because it contains both the negative and the positive, both the plural and the unified.

Dreyfus, however, interprets negative and positive as two ways in which the relation can relate to itself, and so be a self. He takes the negative to be one-sided and the positive two-sided though impossible<sup>14</sup> – unless, that is, the individual makes an unconditional, defining commitment which exhibits infinite passion for something finite. Dreyfus is correct that, for Kierkegaard, making such a commitment effectively means accepting the paradox of Jesus Christ as one’s saviour, since only Jesus is both infinite and finite, God and a man.<sup>15</sup> But Dreyfus misses how this paradox is also reflected in the human self’s pluramontist structure, since he conceives of the self as unifiable. He takes each of its factors to be ideally “defined in such a way as to support rather than be in conflict with the others”; they are to “reinforce each other” synergistically, “so that the more you manifest one the more you manifest the other.”<sup>16</sup>

For Kierkegaard, however, they ought to do both this and its opposite. That is why his Christianity is not merely “not easy,” it is “extremely hard, the hardest task of all.”<sup>17</sup> True, genuine Christians are “always joyful,” but they are far from experiencing pure bliss, since they know that they are “always in danger.”<sup>18</sup> Otherwise, their religion would constitute no more than another ostensibly unified sphere of existence, which is to say Religiousness A rather than B. And that

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<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See Dreyfus, pp. 237.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 239; and e.g. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 177, 182–83.

<sup>16</sup> Dreyfus, pp. 240, 245, 241.

<sup>17</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> See *Stages on Life’s Way*, p. 470.

would lead to a failure to see that “it is up to us human beings to be careful not to become all too positive, for this would really mean being fooled by life.”<sup>19</sup>

## II. Deeper into Kierkegaard’s Spheres/Stages of Existence

Let’s explore Kierkegaard’s spheres/stages of existence in more detail. The first, once again, reflects the aesthete’s commitment to enjoyment. I also suggested that this sphere is a unity and, at least temporarily, it is: like the ancient Greek idea of the cosmos, it is “wonderful at uniting what belongs together.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, sensuality follows a principle that manifests itself “as wanting to unite the separated,” the desire and the object desired, something that’s said to take place in “an instant of enjoyment.”<sup>21</sup> So while aestheticians aim to determine how, say, an opera “works” by taking it apart, true aesthetes approach it instead as a unified totality. They aim “not to discuss the individual parts separately but as far as possible to incorporate them into the whole, to see them not as detached from the whole but integrated in it . . . [For] the unity in an opera is preserved by the dominant tone that sustains the whole.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, all classic artistic works are seen as harmonious unities that exhibit a “mutual intimacy” of idea and form<sup>23</sup> – just as the aesthete argues life does, that is, when it’s lived as a game is played, unifying theory and practice.<sup>24</sup>

This, then, is how the aesthete fulfils the strictly aesthetic values present within this sphere.<sup>25</sup> So when it comes to ethics, he admits to finding it boring.<sup>26</sup> And while it’s true that he occasionally appears to be open to religious values, one would be forgiven for questioning his piety.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 444. John D. Glen, Jr. also misses how Kierkegaard would have us uphold the tension between unity and plurality rather than aim for the former over the latter: “Kierkegaard is asserting that human selfhood involves certain inherent *tensions* – in this case, a tension between the self’s capacity for *unity* through time and the tendency of its existence to be *dispersed* into different moments. In this respect, the self’s task is to give its existence a unifying meaning...” Glen, Jr., “The Definition of the Self and the Structure of Kierkegaard’s Work,” in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary, vol. 19: The Sickness unto Death* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003, rev. ed.), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Either/Or: Part I*, p. 47; see also p. 48.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 116–17.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 48–9, 54.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 47, 58, 61, 432.

<sup>25</sup> See *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 271–72.

<sup>26</sup> See *Either/Or: Part I*, p. 367.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 20, 146. Note, however, that the aesthete doesn’t claim to believe in the Christian God (p. 61), not to mention follow austere forms of religion such as Presbyterianism (p. 72).

