"The Crowd is Untruth!" Kierkegaard on Freedom, Responsibility, and the Problem of Social Comparison

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I. Introduction

Kierkegaard provides a compelling vision of personal identity—what he calls "selfhood." For Kierkegaard, human beings are essentially free creatures who can determine their own actions. To be a self is to understand that one's actions are free, that one can perform good or evil actions, and that only the self is ultimately responsible for those actions. In theological terms, the self will stand alone before God and account for her/his actions. In this essay I first describe Kierkegaard's understanding of free and responsible selfhood. I then describe one of Kierkegaard's unique contributions to freedom and responsibility – his perceptual theory of the emotions. Kierkegaard understands emotions as perceptions that are related to beliefs and concerns, and thus the self can—to some extent—freely participate in the cultivation of various emotions. In other words, one of the ways that self takes responsibility for itself is by taking responsibility for its emotions. In the final section, I turn to Kierkegaard's understanding of social comparison and the role that the "crowd" plays in shaping the self's beliefs, desires, and emotions. Kierkegaard is clear that envy and social comparison are detrimental to becoming a self, yet envy and social comparison are pervasive social practices. I conclude that Kierkegaard understands both the value and the difficulty of cultivating social courage: the crowd is untruth due to the difficulty of holding fast to one's values when confronted by crowd.

II. The Three Steps Of Kierkegaardian Selfhood[1]

[1] Kierkegaard famously divided personality (or moral and spiritual) development into three stages or spheres of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, with commentators often dividing the religious into A and B. I am using "steps" to avoid confusion, as my steps are not the same as the stages. Some commentators disagree with the

In this section I map out three steps to becoming a self: ethical choice, character, and m becoming an “individual.” The first step to becoming a self is making an ethical choice – a free and responsible choice. But one can make ethical choices without being consistent in those choices. Thus the next step on the road to selfhood is developing character – deeply entrenched dispositional commitments that issue in consistent choices. This is certainly a more developed self on Kierkegaard’s view, but it is still a self that can be largely heteronomous, that is, a self that is constructed by and dependent on its larger social context for the source of its commitments. The highest stage on the road to selfhood is becoming an individual. There are several aspects to becoming an individual; I will focus one in particular. The individual is committed to values generated by the self, not by society. The individual has what I call the virtue of *social courage*.[2] I will describe each of these three steps in turn.

Many of Kierkegaard’s texts illustrate his understanding of freedom and responsibility: I will draw on *Either/Or II*, a pseudonymous text. “A” is the main author of the first volume, while Judge William is the main author of the second volume. “A” is a reflective aesthete. Aesthete is meant to invoke the notion of aesthetic. Consider the way an art critic might enjoy a painting. In the same way that the critic stands at a distance and derives pleasure from staring at and reflecting on various aspects of the painting, so the aesthete derives pleasure from standing back from his own emotions,

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stages, but I do not space to argue for this view here. For one articulation, see Evans, 2003. *Kierkegaard’s “Fragments” and “Postscript”: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus.* Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

[2] I will sometimes use the phrase moral autonomy, but do not mean it in a Kantian sense. I am borrowing the term from Robert Adams’s *A Theory of Virtue*. He discusses the Milgram obedience study and its challenge to virtue theory, and then suggests that perhaps what agents need to combat immoral authority is moral autonomy. “What is the virtue of dealing well with the temptations of social conformity? …*moral autonomy*, a deep groundedness in certain moral ways of viewing people and situations, with a developed ability to interpret situations accordingly and confidently…Contrasted with such a virtue would be…a vice of deficiency that might be called social conformism.” This is very similar to who Kierkegaard thinks of the individual. The individual does not have to resist conforming to immoral social pressures, and be able to hold fast to her values. She must have moral autonomy. See Adams, Robert Merrihew. 2006. *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good.* Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, pp. 154-55.

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desires, and experiences and reflecting on them. The key to this life, however, is to not have any longstanding commitments. It is much easier, after all, to enjoying a variety of different experiences and mental states, just as it is more enjoyable to have a number of beautiful paintings. Consider A's either/or between a pastor and an actor. After strenuous deliberation, A "decides" to become a pastor, or more accurately, "reflection with its hundred arms seizes the *idea* of becoming a pastor."[3] Once A "decides", he energetically throws himself into the pursuit of this vocation and begins reading, writing sermons, and talking to pastors. A does everything involved in becoming a pastor except *actually becoming* a pastor. As soon as the intensity of the *desire* to become a pastor passes, the desire to become a lawyer appears, and A begins anew. This shows that A is deliberate and calculating in the management of his desires. However, he carefully prevents any commitment-granting motivational state from achieving efficacy in the economy of his desires, because he is convinced that long-term commitments only bring despair and boredom, and he wants to avoid these above all. This is especially problematic in the ways A relates to others. "What is unethical about this is that one person's practice of drifting though situations can easily lead to suffering for another whose life is not merely a series of boring or interesting spectacles."[4] A has emotions to be sure, but his emotions do not lead him to actually do anything, like help another person. He would rather have a variety of desires and experiences to aesthetically reflect upon, and this means refraining from commitments, even from future-oriented emotions that would bind him to action.[5]

