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QUEERING KIERKEGAARD:
SIN, SEX, AND CRITICAL THEORY

Jesus was my first boyfriend – Michael Warner

Introduction:

There is an uncanny agreement between the queer rejection of marriage, which resists affirming the legal recognition of same-sex relationships on the grounds that it codifies and normalizes non-heterosexual desire, and the religious objections to gay rights in North America, which oppose legal recognition on the grounds that it compromises the meaning of marriage and family. The former position is exemplified by skepticism towards neo-liberal ideals of equality, especially ideals of citizenship, found in recent arguments by queer theorists.¹ The latter argument was exemplified recently by the successful “yes on 8” campaign in California, subsequently upheld by the State Supreme Court, which persuaded many voters to support a ballot proposition to overturn the legality of same-sex marriage in the state. In both the queer critique of marriage and the religious condemnation of gay rights, there is an acknowledgment that there is something *perverse* about queer desire. Specifically, both tend to concede the point that the inclusion of non-heterosexual

This article is a revised version of a dissertation chapter, written under the supervision of Martin Beck Matustík, whose guidance and support has been invaluable and whom I thank here. The dissertation research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council doctoral fellowship from Canada and a Bisland Dissertation Fellowship from Purdue University; the revision was funded in part by a Summer Research Fellowship granted by Sonoma State University. For insightful comments and suggestions, I’d like to thank Tara Pedersen, Alice Sowaal, Michael Michau-Paradiso, Namrata Mitra, Alexis Shotwell, and the anonymous reviewer for JCRT.

¹ For an excellent overview of such arguments, see Amy L. Brandzel, “Queering Citizenship? Same-Sex Marriage and the State,” *GLQ* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171-204.

couples into the state-legislated institution of marriage threatens the very category of “normal.”

Opposition to same-sex marriage, emerging especially from the religious right, often involves the explicit admission that marriage as an institution reflects heterosexual essentialist norms. Moreover, it also seems to admit to the threat that to include queers in the ethical community would involve relinquishing the association of homosexuality with transgression.² This admission—that the inclusion of queers in the institution of marriage challenges the purported natural status of heterosexuality—makes a surprisingly similar point to one that has been consistently elaborated by queer theorists.³ What I will explore in this article is the possibility for another strange agreement between such disparate voices in the public sphere debate about sexuality and civil rights—namely, that the spiritual category of “sin” is relevant to the debate. What may be unexpected in this analysis is its conclusion that it is actually the queer theorists, rather than advocates of the religious right, who demonstrate an understanding of faith and sin-consciousness.

I make this argument by examining the relevance of Kierkegaard’s religious existentialism for the broader queer project of undermining the “normal” and moving beyond identity politics. This may seem counterintuitive since the prevailing tenor of queer theory understandably dismisses religion as part of the problem in need of critique.⁴ However, Kierkegaard’s own critique of established religion demonstrates the productivity of a *religious* account of sin. If we could advance a religious argument like Kierkegaard’s towards a queer understanding of sin and desire, we could not only undermine on spiritual

² This point is made by James Penney, “(Queer) Theory and the Universal Alternative,” *Diacritics* 32, no. 2 (2002): 3-19 and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). See also Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006): 168.

³ See Eric Fassin, “Same Sex, Different Politics: ‘Gay Marriage’ Debates in France and the United States,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2001): 215-32. Fassin provides an analysis of both gay conservative arguments in favor of same-sex marriage in the US and conservative progressive arguments against the Civil Pact of Solidarity in France: “Whereas in the United States, normalizing is the justification invoked by gay conservatives to defend same-sex marriage, in France, conservative progressives use symbolic, social norms to resist the entry of gays and lesbians into the institutions of marriage and the family, for fear that homosexuality and heterosexuality should be equally legitimate—that is, lest the heterosexual, not to say heterosexist, norm falls apart” (227). The latter French argument moreover affirms the subversity of remaining outside of marriage altogether.

⁴ In a presentation of an earlier draft of this paper at the Eastern A.P.A. in a panel on continental philosophy and queer theory, I was asked why even raise the question of addressing religious discourse from within queer theory; since the battle lines are drawn, why bother attempting to engage those who vilify, discriminate against, and demonize queers? This article is an attempt to transform the question into one that rethinks the relations of sin, sex, and desire in order to reflect upon the spiritual, and not solely political, import of queer theory.

grounds the prejudicial attacks on civil rights at work within the contemporary religious right in North America, but we could also augment the ongoing project of queer theory and affirm the critical relevance of Kierkegaard's existentialism.

