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Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard and Religion: Personality, Character, and Virtue*. Cambridge: CUP, 2018, 245 pp.

I. Brief Background and book themes.

Sylvia Walsh is among the most important writers on Kierkegaard in English in recent decades. Her monographs and essays have focused on themes in Kierkegaard's later more explicitly Christian work and late journals, from *Sickness Unto Death* onwards, which have received less attention in recent discussions of psychological and ethical ideas in his earlier pseudonymous works and "upbuilding discourses." For anyone seeking to understand Kierkegaard's late religious thought and themes such as "dying to the world," Walsh's scholarship is indispensable.

The same remains true in her new monograph, *Kierkegaard and Religion,* which is informed throughout by Walsh's detailed and sympathetic grasp of Kierkegaard's most demanding writings on Christian discipleship. However, here she also engages with themes in the earlier pseudonymous texts and "ethico-religious" discourses, including personal identity, character, virtues, or other "spiritual qualities." Her novel take on these topics adds to Walsh's significant contributions to recent debates on how Kierkegaard conceives neighbor-love and its relations with other types of love in the less universal (or "special") relationships. I will focus on Walsh's challenge to readings of Kierkegaard as a virtue ethicist, given abundant recent interest in this debate.

As the Prologue makes clear, much of Walsh's interest lies in clarifying how Kierkegaard understands "character" in contrast with work in empirical and philosophical psychology more broadly. In particular, her thesis is that Kierkegaard contributes a distinctively Christian understanding of character that is largely absent even in recent "characterology" (my term) informed by ethical theory and conceptions of ethical virtues. Thus chapter 5 on "Christian character in Kierkegaard's later" Christian writings form "the heart of this study" (15).

Chapter 1 begins with a few remarks on contemporary personality theories such as the Big Five factors of temperament model, before turning to a comprehensive summary of important themes in Kierkegaard's early works; this provides an excellent introduction for readers who are interested in per-

sonality and character but less familiar with Kierkegaard's moral psychology. Notably, while stressing Abraham's absolute obedience to God, Walsh backs the "eschatological" (my term) interpretation of faith in *Fear and Trembling* as focused on the miraculous fulfillment of the ethical ideal beyond any power of human agency (38; compare 64, 113). For Kierkegaard, personality requires "life-development" and even rebirth as one becomes rightly oriented towards the eternal or highest good. Walsh finds in the pseudonymous works "a continuous emphasis on human freedom, choice, resolution, and individual striving along with receptivity to and cooperation with the divine in the formation of personality" (48). This is vital, because it implies that the human will matters: we have some germ of *aseity* in St. Anselm's sense — something that has to arise spontaneously from us, rather than only from God. There is tension here with Walsh's later detailed arguments that Kierkegaard's mature Christian view aims to oust any possible vestige of merit from the faithful human person. I return to this below.

II. Personality, Character, and Virtue

Chapter 2 begins with further brief reflections on contemporary theories. The situation is confusing because, of course, psychologists and philosophers use the relevant terms in a variety of different ways. In many contexts today, "personality" refers to stable aspects of temperament displayed in social interactions that may continue even when morally significant aspects of character, such as one's loves and personal projects, alter drastically. For example, someone may have a morose demeanor throughout life while being courageous in youth and cowardly later on. The idea that true personality is an achievement that requires working with our temperament and rising above aesthetic carelessness and hedonist self-distraction is a uniquely Kierkegaardian contribution in response to the twisted artificiality of the bourgeois salon and narcissistic forms of romanticism.

Similarly, in comparing Kierkegaard's themes and contemporary studies of "moral character traits," it might help to emphasize that Kierkegaard uses "character" in *Two Ages* for the more fundamental condition of taking any serious stand with deep implications for our moral worth, or conceiving oneself according to any robust identity-defining commitments with full acceptance of their ethical implications (see 66–69). This is a constitutive requirement for any particular character-traits or dispositions that make our very person,

rather than our particular actions, either good or evil. Thus Kierkegaard may agree that dispositions or cross-situationally stable traits involving motivations and emotions must be to some extent under our control, so that we can be responsible and morally evaluable for them (51). But he still introduced a distinctive sense of "character;" none of the mainstream accounts today imagine that someone could have morally admirable or reprehensive traits — e.g. being generous or stingy, friendly or surly, polite or rude, kind or cruel — without having owned and worked on such traits as part of a life-view or set of ethically qualified commitments that constitute *existential character*. In fact, Kierkegaard's aesthetes do exemplify a variety of such traits without having a "self" or inner, volitional character. Similarly, ethically engaged agents in Kierkegaard's depictions display different temperamental tendencies and morally evaluable traits, but they all "have character" in the same constitutive sense.