The Judge's response to A's aesthetic reflection aptly describes the first step on the road to full selfhood. The Judge wants A to make a choice! Despite all the little decisions A makes in life, he fails to make the crucial, *ethical* choice. The Judge says to A that the choice he is referring to "is

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[3] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, and Edna H Hong. *Either/or*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 165. Emphasis mine. It is important to note that this is Judge William's description of A.

[4] Furtak, Rick Anthony. *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, p. 59.

[5] Furtak, *Wisdom in Love,* p. 59.

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between choosing and not choosing…" and that he wishes to force A "to the point where the necessity of making a choice manifests itself and thereafter to consider existence under *ethical* qualifications."[6] Clearly this is not just any kind of choice. After all, '[a] person living from the aesthetic posture makes decisions, and their decisions can be very reflective…A…is a virtuoso when it comes to deliberation, and of course he makes choices."[7] But the Judge draws a distinction between two kinds of choices when he tells A that A's "choice is an aesthetic choice, but *an aesthetic choice is no choice*."[8] The aesthetic choice is choice in the common sense understanding of the word; choosing to engage in various activities, and to act on certain motivational states instead of others. However, true choice is ethical choice: the choice to be an active (moral) agent, an agent who recognizes external moral demands, makes choices and volitional identifications in light of those moral demands, and guides herself along a certain path.

The judge urges A to embrace himself as an *active agent capable of free and responsible choices* (the "ethical" choice), instead of remaining a passive agent who lets his own desires act on him, and lets them become responsibility-undermining external forces (the "aesthetic" choice). "The conversion to an ethical standpoint is, in the Judge's characterization, equivalent to the acceptance of choice, the taking up of responsibility…"[9] A refuses to engage in active, ethical choices because he believes that the world is fundamentally fatalistic, that none of his choices really matter. He is not in control of the direction and shape that his life takes. To avoid despair, he refuses to make any commitments, and instead becomes a connoisseur of experience. "Such a person is disintegrated, that is, lacking integrity (the word used by Kierkegaard is *opløst,* meaning 'dissolved'). Lacking any continuity in

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[6] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, p. 177-78. My emphasis.

[7] Mehl, *Thinking Through Kierkegaard,* 15. For instance, the Judge says to A that 'if deliberating were the task of life, then you would be close to perfection." *EO II,* 165.

[8] *Either/Or*, 166. Emphasis mine.

[9] Kosch, Michelle. *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford; Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 150.

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time, he or she lives in a world of fleeting and abbreviated passions."[10] The connoisseur of experience cannot have integrity. A will not make the ethical choice that would put him on the path towards integrity because he sees his "activity as the result of a deterministic historical process…(which) cannot be reconciled with the forward-looking standpoint of agency which forces deliberation and choice."[11] By refusing to make an ethical choice, A refuses to embrace a fundamental aspect of personhood; he denies that he is a free agent, able to make non-deterministic choices.

Taking responsibility for one's free choices is the first major step on the way to full selfhood. The second step is taking *continual* responsibility for one's free choices. In other words, the self has *character*. Kierkegaard often equates character with inwardness. As Robert Roberts notes, "'Inwardness' is a metaphor for centrality to the self. This core of the self is its concerns (enthusiasm, interests, passions) and what flows from them: emotions, intentions, decisions, actions."[12] What it means to have character is to have a strong life-orienting passion or concern that is the basic for one's activity in the world. While Judge William's main goal with A is to get him to make an ethical choice, the Judge himself understands the dispositional nature of character: "The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself…as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits…"[13] The Judge goes on to stress that this ethical self now possesses himself as a task and must order and shape himself and his characteristics. Thus a self who possesses character has played an active role in shaping her personality. She has "something like sustained dispositional ethical enthusiasm or interest" that is the

[10] Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, p. 59.

[11] Kosch, Michelle. *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford; Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 149.

[12] Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. P. 181.

[13] *Either/Or II*, p. 262. Quoted in Mehl, *Thinking Through* Kierkegaard, p. 30.