As many have observed, we can simplify the five aesthetic stages identified by Kierkegaard by noting how, when he writes in the guise of an ethicist, he distinguishes between two basic kinds of aesthete: the unreflective and the reflective.<sup>28</sup> The former is natural,<sup>29</sup> in that he savours beautiful, sensuous experiences.<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard considers music most conducive to this savouring, since unlike prose language it is repetitive rather than unfolding and so strikes the ear as both immediate and abstract. These also happen to be the central qualities of the Romantic symbol,<sup>31</sup> an organic unity of which Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* is perhaps the greatest embodiment.<sup>32</sup> For its leading character is a perfect sensualist, as is evident from both his musicality and the fact that he's a deceiver but not a seducer. (As we'll see, because seducers toy with people they should be classed among the more sophisticated, and so reflective, aesthetes.<sup>33</sup>)

The unreflective aesthete is also an isolated individual, someone who lives apart from social institutions such as the family and state.<sup>34</sup> Note that this "apartness" is a strictly mereological quality. Despite being socially *unintegrated* (and so not a part of society holistically), the unreflective aesthete is still said to resemble an atom that has been *collected* alongside others within it; in both cases, then, society remains a unity.<sup>35</sup> So we can understand the unreflective aesthete's choice to join such strange associations as The Fellowship of the Dead, which shuns pluralism: "one must always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can become many . . . . If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 181ff. John Stuart Mill also recognizes these two. As he states, there is "no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation." *Utilitarianism* (1861), in *Utilitarianism and the 1868 Speech on Capital Punishment*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001, 2nd ed.), p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> See *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 132, 135.

<sup>30</sup> Even though this has only been possible since the rise of Christianity, the natural unreflective aesthete, while pursuing pleasures far less psychical than those of the ancient Greeks, nevertheless opposes the Christian religion. See *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 61–62, 67, 72, 93–95; and *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 181–82.

<sup>31</sup> See *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 68–71, 95, 120.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 85, 112, 118–120, 134.

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 98–102, 372.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 149, 220.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 151–152, 165–215; and *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 273.

<sup>36</sup> *Either/Or: Part I*, p. 297.

Indeed, aesthetes of this sort are what Isaiah Berlin would identify as monist “hedgehogs,” since they manage to “acquire in the course of time a single phrase or a single idea with which they are able to signify everything to themselves and to the individual they have initiated into it.”<sup>37</sup> It’s also worth noting that while the Fellowship’s members desire sorrow, each aspiring to the title of “The Unhappiest One,”<sup>38</sup> this is not because they shun enjoyment; on the contrary, they take *delight* in their sorrow as a diversion, a way of going outside of themselves.<sup>39</sup> Evidently, theirs is an aestheticized sorrow, a simulacrum of the real thing. While indulging in it would be considered a “sin” to the ethicist, they can be said to concur instead with Nietzsche that only the very best of us are capable of embracing the “joy” of tragedy.<sup>40</sup>

Sooner or later, however, the threat of boredom induces aesthetes to turn to an increasingly sophisticated, reflective aesthetics, and so away from savouring and towards fantasizing and playing.<sup>41</sup> To be sure, the reflective aesthete still appreciates beauty and immediacy.<sup>42</sup> Yet he is also someone who has decided to live “poetically,” according to his imagination, which is why “his diary is not historically accurate.”<sup>43</sup> By describing his experiences with great “dramatic vividness,” he hopes to be carried away into a “dreamland,” a “kingdom of mist” where he can fulfil his erotic fantasies.<sup>44</sup> This explains why, as a seducer, his prime target is a young woman who also “lives in a world of fantasy”;<sup>45</sup> moreover, he chases her as if he were a player in a game or sport.<sup>46</sup> He plays to play and to not win, however, which is why he hopes to conquer but to not

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 200; and see Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 2nd ed.).

<sup>38</sup> See *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 217–30.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 175–76, 222; and *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 233–36.

<sup>40</sup> *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 189; Nietzsche, “What I Owe to the Ancients,” in *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (1889), § 5, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> See *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 37, 281–300, 328.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 321–24, 381, 390, 428.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304. See also *ibid.*, pp. 391, 395; and *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 305, 310. See also p. 306; and *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Either/Or: Part I*, p. 341. See also *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 105.