Following Kierkegaard, I will argue that the singular individual cannot be faithful simply by acting in accordance with social norms; rather, the faithful person is called to confront his or her limitations, not only ethically but existentially. This point parallels Kierkegaard's insistence, throughout his oeuvre, that the existing singular individual is incommensurate with the normalizing and leveling social order.⁵ Kierkegaard claims that there can be no existing individual if we each rely solely upon our social institutions to mediate or even actualize who we are as subjective individuals. He thus exposes the undue prioritizing of social norms and values as *religiously* misleading. In that normalization lifts external, socially recognizable criteria higher than subjective inwardness, there is a certain "deification" of the social norms and values. As Merold Westphal puts it, Kierkegaard's project is critical because it seeks to "unsocialize the individual in order to un-deify society."⁶ From the vantage point of anti-homophobic thought, this point is very queer.⁷

It is important to clarify that whereas the religious right employs universalizing rhetoric, its conception of sin remains squarely within the realm of particular social and cultural customs and assumptions. According to several of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors, such an approach to the problem of sin simply evades or precludes a confrontation with sin.⁸ For example, Johannes de Silentio demonstrates that over-privileging one's compliance with social norms

⁵ See for example Søren Kierkegaard, "Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review," *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Ed. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), where Kierkegaard's indictment of the leveling tendencies of the present age seems pressingly relevant to contemporary consumerism. See also Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Ed. & Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), in which Johannes de Silentio claims, "It is a simple matter to level all existence to the idea of the state or the idea of a society. If this is done, it is also simple to mediate, for one never comes to the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal" (62).

⁶ Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991): 34.

⁷ I expand on this point elsewhere, demonstrating that Kierkegaard's relevance to contemporary critical theory demands in part a "non-ideal" reading of his project. See Ada S. Jaarsma, "The Ideology of the Normal: Desire, Ethics, and Kierkegaardian Critique," *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*. Ed. Lisa Tessman (Springer, 2009): 85-104.

⁸ As per convention, I will refer to the pseudonymous authors of the Kierkegaardian texts; the texts are listed under Kierkegaard's name in the end notes. While this convention ostensibly heeds Kierkegaard's request that we acknowledge the pseudonymity of the authorship, it also greatly facilitates a certain clarity in interpreting the Kierkegaardian oeuvre. Since the pseudonyms frequently comment on and correct each other's concepts, it is vital to ground analysis in the specificities of the authorship.

can lead to one's inability to even recognize sin or faith. Further, Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus explain that insistence on complicity with the existing order of knowledge can disable one's willingness to confront one's own sin and thereby evade the rigors of existential inwardness.

The religious right's approach to transgression presupposes that sins can be accounted for through what Lacan calls "permanent bookkeeping"⁹ and what Kierkegaard calls habit.¹⁰ As I will explore below, Christian guidebooks that seek to correct certain gendered and sexual behaviors in light of external criteria will only further validate the "deification" of processes of socialization. Kierkegaard, however, shows us the limitations of conceiving of sin in these terms because such an "educative" or therapeutic approach to sin assumes that every individual has the capacity to fulfill the expectations of such bookkeeping. According to Climacus, for example, if every individual already has the capacity for meeting these expectations, then there actually is no acknowledgment of sin or any need for spiritual deepening.¹¹ Indeed, it is only with the deepening of an exploration of sin that we will gain the capacity for acknowledging the problem as such.

In the following two sections, I examine the implications of Kierkegaard's conception of sin for a queer understanding of desire, making a two-pronged critique of the educative approach to sin. First, I look to Johannes de Silentio's typology of different modes of existence, which each bear different implications for the existential import of sin. I argue that Silentio's descriptions of existential passion intensify a religious understanding of sin while concomitantly *undoing* the misunderstanding of sin's relationship to desire. Put briefly, social and ethical norms about desire do not and cannot secure the meaning of "sin" for individuals. Second, I look to Climacus and Anti-Climacus for accounts of knowing in which existential passion undoes the dogmatic reification of sin as an object of knowledge. In both of these arguments, I claim that an existential approach to sin, as found in Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, results in an anti-

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Seminar VII*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997): 318.