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result of deliberate choices and sustained action.[14] This will take much more than an ethical choice; it will take persistent effort on the part of the self.

The last step is becoming an "individual." Ultimately, to become a self is to become an individual with the social courage to stand apart from "the crowd." A Kierkegaardian individual will have "religious inwardness" or sustained ethical commitments, i.e. character. The difference between the self with character and the individual is the *source* of those ethical commitments. The source of the self-who-is-not-yet-individual's commitments is society, or customary mores (the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*).[15] As MacDonald states, "In this sense 'ethics' represents 'the universal', or more accurately the prevailing social norms."[16] As I noted earlier, Judge William has sustained dispositional interests. However, the Judge's ethical commitments—such as his commitment to marriage—are in his own mind commensurable with the commitments of a good Danish citizen. For instance, Judge William notes that "it is every person's duty to marry" and that marriage "fulfills the universal…"[17] The judge has very strong views of the ethical person's social duties: "the self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, civic self."[18] Societal duty is characteristic of the Kierkegaard's view of the ethical, as also seen in the comparison between the tragic hero and the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. Through faith Abraham suspends the ethical, while "The authentic tragic hero sacrifices himself and everything that is his for the universal; his act and every emotion in him belong to the universal…"[19] In the words of Iphigenia,

> All of Greece is looking to me. Only I
> can rescue her…

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[14] Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard," p. 179.

[15] McDonald, William, "Søren Kierkegaard", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/kierkegaard/>.

[16] MacDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard."

[17] *Either/Or II,* p. 302.

[18] *Either/Or II*, p. 262. Quoted in Mehl, *Thinking Through Kierkegaard*, p. 31.

[19] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, and Edna H Hong. *Fear and Trembling; Repetition.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983. p. 113.

Artemis wants this poor body….

Let me offer myself to her. Sacrifice me,

I say to Greece, and win Troy. This is

my memorial, my marriage, my children,

my duty, all you could wish for me.[20]

Both Judge William and the tragic hero can act with deep passion and even sustained moral commitments; however, they lack moral autonomy because those commitments are derived from and fully commensurable with the *Sittlichkeit*.

The individual with social courage is different from the person with only character because the individual will act according to her commitments: "It takes courage to be good, social courage, to be honest with yourself, to do things the right way."[21] This courage exists because the individual has an awareness of the *eternal*. In *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* Kierkegaard asks his reader, "Do you now live so that you are conscious of being an individual and thereby that you are conscious of your eternal responsibility before God?"[22] This awareness of one's eternal responsibility before God makes the individual different from the person with mere character. She will be committed to her ideals regardless of what other members of her social group think. Furthermore, she will see the world as inverted.[23] In eternity the individual will answer to the self. There will be crowd, no mob, no social pressure. This isolation changes the individual's sense of responsibility: "What then in eternity will conscience demand of you by the consciousness that you are an individual? It will teach you that if you judge (for in very many cases it will restrain you from judging), *you must bear*

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[20] Euripides, David R Slavitt, and Smith Palmer Bovie. *Euripides, 3*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p. 300-301.

[21] Malcolm Gladwell, *This American Life*. Podcast audio, June 24, 2016. http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/590/transcript.

[22] Kierkegaard, Søren, and Douglas V. Steere. *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*. New York: Harper, 1956, p. 197.

[23] Perhaps most fundamentally, she will be content with being a human being, i.e. mortal, limited, and ultimately dependent on God. I do not stress this point due to space constraints.

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responsibility for your judgment."[24] As I will argue in the last section, Kierkegaard anticipates contemporary findings in social psychology by recognizing that being a part of a crowd or mob reduces individual responsibility. However, the individual recognizes her responsibility before God, and that it does not matter what the crowd does.

The individual will answer to God in eternity. Sometimes the individual will find her commitments shared by others in her social context, but even then she will relate first to her moral value (the commitment), and to her fellow individual through the idea. She will not change her commitments because of what other's think in order to befriend them; rather, she will befriend those that share her commitments: "When individuals (each one individually) are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them…thus individuals never come too close to each other in the heard sense, simply because they are united on the basis on an ideal distance."[25] The individual relates first to her moral commitments, and then to members of her social group through her moral commitments. The person with moral autonomy recognizes that she alone is responsible for her commitments.

The individual with moral autonomy is conscious of the eternal, and thus sees things as *inverted*. "The one who is conscious of himself as an individual has his vision trained to look upon everything as inverted. His sense becomes familiar with eternity's true thought: that everything in this life appears in inverted form."[26] To see the world as inverted is to recognize that many things that most people strive after and value are fleeting, insignificant, and will not bring the self lasting happiness. So the person with moral autonomy will not seek the same things that most people seek.