<sup>46</sup> See *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 307–308, 319, 322, 329, 360–61, 366, 384–85, 391, 423, 436; and *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 78, 103–104, 107, 112.



possess her.<sup>47</sup> He also differs from the unreflective aesthete in that he explicitly desires “joy” instead of sadness. That said, while certainly not anti-social, he too has no genuine friends.<sup>48</sup>

Notice that while Kierkegaard’s aesthetes savour, play games for fun, and fantasize, they rarely if ever put on shows – that is, engage in spectacle – making this a major aesthetic mode that Kierkegaard appears to overlook.<sup>49</sup> There are implications here for both his conception of ethics and his writing practice, as we’ll see below. At this point, I’ll simply mention again how he portrays the aesthetic sphere as a finite unity, a collection of immediate moments that, sooner or later, breaks up. This leads to a transition period marked by irony, which is then followed by the leap into the next sphere, that of the ethical.

Where the aesthete is committed to the outer, the ethicist is to the inner; and where the aesthete affirms a “self-contained” non-dialectical unity that requires choosing “only one thing,” the ethicist is dialectical.<sup>50</sup> Above all, the ethicist is committed to playing, not games, but the social roles he has chosen, such as dutiful husband (“an ideal husband is not one who is ideal once in his life but one who is that every day”) and father (“I am playing a noble father”).<sup>51</sup> The choice must be an either-or, all-or-nothing one – a choice, that is, over an “absolute contradiction.” And when the duties accompanying the chosen role are willingly performed, they will by no means limit the chooser’s freedom.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, at least according to the ethicist, his way of life incorporates not only aesthetic but also (Christian) religious concerns.

This differs from the strictly aesthetic life in a number of ways. In radically choosing his role, for instance, the ethicist avoids the aesthete’s deliberation over a plurality of choices.<sup>53</sup> And since it is self-consciously a role rather than a game that he plays, he supposedly enjoys more than the “formal, abstract freedom”<sup>54</sup> that comes from subjecting oneself to a systematically unified

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<sup>47</sup> See *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 130–31.

<sup>48</sup> See *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 428, 371.

<sup>49</sup> On pp. 24–25 of *Either/Or: Part II*, the ethicist makes this complaint of the aesthete: “you never give of yourself, never let others enjoy you.” However, on p. 185, one of the stages of aesthetic life is said to be “often found in young people, who . . . are easily tempted to exalt themselves, especially when they have an audience.”

<sup>50</sup> *Either/Or: Part I*, pp. 39, 43. That this approach is non-dialectical can be gleaned from the assertion, on p. 38, that “Tautology is and remains the highest principle, the highest maxim of thought.”

<sup>51</sup> *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 135, 46. See also pp. 82, 280–83, 288, 298.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223. See also pp. 43, 45, 146–53, 176, 214, 221.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 164–69, 171, 173, 176–77, 211, 213–14, 219.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

rulebook. The ethicist is also a husband who aims to possess his wife, rather than merely conquer her like a seducer.<sup>55</sup> He likewise favours ongoing historical love over Romantic first love;<sup>56</sup> poetry, given its ability to portray the meaning of time, over the supposed spatializing of music;<sup>57</sup> actuality over the imaginary;<sup>58</sup> and sociality over alienated aloneness.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the easily bored aesthete, the ethicist also appears to embrace tedium – at least if his long-winded writing is any indication. And because the ethicist can be expected to give beauty its proper place,<sup>60</sup> integrating a “dethroned” aesthetics within the ethical,<sup>61</sup> he avoids the aesthete’s tendency to live for the moment and pursue every mood or idea as an abstraction.<sup>62</sup> Thus does he manage to shun the childishness that’s so characteristic of those ancient aesthetes, the Greeks, who were governed by arbitrariness and did anything but welcome growing old.<sup>63</sup> And where the aesthete is in denial about his pluralism (and so, ultimately, his nihilism, since his life eventually “disintegrates into nothing”<sup>64</sup>), the ethicist supposedly lives in unity.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, it is none other than the ethicist’s “unity in a life-view” that allows him to meet “the condition for friendship” with other people.<sup>66</sup>