¹⁰ See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. Ed. & Trans. Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). When external actions are repeated continuously but lack the motivation of passion, then they can be called "habit", according to Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis explains that, in contrast to habit, "[e]arrestness alone is capable of returning regularly every Sunday with the same originality to the same thing" (149).

¹¹ This is resonant with recent psychoanalytic insights into the disavowal of desire at work within normalizing cultural fantasies through which hetero- or homo-identities and egos are stabilized (see Edelman, *No Future*, for example). As I articulate more fully below, I am convinced of the value of arguments that attend to the resonances between Kierkegaard's religious ethics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. See for example William Egginton, "The Christianization of Deconstruction," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 4, no.1 (2002) and Marcus Pound, "The Assumption of Desire: Kierkegaard, Lacan, and the Trauma of the Eucharist," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 9, no. 1 (2008).

homophobic critical theory of desire. On these terms, homophobia becomes exposed as a form of defiance or bad faith; rather than expressing the hope for redemption, homophobic prescriptions actually limit one's existential possibilities for passion and inwardness.

I. Sin and the Socialization of Purity

In this section, I examine Johannes de Silentio's declaration in *Fear and Trembling* that the socio-ethical realm is profoundly limited in its ability to understand the concept of sin. This has several crucial implications that I will elaborate: we are not fully defined by the social institutions, linguistic practices, or other cultural habits that make up our social lives; this means that as individuals, we have more, not less, responsibility towards cultivating a certain concentrated passion towards our own desires; the "double movement" of faith as described by Silentio both reinforces the personal value of our own attachments and demonstrates the insufficiency, ultimately, of our social relations and the impossibility of achieving existential wholeness through our own resources.

Silentio finds evidence for the existential limitations of the socio-ethical realm in his literary rendering of the Abraham and Isaac story from Genesis. In this story, God tells Abraham to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt offering, the promised son for which Abraham and his wife Sarah had waited for many years. Rather than ignoring the command as absurd or impossible, Abraham responds with what Silentio identifies as the double movement of faith: he accepts that he must obey God's command, and he trusts that Isaac will somehow, despite all logic, be returned to him.¹² Of course, this faithfulness is rewarded: Abraham finds a ram on Mount Moriah which can be sacrificed in Isaac's stead, and Abraham and his son return home together.

Given the story's linkage of Abraham's response to God's command with a "teleological suspension of the ethical," the referent of the term "ethics" is under great dispute in scholarly debates about *Fear and Trembling*. If God commands Abraham to commit an act that is clearly at odds with the community's ethical standards, what does this tell us about the kind of "ethics" that is ultimately endorsed by the text itself? The seeming incompatibility between religion and ethics in the story leads some scholars, most famously Levinas, to object to Kierkegaard's project all together in the very name of ethics (what kind of ethics requires the sacrifice of a son?) and others to conclude that Kierkegaard's import lies in a specifically Christian understanding of moral duty in which theology

¹² In *Fear and Trembling*, the pseudonymous Silentio explains that Abraham also demonstrates the double movement of faith as he waits for the birth of his promised son: "But Abraham believed and held to the promise. . . . [F]or it is great to give up one's desire, but it is greater to hold fast to it after having given it up" (18). Abraham makes the double movement of faith later, in response to God's call for Isaac's sacrifice, by both acquiescing to the command and trusting that God will do the impossible: "He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement" (36).

surpasses ethics (it is God's grace that gives the story sense and significance).¹³ In both cases, the text *Fear and Trembling* is "not about ethics" at all.¹⁴

In line with arguments by Merold Westphal, Kevin Hoffman and J. Aaron Simmons, I am advancing an understanding of the text that diverges most clearly from the latter approach. Emerging out of Christian theological commitments, divine command interpretations of *Fear and Trembling* tend to pose metaphysical questions about the extent to which we can know with certainty that a command comes from God, the degree to which moral obligations are ultimately binding on us because of divine authority, and the likelihood that God's commands might contradict or override other moral obligations.¹⁵ By focusing either on the "knife or the outcome," as Hoffman puts it,¹⁶ divine command interpretations seem to alleviate the anxiety of Silentio's rendering of the story, either by discounting Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac or by over-emphasizing Abraham's anticipation that Isaac would be returned to him.