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[24] Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing,* p. 191.

[25] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, and Edna H Hong. *Two ages: the age of revolution and the present age: a literary review.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 62.

[26] Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is the Will One Thing,* p. 194.

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The individual will not find comfort in material possessions, or worldly praise. The individual will remember that the last shall be first; whoever loses his life will find it; do not worry about tomorrow. This is the pinnacle of Kierkegaardian selfhood, to not derive one's values from one's social group or even from human culture more broadly. For Kierkegaard, what makes these commitments worth the social cost is that they will remain valuable when one stands alone before God in eternity.

III. Kierkegaard's Perceptual Theory of the Emotions

So far I have argued that for Kierkegaard, to have identity means to become a self, and becoming a self means taking responsibility for one's free choices and developing sustained commitments. The strongest identity will involve social courage and awareness of the eternal. The individual with social courage has the ability to cultivate her *own* sustained moral commitments that can withstand social opposition. But can the individual cultivate this strong identity if her emotions constantly oppose her commitments? Throughout much of the history of philosophy in the West, emotions have been viewed as automatic, animalistic responses that more often than not directly oppose the calm, rational reflection prescribed by philosophers. Emotions are unlearned or innate, while beliefs are teachable. Emotions are possessed by animals and very young children, while mature adults alone have a rational capacity.[27] Most importantly, rationality and judgment are necessary for the moral life, while emotions are at best heuristic; their presence "makes no essential difference to the ascription of moral worth" to the agent's action.[28] If this were true, it would be detrimental to a character ethics like Kierkegaard's. For Kierkegaard, however, emotions are closely

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[27] Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 1994. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 79.

[28] Sherman, Nancy. 1989. *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue*. Oxford [England]; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, p. 46. Sherman is speaking specifically about the Kantian view of emotions. Although some revisionist Kantians would challenge this view, the point is that this has been a longstanding view in the Western philosophical tradition.

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related to beliefs. Because emotions are intimately related to beliefs, the individual has a level of control over her emotions. The individual can take responsibility for herself by taking responsibility for her emotions. In this section I will briefly explain the relationship between beliefs or concerns and emotions for Kierkegaard, articulating his perceptual understanding of the emotions. Just as beliefs can color our visual or aural perceptions, so beliefs also affect our *emotional* perceptions. Emotions stem from or are based on beliefs, concerns, attachments, etc. This gives the individual some freedom to take responsibility for her emotions.

There are numerous places in the Kierkegaardian authorship that illuminate the relationship between concerns and emotions. I will mention two prime examples. In the *Postscript* the pseudonym Johannes Climacus uses the word passion (*lidenskaben*) in two distinct but related ways. Passion can either refer to "the kind of state that we usually call emotion – a response to particular features (as the subject sees it) of the subject's world;" it can also refer to "the concern which such responses are contingent."[29] So for instance, in a well-known quote from the *Postscript* Climacus notes that "Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essentially passion, and in its maximum an infinite personal, passionate interest in one's eternal happiness."[30] Passion is closely relates to inwardness, and is essential to character. To be passionate about something in this sense is to believe that it is valuable, to care deeply about it, and to pursue it with enthusiasm. But Climacus also uses *lidenskaben* to refer to emotions. He says that the orator "has much understanding of human passion, the power of imaginative description and command over the resources of fear for use in the decisive moment."[31] This passage brings up two important

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[29] Both quotes in this sentence are from Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard", *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, p. 187.

[30] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, Edna H Hong, and Søren Kierkegaard. 1992. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 33.

[31] Kierkegaard, Søren, Alastair Hannay, and Søren Kierkegaard. 2009. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 14.

points. First, the orator understands passion because he knows how to induce fear in his listener. Passions are beliefs or concerns, but they are also emotions such as fear. This same insight appears later in the *Postscript* when Climacus talks about bringing a man into a state of passion which refers to giving him an emotion that he cannot have unless he has a passion in the sense of sustained interest.[32] Second, the orator can create a passionate response of fear in his listener through "the power of imaginative description." Changing how a person *thinks* about something can also change the way they *feel*. Speaking specifically of religious emotion, Kierkegaard notes that "…not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring …(rather) emotion which is Christian is checked by the definition of concepts."[33] As Roberts notes, "emotions always involve some assessment of one's situation."[34] When the agent's assessment changes, the emotion often follows suit. In this way Kierkegaard seems to understand that emotions are like perceptions. Just as beliefs can color our visual or aural perceptions (think of optical illusions or changing the background music to a movie scene), so beliefs also affect our *emotional* perceptions. For Kierkegaard, emotions are "perceptions of significance," perceptions informed or colored by beliefs and concerns.[35]