As for the contrast between the ethicist’s life and that of the strictly religious, the upholder of “religious abstraction,”<sup>67</sup> the ethicist still considers himself able to be a good Christian, since Christianity and ethics, God and the good, form a “complete whole.”<sup>68</sup> For the ethical not only subsumes the aesthetic, but both may be considered “united” with religion<sup>69</sup> – it’s for this reason

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<sup>55</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 47, 138–44.

<sup>57</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 136–37.

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 83–84, 262, 273.

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 20–21, 57, 275–77, 323.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226. See also *ibid.*, pp. 177, 271.

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 17, 179, 229–30.

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 87, 121, 162, 186, 188, 257–58; and *Fear and Trembling*, in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 9, 55.

<sup>64</sup> *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 11; see also pp. 50, 88, 90, 160, 168–69, 192, 228.

<sup>65</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 219, 228.

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 319, 321.

<sup>67</sup> *Stages on Life’s Way*, p. 172.

<sup>68</sup> *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 21. See also *ibid.*, pp. 22, 26, 32, 58, 61, 94; and *Stages on Life’s Way*, pp. 162, 178.

<sup>69</sup> *Either/Or: Part II*, pp. 34. See also *ibid.*, pp. 116, 147.

that the ethical can be seen as reflecting a self-contained “rational order,” one which “has its teleology in itself.”<sup>70</sup> This monism is also behind the ethicist’s belief that marriage is an institution whose “sensuous love has but one transfiguration, in which it is equally aesthetic, religious, and ethical”<sup>71</sup> and which thereby incarnates an “earthly love” that “ends with loving one.”<sup>72</sup> And because those who marry constitute “a unity of contrasts,”<sup>73</sup> their duties are unified rather than plural.<sup>74</sup> No wonder family life can be said to exhibit a “coherence.”<sup>75</sup>

Kierkegaard is clearly sceptical about the incorporation of genuine Christianity into the ethical, however. It says a great deal that the ethicist’s version of it is presented as sensuous,<sup>76</sup> as dismissing the notion of being born again,<sup>77</sup> and as capable of being captured theoretically, that is, by a theology or “total view.”<sup>78</sup> In any case, and more generally, Kierkegaard believes that the ethicist’s unity will, like the aesthete’s, also eventually break down. Before showing how, however, I want to register the disagreement that I have with Kierkegaard over the natures of both the aesthetic and the ethical.

Essentially, I consider unified existence a gateway to the aesthetic. Ethical seriousness, by contrast, comes from contending with disunity, which is why genuinely unified worlds – paradises – are literally fantastic, so much so that we sometimes call them utopias (“no places”). To conceive of the ethical as “a perfect, self-contained sphere,”<sup>79</sup> then, is to conceive of it as aesthetic rather than ethical. And whenever someone plays a role within such a sphere, they must ultimately be doing what they do for its own sake (given that its sake is contained within it). No surprise, then, that their actions tend to be for show, concerned with the impression they give to spectators.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 292, 263. Living the ethical life thus amounts to a “collecting of oneself.” Ibid, p. 258. See also pp. 188, 190, 193; and *Fear and Trembling*, p. 54.

<sup>71</sup> *Either/Or: Part II*, p. 65. See also *ibid.*, pp. 36, 41, 44, 60, 72, 77, 89. On p. 62 we are told that “since marriage is an inner harmony in this way, it of course has its telos in itself.” See also p. 90.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 254–56, 268.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 118. See also pp. 88–89, 109, 117–18, 258.

<sup>79</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 68.