Nevertheless, Walsh's three "portraits of character" are quite helpful. Her analysis of Mr. "A" from *Either/Or* explains how the different narratives in volume I hang together to show how hollow and meaningless aesthetic strategies become once they move beyond the totally unreflective childlike sensuousness. Walsh's treatment of the faithful tax collector helpfully explains journal entries distinguishing "purely personal…existential faith" from faith in goods promised according to a doctrine with its own distinctive demands (65–66). She argues that Kierkegaard's explanation of "character" in *Two Ages* requires the religious inwardness or relation to God that is stressed in his later work. I have argued in *Love, Reason, and Will* that Kierkegaard's "Present Age" essay focuses most on the inwardness achieved *by self-choice* in the Judge's sense, i.e. the mode of commitment or infinite pathos that is the precondition of character. This is closely related to the "fall" from innocence as ignorance mediated by initial anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety.* These themes suggest, perhaps *pace* Walsh, that the *ethical stage* in Kierkegaard's moral psychology has some independent value or enduring importance in itself, even though it will be incorporated into faith in his final Christian conception. This means that many insights of *Either/Or*, *Two Ages*, the *Concept of Anxiety*, *Stages on Life's Way*, and the *Postscript* can all help people who currently lack faith in religious promises and consolations.

This issue underlies the debate about virtues in chapter 3. I have argued that Kierkegaard is "a kind of virtue ethicist" who focuses on "proto-virtues" needed to overcome aestheticism, such as earnestness, commitment, integrity, and authenticity; yet I agree with most of Walsh's reasons for distinguishing

Kierkegaard's positions on moral character from those typical of recent work on virtues in ethical theory. "Dydig" in Danish connotes excellence, or merits, or even expertise, much as "virtue" in English can suggest a "paragon" of ethical superiority inconsistent with the humility that Kierkegaard stresses throughout his religious writings. Walsh's detailed evidence confirms that Kierkegaard associated talk about natural and even infused virtues with eudaimonism understood as enlightened self-interest, or a sagacious concern for one's own self-realization that is actually self-defeating because it is incompatible with loving other persons or God entirely for their own sake (78, 89, 102–3, 144). Still, even if Kierkegaard shunned the term because of these associations, reconstructing some of his points in the language of virtues as ethically good dispositions could be helpful in explaining his insights and defending the possibility of non-eudaimonist forms of virtue ethics in which the telos is reconceived in terms of a fully meaningful life — at the ethical stage, before its full religious conditions become apparent to the striving agent. The proto-virtues are the qualities involved in becoming a definite personality or "single individual" (107). The same point applies to other terms like "autonomous agency," which Kierkegaard followed Luther in avoiding because of its associations with autarky, even though most forms of self-determination are implied in his work. Patience, purity of heart, earnestness, and faith can be described as human virtues in a similar moderate sense that requires constant volitional effort to sustain (88), and that is humbled in surrendering or resigning all hopes to succeed on our own. Agape may be more complex (see below).

But this point about contemporary appropriations of Kierkegaardian themes to enrich current debates in moral psychology does not refute Walsh's main point that, in several places, Kierkegaard develops the strictest Lutheran view that we are capable of literally nothing, not just outwardly in the concrete earthly realm, but even inwardly — as if all the choices involved in faith are also caused solely by God without anything originating from our own aseity. We do not voluntarily accept "the condition" for faith that God gives, or bring anything of our own into preserving these gifts through our striving (87, 100–2). Crucially, this implies *more* than that we cannot avoid the "totality of guilt" described in the *Postscript* or recover from sin on our own, or become faithful without divine aid — ideas found throughout Kierkegaard's work after *Either/Or*. It is the more extreme doctrine that ethical character and faith do not depend on any initiative for which we are ultimately responsible. A reconstruction

in terms of existential virtues would have to oppose this view, and emphasize instead that "the person himself shall do everything to use what God rightly gives him" (*Christian Discourses*, Discourse on Luke 22:15, Hong ed. p. 254).

Walsh offers good evidence for this strand in Kierkegaard's thought, from early discourses on "Every Good and Perfect Gift" to his later works and journals — see especially Walsh's analysis of his responses to Clausen and Martensen on grace and free will. However, there are other strands in Kierkegaard's work that seem to run counter to this extreme, e.g. remarks implying that we alone choose our non-resistance to grace (avoidance of "offense"). For otherwise, how can human spirits refuse God to the end, even in demonic defiance, as the *Sickness Unto Death* teaches? Walsh's point that Kierkegaard rejects reliance on habits accrued by good actions (see the discussion in *The Crisis*), and instead emphasizes "earnestness" understood as a continually willed or repeated disposition, confirms the importance of the human will, suggesting the existence of *volitional* virtues.