Kierkegaard's *Christian Discourses* also displays this perceptual understanding of the emotions. In part one, "The Cares of the Pagans," Kierkegaard focuses on one of his favorite biblical passages, Matthew 6:25-34: "Therefore you should not worry and say, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?'—the pagans seek all these things."[36] Kierkegaard's methodology is to examine the *bekymringer* (worries) that people have. And by examining these worries, he believes we can tell whether a person is a Christians or a pagan. Kierkegaard explains, "Thus with the help of the lily and the bird we get

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[32] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* p. 276. Cited in Roberts, "Passion and Reflection" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary:* Two Ages, p. 89.

[33] Kierkegaard, Søren, Walter Lowrie, and Frederick Sontag. *On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler, or A Cycle of Ethico-Religious Essays.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955, p. 163. Cited in Roberts, "Passion and Reflection," p. 91.

[34] Roberts, Passion and Reflection, p. 90.

[35] Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, p. 4.

[36] *Christian Discourses,* p. 13.

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to know the pagan's cares, what they are, namely, those that the bird and the lily do not have, although they do have the comparable necessities."[37] The implication is that Christians will be like the bird and the lily, lacking certain cares. *Bekymringer* is commonly translated as "cares." However, it is sometimes better translated as "anxieties" or "worries." But the choice of "cares" as the translation of *bekymringer* is not without rationale. Just as passion has a dual sense in our own current linguistic usage—a person is passionate about gardening, and when the birds ate her tomatoes she flew into a fit of passion—so can *care*. The same person cares about her garden in the first sense, and she has cares than result from her perception of the state of her garden. However, we more commonly say that a person *worries* about whether the birds will eat her tomatoes, because she *cares* about the state of her garden. In this way emotions such as worry stem from or are based on beliefs or concerns.

Consider one example from the *Christian Discourses*, the care of poverty. Throughout part one, Kierkegaard compares the cares of the mythical bird from Matthew 6 with the Christian and the pagan. All three characters are quite literally poor. They wake up each day with no stored food and no knowledge of where that day's food will come from. Kierkegaard calls this their "external condition." He is not concerned with their external condition, but with their self-understanding. The bird is poor, but is not *worried* about its poverty. It does not have the emotions we typically associate with poverty. The bird doesn't have the emotion of worry because the bird isn't concerned about whether it will have enough to eat that day. It doesn't believe that it will have enough to eat or not have enough to eat. Birds don't have attachments to material objects or beliefs about the future. *The bird has no emotion because it has no concern*. The pagan on the other hand is concerned about having enough to eat today and every day in the future. And the pagan believes

[37] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, and Søren Kierkegaard. 1997. *Christian Discourses; The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 11.

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based on today's refrigerator that his situation is dire. The pagan is *worried* about tomorrow. "He is not silent like the carefree bird; he does not *speak* like a Christian, who speaks of his riches; *he has and knows really nothing else to talk about than poverty and its care*."[38] Relentless focus on something is indicative of care. Negative emotions stem from the pagan's construal of his situation, a construal that is based on concerns and beliefs. The Christian in Kierkegaard's story is also literally poor, but the Christian isn't concerned about her poverty—she turns her gaze upward and give thanks to God.[39] She is not impressed by her external condition because she *believes* that God will provide her daily bread. Her construal of situation is very different because of her beliefs.

These two examples illustrate that Kierkegaard understands that emotions are like perceptions, and that emotions rest on beliefs, concerns, attachments, etc. Since emotions are intricately related to beliefs or concerns, "…emotions are susceptible to the will; by choosing to think in one way rather than another about our situation, we can to some extent choose our emotions."[40] This is essential for Kierkegaard's understand of freedom and responsibility. To be a free agent that can take responsibility for the self and cultivate character and social courage, the self must have *some* freedom with respect to one's emotions (if we view emotions as morally salient, which Kierkegaard does). However, in the next section I will qualify the extent to which the self can choose her emotions.

IV. Social Comparison

I have argued that according to Kierkegaard, becoming a self means taking continual responsibility for one's free choices, developing sustained passions, and not relying on the crowd as

[38] Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 19. My emphasis.

[39] Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 21.

[40] Robert C. Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard." *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, p. 184.