As it happens, this is precisely how the sociologist Erving Goffman has urged us to approach the performance of social roles: he argues that we should view such actions “dramaturgically” rather than technically, politically, structurally, or culturally.<sup>80</sup> “Role-players,” that is, should be judged according to the standards of performers and, “*qua* performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized.”<sup>81</sup> According to this view, rather than actually being virtuous, what matters is one’s ability to *signal* virtue. Or one’s failure to do so, as in the following startling example:

when a surgeon and his nurse both turn from the operating table and the anesthetized patient accidentally rolls off the table to his death, not only is the operation disrupted in an embarrassing way, but the reputation of the doctor, as a doctor and as a man, and also the reputation of the hospital may be weakened.<sup>82</sup>

This amoral, because aesthetic, approach is only to be expected whenever one begins with the assumption that such events transpire within a self-enclosed unity. Genuine ethics, by contrast, often requires responding to a conflict that, potentially, may not be resolvable; this is one reason for its seriousness. Of course, Kierkegaard recognizes that such conflicts will sooner or later arise, if only because ethical requirements are sometimes insatiable. But for him this marks not the essential condition of the ethical but its breakdown. It is because, ultimately, “the individual always goes bankrupt,”<sup>83</sup> that the (so-called) ethicist’s “soul is dissipated in multiplicity.”<sup>84</sup>

Which brings us to religion, the next sphere(s). Like the previous ones, Religiousness A is ostensibly self-contained, albeit in an infinite way reminiscent of an ouroboros: “Religiousness A is the dialectic of taking to heart; it is the relation to an eternal happiness that is not conditioned by a something, but is the dialectical taking to heart of the relation itself, conditioned alone, that

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<sup>80</sup> See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), p. 240.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>83</sup> *Stages on Life’s Way*, p. 476. See also *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 224.

<sup>84</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 43.

is, by the taking to heart.”<sup>85</sup> As noted, its highest form is that of Hegelian philosophy, which underlies the “Christendom,” in contrast to genuine Christianity, that Kierkegaard identified with the Danish church of his day. But as Christendom ultimately amounts to no more than “playing Christianity,”<sup>86</sup> we have here yet again something that Kierkegaard should have identified as aesthetic.

Regardless, Hegelian philosophy claims to be an absolute, and so unconditional, idealism – one which contains all reality. So we need to appreciate how it fails when confronted by events such as the Bible’s Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). Hegel would have us view Abraham as a great man for, despite representing an extreme form of alienation from the world, he is the starting-point of a dialectic progression that culminates in the overcoming of all oppositions, including the one between the world and the God who transcends it.<sup>87</sup> While Abraham’s role in this “teleology of the moral” is accepted by Kierkegaard, when it comes to religion, Kierkegaard objects that Hegel “is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham’s enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith when he should be sent back to a lower court and shown up as a murderer.”<sup>88</sup> Otherwise put: Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son for God means that he embodies an unresolvable paradox, which Hegel refuses to recognize. Emil L. Fackenheim has raised a similar objection as regards the aporia that is the Holocaust: philosophy cannot remain silent about it and do it justice, yet it cannot comprehend it either, since it is inherently incomprehensible.<sup>89</sup> Notice, however, that such irreconcilables do not lead Kierkegaard to claim that Religiousness A breaks down, like the aesthetic and the ethical spheres, into a plurality; rather, his point appears to be no more than that it fails to acknowledge the presence of plurality, and so the gaps between itself as

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<sup>85</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 465.

<sup>86</sup> *Kierkegaard’s Attack upon “Christendom”: 1854–1855*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 8, 44, 121, 149, 179.

<sup>87</sup> See Hegel, “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate,” in *Early Theological Writings*, ed. Richard Kroner, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), pp. 182–89.

<sup>88</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 55. For helpful commentary, see Mark C. Taylor, “Journeys to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, nos. 3–4 (July–Oct. 1977): 305–26; as well as Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 7.