In short, Kierkegaard often appears to *agree* with Martensen that even if, from an external standpoint (as in the *Fragments*), the learner is utterly helpless, from the "subjective, practical standpoint" of a person engaged in living, our continually repeated efforts to pursue good ends and to conform our aims and methods to moral duty are essential (101). Without ethically conscious striving, we could never rediscover the limits the prompt resignation. Thus the young need to strive to the utmost before they can learn how far they are from ethical perfection, or how deep human guilt goes (105–6; compare 146). This is the paradox that David Aiken (following C.S. Lewis) called a "pilgrim's regress." In this sense, we remain God's "co-workers" (89) although our best efforts will only clarify our inadequacy without God. Thus the ethical stage with its volitional aspects is retained within existential faith; it is not like a ladder that is thrown away. We must "personally will" to have faith (88); it is a risk we willingly maintain. So the paradox of humility has two sides: we have to strive for good ends, which may suggest positive qualities and potentials within us, in order for our taking no final credit to mean anything.

III. Conclusion: Christian Character

The crucial fifth chapter seems to confirm this finding. Walsh explains the paradox that, for Kierkegaard, Christians must embrace their "infinite or ideal self" in the likeness of God as their true self, even while recognizing

the infinite difference from this ideal implied by sin. The Christian thus seeks to imitate Christ for God's sake rather than as a means to her own virtue or merit (131). However, in trying to explain this, Walsh inevitably has to do some reconstructing — emphasizing some suggestions in the texts over others — to avoid possible objections to Kierkegaard's late views. For example, if we interpret renouncing the world or self-denial as retreating entirely from social relations or politics, we again lose ethically informed striving and the higher "immediacy" of faith as well. Instead, Walsh argues that it means giving up all desires for "money, success, honor, esteem, prestige, possessions" and confidence in our own agency (132).

This seems to leave some room for caring about finite goods that affect our neighbors' well-being, even if they can never be entirely equalized. For we have to "communicate" our solidarity with others in true neighbor-love, which is a willingness to perish (134–5) or put aside all our personal pursuits if necessary for our neighbors (so much for Bernard Williams's Gauguin). Neighbor-love so understood can still hope for reciprocation from neighbors and involve proper self-love (136). But this must include caring about — and thus recognizing some value in — one's own efforts, striving, and choices. To deny this would put us into the demonic state of asserting that God made a mistake in creating us with free will. Our value lies in our loving unselfishly, and we are commanded to believe that all others (even the outwardly worst) can love. Likewise, while loving others as neighbors is sharing the highest (God) with them (137), our agapic duties cannot be simply to urge them towards worship (for example), or we are back to complete monastic withdrawal from the finite world (149).

In discussing key themes in *Works of Love*, Walsh accepts that agapic love can become a kind of disposition; but it is not a capacity of ours, or an enhanced version of our natural dispositions, like Aquinas's "charity." However, imagining that the Holy Spirit acts directly through us without acts of love coming from our heart or self might be taking the metaphor of becoming "an instrument of God's will" too literally — as if we were merely a colorless window for God's light to shine through. We do have some aseity: for Kierkegaard, "human beings are always free to accept or reject God's gift" (142). Still, Walsh must be correct that for Kierkegaard, we cannot conceive agape as the fulfillment of our natural longing for completeness (144). Although Kierkegaard's Climacus stressed infinite concern for our highest good, Kierkegaard's late works seem to clarify that this can only be understood as salvation *with*

all others. The eternal happiness is the most common or necessarily shared of all goods (145). This is my favorite insight in the book.

There is more to say than space allows about the last parts of Walsh's account. But in sum, this is a provocative account of Kierkegaard's mature conception of character that clarifies many important topics. While it may remain controversial, Walsh's persistence in questioning "virtue" interpretations has put new issues on the agenda in Kierkegaard scholarship.

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James A. Diamond, *Jewish Theology Unbound*. Oxford: OUP 2018, 304 pp.

In the interest of full disclosure, let me say two things. First, I am a long-time friend of James Diamond and greatly admire his work. Second, I am a proponent of doctrines that he firmly rejects, e.g. negative theology and creation ex nihilo. So it is with a good measure of objectivity that I say that *Jewish Theology Unbound* is a highly learned and intricately researched effort to construct a workable theology on a wide range of questions including love, death, freedom, and evil as well as metaphysical issues like the names and nature of God. Diamond's passion for his subject matter, close reading of biblical passages, and thorough knowledge of rabbinic sources are apparent on every page of the book.

Broadly speaking, the book takes on the Christian prejudice that originated with Paul at Galatians 3.13 ("Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law.") and carried through to such "enlightened" figures as Kant and Hegel. Against this, Diamond argues that Judaism places heavy emphasis on, even demands, freedom, more specifically freedom from God. In his words (p. 5): "The title of this book, Jewish Theology Unbound, captures a fierce opposition to these theological and philosophical corruptions of Judaism. Jewish 'unbound' theology conveys a sense of vitality and creativity that is anything but passive, slavish, and legalistic."

Freedom from God? Diamond is on solid ground in showing that biblical characters like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Job feel perfectly free to question God, and in Jacob's case, even wrestle with God. Their questions are philosophical in nature, and in many instances, cause God to relent in the face of human