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the source of those passions. Furthermore, the responsible self has emotional integrity, integrity that is possible due to the relationship between emotions and concerns. However, the fact that emotions are intimately related to concerns does not give the agent absolute freedom with regard to emotion. Just as concerns are not always under our *direct* control, neither are emotions. "The crowd is untruth" because other members of our social group influence both our emotions and concerns. The crowd influences the individual's emotions and concerns by causing her to engage in social comparison. The emotions and beliefs acquired through social comparison can become deeply entrenched in the individual's psyche and self-understanding, difficult to eradicate. Thus Kierkegaard describes a number of spiritual practices to aid the individual in developing social courage. I will not focus on the spiritual practices here.[41] Instead I will explain how the crowd influences the individual's emotions and concerns by putting several of Kierkegaard's signed texts in dialogue with contemporary social comparison theory. I conclude Kierkegaard is not a radical individualist, and he also does not think that become a free and responsible person—a person with social courage—is easy. The road to becoming a self is fraught with envy and mimetic desire, making social courage vitally important for moral development.

The role of the crowd in influencing both the concerns and emotions of the self is most clearly seen in Kierkegaard's upbuilding and Christian discourses. For instance, in part two of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, "To Be Contented with Being a Human Being," Kierkegaard uses the lilies and the birds from Matthew 6 to illuminate the negative effects of social comparison. He tells two illustrative stories. First, he tells the story of a content lily who is befriended by a "naughty bird." The bird traveled from far off places, and began telling the lily about far off lands, with exotic birds and beautiful lilies. The bird humiliated the lily by telling the lily that "in

[41] I write about these practices in "The Bird, the Pagan, and the Christian: Exploring the Relationship between Emotions and Concerns in Kierkegaard's *Christian Discourses*" forthcoming in the *The Redemption of Feeling: The Religious Existentialists.*

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comparison with that kind of glory the lily looked like nothing—indeed, it was so insignificant that it was a question whether the lily actually had a right to be called a lily."[42] The lily had never thought about itself in relation to other lilies before, but the naughty bird generated social comparison. As a result, "*The lily became worried*. The more it listened to the bird, the more worried it became; no longer did it sleep calmly at night and wake up joyful in the morning…Now in self-concern it began to be preoccupied with itself and the condition of its life—all the day long."[43] Once the lily began comparing itself to other lilies, it began to care about things it hadn't cared about before—namely, being in a more exotic place and becoming a more beautiful lily—and it developed negative emotions as a result. What happened to the lily? It talked the bird into plucking it out of the ground and transporting it to a more exotic place. On the way, the lily withered and died.

The second story has a similar message. A wood dove lived in wonder and let "each day have its own troubles" until it met two tame doves from the nearby farmer's house. The tame doves tell the wood dove that because of the farmer's storehouse their "future is secure."[44] As a result of these conversations, the wood dove became uncertain and insecure about its own life: the wood dove thought "it must be very pleasant to know that one's living was secured for a long time, whereas it was miserable to live continually in uncertainty so that one never dares to say that one knows one is provided for."[45] The wood dove had no actual needs; it found enough to eat each day. But now the wood dove "had acquired an *idea* of need in the future. It had lost its peace of mind—it had acquired *worry about making a living*."[46] The wood dove suffers a similar fate as the lily: its desire for security gets it caught and killed.

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[42] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, and Edna H Hong. 1993.*Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 167.

[43] Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, p. 167-68. My emphasis.

[44] Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, p. 174.

[45] Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits,* p. 175.

[46] Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, p. 175.

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Kierkegaard's point with both of these tales is clear: social comparison and the envy that it causes are detrimental to the development of a healthy self. Furthermore, social comparison gives rise to worries and cares (emotions) that humans otherwise wouldn't have. These emotions are acquired mimetically—the self wants to have the security or the material prosperity of her conspecific, realizes she doesn't have it (which she didn't realize until the comparison began), and then experiences the emotion of worry as a result of this new knowledge. The worry then changes the self's attentional focus to objects it did not focus on before, like living in a more exotic place or having future security. The self also engages in different practices, like trying to make itself more beautiful or building up a storehouse for the future. This change in attention and practice only serves to increase the worry, resulting in a feedback loop that further intensifies the new attentional focus and practice. Soon the individual's basic concerns or beliefs have fundamentally changed—she now believes that she *needs* security and material prosperity to be happy, which she didn't believe before social comparison began. Social comparison changes the self's fundamental concerns, emotions, and actions.