<sup>89</sup> “Indeed, such are the crises which have befallen the Christian West in the last half century that it may safely be said that, were he alive today, so realistic a philosopher as Hegel would not be a Hegelian.” Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel’s Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 224; see also his *To Mend the Word: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 238.

a unified religion and the now-shattered antecedent spheres.<sup>90</sup> To Kierkegaard, Hegelian religion's monist denial of these gaps – of their very possibility, in fact – leaves it unable to fully account for reality. That's why it is merely theological and so, in a sense, faithless.<sup>91</sup>

By contrast, Religiousness B upholds a genuine, because pluramonic, faith. It is Christianity as a serious, mature religion, one that follows Abraham in having undergone a “rebirth”<sup>92</sup> and weaned itself from the childlike belief in monism, in unity alone.<sup>93</sup> For it embraces paradox,<sup>94</sup> affirming both the unified dialectic of Religiousness A alongside the plural remnants of the ethical and aesthetic – both the infinity of the former and the finitudes of the latter. If we truly want to live “a personally ethical and religious existence,”<sup>95</sup> Kierkegaard therefore believes, we ought to uphold the unmediatable paradoxes that arise from such contradictory truths. And foremost among these is the idea that Abraham must both love his son if he is to be a good father, and be willing to sacrifice him if he is to follow God.<sup>96</sup>

### III. Suspending the Ethical?

Kierkegaard has famously described the latter as entailing a “suspension” of the ethical.<sup>97</sup> But why, especially given the act's “horrifying”<sup>98</sup> nature, does he not refer to religion “overriding” ethics instead? As Michael Walzer has pointed out, to override a prescription is to violate it while recognizing that it nevertheless still stands; whereas to suspend it is to set it aside, to cancel or annul it temporarily. This is why those who do the former are understood to dirty their hands,

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<sup>90</sup> See *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 54–55.

<sup>91</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>92</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs*, in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M.G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 96. Note that this “rebirth” (*Gjenfødslen*) is different from the idea of being “reborn” (*Opvakt*, better translated as “awakened”), which is a target of criticism on p. 381 of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. See M.G. Piety, “A Problem with Hannay's Postscript,” in *Piety on Kierkegaard*, 16 April 2017, <https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/tag/born-again/>.

<sup>93</sup> See *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 9, 13.

<sup>94</sup> See e.g. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 152, 175, 179, 183.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258; see also *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 38, 40.

<sup>96</sup> See *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 30, 33, 56–57, 59, 66.

<sup>97</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>98</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 224.

unlike those who do the latter.<sup>99</sup> “Suspension” is nonetheless appropriate in Abraham’s case, given his certainty that God will ultimately halt the sacrifice. True, Abraham “infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life,” but at the same time his boundless faith that he will not lose his son means that, ultimately, he will “not renounce anything.”<sup>100</sup> Because even if he were actually allowed to carry out the murder, he believes that “God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed.”<sup>101</sup> This is the paradox in his case, and it is why he is able to be both at “peace and rest and comfort in the pain.”<sup>102</sup> In the end, then, Abraham assumes that he won’t have to violate ethics after all, since his love of God will allow him to act for God’s sake *as well as* for his own and his neighbours.<sup>103</sup> And he knows this by virtue of the absurd,<sup>104</sup> his embrace of pluramontist paradox, not because of the monist, speculative form of reason underlying Hegelian dialectics (though it, too, claims to suspend any paradox).<sup>105</sup>

So we may consider Abraham’s preparations for the sacrifice as akin to, say, Jesus’ withholding the whole truth about his eventual fate when he knows that his followers are not yet ready to hear it.<sup>106</sup> Because while Abraham’s suspension of the ethical indeed constitutes a “trial,”<sup>107</sup> it is one whose verdict is a foregone conclusion. Or so he believes.

But what about Isaac? What must he have thought? And what must the vast majority of us think, including presumably Kierkegaard himself? For unlike Abraham, we are not knights of faith – if we do believe, then we do so with a degree of doubt; sometimes, with quite a lot.<sup>108</sup> That’s why we cannot help but see Abraham as someone who would have, at least potentially, violated

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<sup>99</sup> See Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” p. 286.

<sup>100</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 48; see also p. 49.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>103</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 59, 70–71.

<sup>104</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 46–49, 115.

<sup>105</sup> See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 186–87, 190.

<sup>106</sup> See *Stages on Life’s Way*, p. 230; and John 16:4, 12.

<sup>107</sup> See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 221.