In its classic formulation, social comparison theory (SC) in psychology is the idea that "individuals are driven by a desire for self-evaluation, a motivation to establish that one's opinions are correct and to know precisely what one is capable of doing."[47] Social comparison is a product of evolution—many other animals engage in forms of social comparison, and humans in particular pay attention to and imitate other humans to an incredible degree.[48] People engage in social comparison in part because other human beings are one of our greatest sources of information about the

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[47] Gibbons, Frederick X. "Social Comparison: The End of a Theory and the Emergence of a Field." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 102, no. 1 (2007): p. 4. This formulation goes back to Festinger, Leon. 1954. *A Theory of Social Comparison Processes.* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

[48] Gilbert, P. "Social Comparison, Social Attractiveness and Evolution: How Might They Be Related?" *New Ideas in Psychology New Ideas in Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1995): 149–65.

world.[49] Furthermore, people "use comparison to determine whether they are 'correct' or 'normal'" and to determine their relative standing, especially with regards to things like intelligence, ability, and wealth.[50] This tendency to use others as the standard of comparison has a number of negative consequences. I briefly note three, and then point to places in the Kierkegaardian corpus where these effects of SC are described.

The first two (often negative) effects of SC is that peer influence dampens and diffuses responsible action and changes the individual's attentional focus. The phenomenon of bystander non-intervention illustrates both of these points. In one of the most famous ethnographic examples in the United States, from 1964, an assailant stabbed Kitty Genovese repeatedly over a 30-minute period. Police reports confirmed that no fewer than 38 people heard, and realized what was going on, and yet no one did so much as call 911.[51] Social psychologists hypothesize that the main reason for such inaction is that *social groups inhibit bystander intervention*. When in a social group, individuals are much less likely to engage in responsible action; they tend to assume that someone else will help or that, if no one else is helping, the situation must not be so dire. This is demonstrated in a number of lab-based studies. One experiment sent male undergraduates into a room to fill out a questionnaire. They were either alone, with two other subjects, or with two confederates of the experiment instructed to remain passive and continue working when the planned emergency occurred—smoke came in through the vent and slowly filled the room. The study found that "While 75 percent of the solitary bystanders left the room to report the smoke, only 10 percent of the bystanders who participated alongside the two impassive confederates, and only 38 percent of the three-person

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[49] Ross, Lee, and Richard E Nisbett. *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*. London: Pinter & Martin, 2011. See especially chapter 3.

[50] Richins, "Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent," p. 596.

[51] Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, p. 41. This story has now been proven to be somewhat apocryphal. However, I repeat it for two reasons. First, it sparked an entire field of research in social psychology, and the basic findings have been replicated numerous times. Second, we are all aware of many anecdotal instances of bystander non-intervention like the Kitty Genovese story.

groups, ever intervened in this way."[52] Social comparison—which is in part the tendency to compare one's knowledge and opinions with those of one's peers—often results in the individual failing to engage in responsible action.

The second related point seen in these bystander effect studies is that group situations seem to inhibit subjects from *noticing* the emergency in the first place. Solitary students in the "smoke study" tended to glance around the room frequently as they worked on their questionnaires, generally noticing the smoke within five seconds. *Those in groups* typically kept their eyes on their work and *did not notice the smoke* until it was quite thick—about 20 seconds after the first puff came through the vent.[53] Furthermore, while subjects who noticed the smoke *recognized* it as a fire emergency, subjects who did not report the smoke did not think that it was due to fire. Rather, they uniformly interpreted the smoke as a "nondangerous event."[54] A number of other studies unrelated to bystander effects demonstrate the same phenomena: social groups influence both the individual's attentional focus and the individual's interpretation of stimuli. Individuals in a group notice different things and interpret them differently than lone individuals.

The last point is that SC generates feelings of envy and inadequacy. This is especially true of upward SC (USC), that is, comparing the self with a person perceived to be better off. USC often "results in feelings of inferiority dissatisfaction, and impaired self-worth," especially if the comparison is in a domain that is important to the self, such as wealth or attractiveness.[55] We might simply call this feeling *envy*. In contemporary studies the effects of USC are vividly illustrated when consumers view idealized media images of American life. The images are of beautiful people with apparently stress-free lives and the latest and greatest consumer goods resulting in a happy and

[52] Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, p. 42. The study was conducted by Latanè & Darley, 1968.

[53] Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, p. 43. My emphasis.

[54] Darley, J. M., & Latane, B. (1970). *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?* New York, NY: Appleton Century Crofts, p. 52.

[55] Richins, M. L. 1995. "Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent." *American Behavioral Scientist American Behavioral Scientist* 38 (4): 597.

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pleasurable life. When consumers see those images they compare them to their own lives and find them wanting. This results in negative feelings about the self that motivate the self to try and eliminate those feelings.[56] More specifically, the self experiencing these negative feelings works to eliminate them and restore the positive feelings of self-worth they have lost.[57] In sum, upward comparison generates envy and a host of negative feelings about the self that the self then wants to eradicate.

The connection between Kierkegaard's understanding of selfhood and moral autonomy in particular and the psychology of social comparison is now emerging. The stories of the lily and the wood dove illustrate two of the negative effects of social comparison—envy and attentional focus. Before the "naughty bird" came along, the lily was content to live "in an isolated spot beside a small brook" and listen to the babbling brook all day, every day.[58] But once the bird came along and told the lily tales of exotic and beautiful places, the lily "in self-concern…began to be preoccupied with itself and the condition of its life…"[59] Suddenly the lily *noticed* that listening to the same thing all day was "much too boring."[60] Before the naughty bird came along the lily never noticed its appearance. Afterwards the lily saw itself as inferior and insignificant. Social comparison changes the self's attentional focus, often with negative consequences. Furthermore, the lily felt envy, wanting to "become a gorgeous lily, or even the most gorgeous."[61] The feelings of negative self-worth and worry motivated the lily to risk—and ultimately lose—its life to better its relative standing.

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56 Higgins, E.T. "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect." *Psychological Review* 94, no. 3 (1987): 319–40. Cited in Richins, "Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent," p. 597.

57 Carver, Charles S, and Michael Scheier. 1981. *Attention and Self-Regulation: A Control-Theory Approach to Human Behavior*. New York: Springer-Verlag. Cited in Richins, "Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent," p. 598.

58 Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits,* p. 167.

59 Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits,* p. 168.

60 Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits,* p. 168.

61 Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits,* p. 168.

The last negative result of social comparison is that individual members of larger social groups often fail to engage in responsible action. Anticipating this point, Kierkegaard proclaims, "A crowd…is untruth, since a crowd either makes for impenitence and irresponsibility altogether, or for the single individual it at least weakens responsibility by reducing the responsibility to a fraction."[62] Why does being a member of the crowd radically reduce personal responsibility? It begins with the invention of the *public*. In *Two Ages,* Kierkegaard notes that in the present age (Kierkegaard's contemporary world), the press creates the notion of the "public" by making everyone aware of the status of other members of their social group.[63] This leads everyone to be envious of every other person because the "public" as represented by the press becomes the standard of comparison. Kierkegaard calls envy "the *negatively unifying principle* in a passionless and very reflective age."[64] Being afraid of distinction and united by envy, the modern tendency is to *leveling*, Kierkegaard's word for bland equality. Fearing difference, everyone decides that they must not do anything too radical. This is why the present age is the age of reflection and not action. Kierkegaard anticipates this point in *Purity of Heart*, asking "do you press yourself into the crowd, where the one excuses himself with the others, where at one moment there are, so to speak, *many*, and where in the next moment, *each time that the talk touches upon responsibility, there is no one*?[65] Social comparison leads to bystander non-intervention, to inaction on the part of the individual.

V. Conclusion: Social Comparison, Freedom, and Responsibility

Kierkegaard's vision of selfhood is of a person that recognizes herself as free and takes responsibility for her choices. Furthermore, she develops sustained commitments to freely chosen values, and at the pinnacle of selfhood those values are her own, not those of her social group. The

[62] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, and Edna H Hong. 2009. *Kierkegaard's Writings, XXII.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=2065133, p. 107.

[63] Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V Hong, and Edna H Hong. 1978. *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review* . Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 91.

[64] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 81.

[65] Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, p. 189–90. My emphasis.

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self with sustained has emotions that stem from and reinforce her commitments. The problem should now be clear: social courage—the courage to act on one's commitments despite social opposition—is incredibly difficult for most individuals due to human social nature and the tendency to conform to social pressure. But Kierkegaard contends that the person who is conscious of the eternal and sees the world as inverted will be much less prone to give in to social pressure. What might it mean to see the world as inverted in our contemporary context? For example, researchers have noted that when consumers low in materialism (who do not consider material possessions important to their own happiness) "see idealized images of wealth, negative self-feelings are unlikely to result even if their own possessions are modest."[66] Perhaps it's obvious; people who don't highly value material possessions aren't bothered by their lack of possessions. But surely this is an example of seeing the world as *inverted*. After all, it is much more common in the Western world to value material possessions than not. To devalue material possessions means not valuing the same things that most members of their social group value. This inverted belief allows these individuals to resist falling into the trap of social comparison. Make no mistake, Kierkegaard does not think that socai courage is easy. Like character, social courage will take time and effort to develop. But the person who is most free and has the strongest identity is the person who takes responsibility for themselves by developing the social courage to care about what truly matters, and by always keeping in might that *the crowd is untruth*.

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[66] Richins, "Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent," p. 598.