<sup>108</sup> Miguel de Unamuno goes even further: “Those who believe that they believe in God, but without any passion in their heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God-Idea, not in God Himself.” *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J.E. Crawford Flitch (New York: Dover, 1921), p. 193. In *The Agony of Christianity*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1960), p. 19, Unamuno writes: “A faith which knows no doubt is a dead faith.”

one of the most fundamental ethical imperatives. And it's why even though God did indeed ultimately revoke His sacrificial order, we recognize that serious moral damage was done; hands *were* dirtied.<sup>109</sup>

So Kierkegaard should have made it clear that, to most, Abraham overrode, rather than merely suspended, the ethical. Kierkegaard's failure to do so suggests that this is an example of when his pluramorphism has degraded to monism, and so aestheticism. I want to conclude by identifying two others.

First, there's his Christian anti-Pelagianism: Kierkegaard seems to believe that only Jesus Christ allows access to the paradox that is true religion, and so is the only way of truly overcoming sin. For example, he considers (Rabbinic) Jewish law (*halakha*) "merely a point of transition," the implication being that Judaism's ostensible supersession by Christianity was something that can be considered thoroughly clean.<sup>110</sup> But anyone who takes the history seriously will know that the reality was quite the opposite.<sup>111</sup> The excuse has been offered that Kierkegaard was, after all, "a man of his times."<sup>112</sup> But he was also a genius, in many ways ahead of his time. So why not in this one?<sup>113</sup>

Second, I mentioned above how show or performance is a major aesthetic mode that Kierkegaard tends to overlook. I think his own writing exemplifies this. Emmanuel Levinas has described it as "shamelessly exhibitionist,"<sup>114</sup> and indeed it's hard not to wonder at not merely its

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<sup>109</sup> As I have pointed out in "[What's Wrong with Hypergoods](#)," in *Patriotic Elaborations: Essays in Practical Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p. 132.

<sup>110</sup> *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F-K*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), no. 2208; see also *The Concept of Irony* in *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates* and *Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 262–63. On *halakha* as a genuine form of paradoxical, revelatory creativity, see my "[On the Minimal Global Ethic](#)," in *Patriotic Elaborations*, pp. 168–72.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001); and David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), chs. 2–3, 6–7, 9.

<sup>112</sup> Aaron Fehir, *Kierkegaardian Reflections on the Problem of Pluralism* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 75.

<sup>113</sup> A point made by Peter Tudvad in the first part of the preface to his *Stadier paa Antisemitismens Vej: Søren Kierkegaard og Jøderne* (*Stages on the Way of Antisemitism: Søren Kierkegaard and the Jews*) (Copenhagen: Rosinante & Co., 2010); see the translation by M.G. Piety, "[Part I of the Preface to Tudvad's book Stadier paa antisemitismens vej](#)," in *Piety on Kierkegaard*, 26 December 2011,

<sup>114</sup> Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," trans. Jonathan Rée, in Rée and Jane Chamberlain, eds., *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988), p. 34.



excessive didacticism and repetition, but also its flashiness. A large amount of the rhetorical superfluity in Kierkegaard's writings seems to have no other end than display. If pressed, I think he would concede the point, admitting (again) that he is no knight of faith. For he himself tells us that a true knight would be silent about his faith, since he would have "no vain desire to instruct others"; indeed, he would also appear as a typical member of society, of whom "no one ever suspects anything else."<sup>115</sup> So it should be hard to tell knight from ethicist. By his own lights, then, a strictly religious Kierkegaard should have appeared as much like Fritz Schlegel, that thoroughly marriageable man who ended up wedding Regine Olsen, the woman Kierkegaard loved but ultimately spurned.<sup>116</sup> He himself never married, of course; instead, he chose to live the life of a literary celebrity bachelor, someone often mocked as a flamboyant dandy who would nevertheless parade about town in ill-fitting clothes.<sup>117</sup>

It's useful here to contrast Kierkegaard's self-exposure with Augustine's. The latter's confessions are certainly entertaining, but they also reveal his candour. There is a thoroughly serious purpose behind Augustine's recounting of lurid deeds. God, of course, already knows all. But through Augustine's confessions, other young men will be able to recognize how low they have gone, and so how high they must go. By contrasting the depths of sin with the height of God, Augustine thereby performs an important rhetorical function: the worse the former appear, the better the latter. "As for the good, it rejoices them to hear of sins committed in the past by men now free from them: not because these things are sins, but because they were and no longer are."<sup>118</sup> In short, Augustine's end is the thoroughly serious one of encouraging conversion.

I would say that this is also true of much – though not all – of Kierkegaard's writings. By demonstrating to aesthetes, ethicists, and pagans that he knows them better than they know themselves, Kierkegaard effectively communicates the message that they would do better to adopt his version of Christianity. Sometimes, however, he would too.

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<sup>115</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 80, 41; and see pp. 113, 115 on Abraham's silence.

<sup>116</sup> Schlegel has been described as "practically the exact opposite of Kierkegaard: stable, harmonious, healthy, un-ironic, and patient; he was thus made for marriage." Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 485.

<sup>117</sup> See Kierkegaard, *The Corsair Affair: And Articles Related to the Writings*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006, 2nd ed.), bk. 10, ch. 3 (p. 212).

#### IV. Just War and the Supreme Emergency

Faced with a supreme emergency, in which “our deepest values and our collective survival are in imminent danger,”<sup>119</sup> Walzer has argued that we may violate the rules of war and thereby fight unjustly, such as by bombing civilians. In allowing for multiple exceptions to the (supposedly) unified theory of just war, Walzer can be interpreted as combining pluralism and monism in the very same paradoxical way as Kierkegaard, albeit in secular terms rather than as a means of achieving openness to revelation.<sup>120</sup> Regardless, the decision-making involved seems equally to rely on a form of creativity that goes beyond reason; it’s not for nothing that Walzer has had so little to say about how, exactly, we are to determine what we may do. After all, the theory of just war itself certainly cannot coherently tell us when it should be overridden, despite the monist claims of some political philosophers.<sup>121</sup> In fact, as Jeremy Waldron has written:

There is a sense in Walzer’s discussion that in certain circumstances, *the bottom drops out of our ability to argue our way legally or morally through a problem*, because the assumptions that normally underpin such arguments have been shaken or have otherwise evaporated... When the circumstances of justice fail in this way, the result is not a neat *alternative* set of moral prescriptions, but rather some radical uncertainty about whether we can think normatively at all.<sup>122</sup>

So we are, it seems, supposed to rely on something like “inspiration” – a term that not only has connotations of irrationality and mystery but, especially when it comes to actions during wartime, should make us particularly attentive to the grave dangers involved. Be that as it may, it is

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<sup>119</sup> Michael Walzer, “Emergency Ethics,” in *Arguing About War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 33; see also *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), ch. 16.

<sup>120</sup> For more on Walzer’s pluramonism, see my “[Dirty Hands: The One and the Many](#),” *The Monist* 101, no. 2 (Apr. 2018): 150–69, pp. 159–61.

<sup>121</sup> See, for example, Richard J. Arneson, “Just Warfare Theory and Noncombatant Immunity,” *Cornell International Law Journal* 39, no. 3 (2006): 663–88; Nathan R. Colaner, “How Just War Theory May Survive Without the Supreme Emergency Exemption,” *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009); and William R. Lund, “Reconsidering ‘Supreme Emergencies’: Michael Walzer and his Critics,” *Social Theory and Practice* 37, no. 4 (2011): 654–78. For a good summary of the issue, see Daniel Statman, “Supreme Emergencies and the Continuum Problem,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 11, no. 4 (2012): 287–98.

<sup>122</sup> Jeremy Waldron, “[Reflections on ‘Supreme Emergency’](#),” NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper no. 17–45, 14 November 2017, pp. 14–15.

necessary to decide, since to do nothing is still to do something (even if this is best described as suicidal). Otherwise, we shirk our responsibilities to face up to a genuine ethical dilemma. Thankfully, Walzer – and Kierkegaard before him – have helped us to identify one approach we might take.