¹³ For example, Jonathan Malesic sees Abraham's obedience as a demonstration of the possibility of "extramoral justification" for religious acts, in other words, for a form of religiousness that steps outside the ethical. See Malesic, "A Secret both Sinister and Salvific: Secrecy and Normativity in Light of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (2006): 458, 460.

¹⁴ See, for example, C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004). Evans writes that *Fear and Trembling* is not about ethics (62). See also Ronald Green's "Enough is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* is not about ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993): 191-209. Evans and Green employ different interpretations to arrive at the conclusion that the text "is not about ethics"; whereas Evans lays out the text's divine command theory of morality, Green identifies an essentially Protestant lesson about the nature of grace and redemption.

¹⁵ For example, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*. On Evans' reading, Kierkegaard's project as a whole gives us a divine command theory of obligation, a theory that is both Kantian and Aristotelian. On these terms, whatever God commands us to do is, in principle, morally obligatory, and these commands are essentially directed towards human flourishing. For a reading that advances an explicitly Christian message, see also Ronald Green's "Enough is Enough!" Green claims that Abraham knows himself to be justified "by grace alone" (204). Stephen Mulhall identifies Isaac's submission to Abraham as analogous to "Christ's submission to his own Father," *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001): 379; in this case, the import of the text is one of foreshadowing, along the lines of a particular theological understanding of Christianity. Similarly, see Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 152. In contrast to these explicitly Christian interpretations, Hoffman assesses Abraham in line with the other exemplary figures described by Silentio, which has the advantage of elaborating Silentio's concerns as generically religious and not strictly speaking Christian. See also Jung H. Lee, "Abraham in a different voice: rereading *Fear and Trembling* with care," *Religious Studies* 26 (2000): 377-400; Lee stresses the value of interpreting Abraham's actions in continuity with the rest of his life, as opposed to insisting up on the anomalous moment of God confronting Abraham with the need to sacrifice Isaac.

¹⁶ Kevin Hoffman, "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 3 (2006): 442.

Moreover, when the story of Abraham is used, as it frequently is, within religious communities to relay a lesson about the patriarch's perfect communication with the divine, such a reading removes all risk and paradox from Abraham's obedience and thereby misses its existential significance entirely. Such an interpretation could be seen as falling squarely within what I will be calling an "educative" approach to faith which fully secures Abraham's patriarchal authority at the expense of existential passion because it lifts Abraham up as anomalous and implies that faithful people should look to the patriarch rather than to their own finitude with fear and trembling.¹⁷

Whereas divine command interpretations claim that the text subordinates ethics to religion, Simmons argues that in contrast we find "the rejection of a *particular* understanding of ethics that would claim for itself *superiority over* religion."¹⁸ While we might find many examples of ethical norms that pose as superior or absolute, I am interested in considering the social dictates of heterosexual prescriptions. When social norms are absolutized or deified, as Merold Westphal notes, "religion is *ipso facto* ideology,"¹⁹ and so the teleological suspension of the ethical reflects the hope that individuals might confront the relative, rather than absolute, nature of social norms. The "suspension" is an existential leap, intensifying an individual's responsibility for how he or she lives out normalizing prescriptions that align "heterosexual identity" with specific gendered and sexualized behavior. Each individual's relations to desire, a matter of existential choice, can be seen as a formal index of his or her willingness to confront the limitations and temptations of the "normal." On these terms, then, the teleological suspension of "the ethical" has a kind of queer logic.

Rather than focusing solely on Abraham, Silentio argues that there are actually different modes of existing as individuals. He sets out a typology of several existential modes, including the "tragic hero," the "knight of resignation," and the "knight of faith." Each of these modes of existence entails different ways of experiencing and valuing desire in one's everyday life. According to Silentio, the movements of each mode take place normatively,²⁰ and according to Hoffman, we can understand these movements as regulative ideals.²¹ If we follow these suggestions, we can read these descriptions as applicable to each of us, in terms of the daily kinds of threats, challenges, and miracles that we all will face. On

¹⁷ For an illuminating analysis of ways in which the story of Abraham has been appropriated in highly problematic ways, thereby strengthening patriarchal ideologies, see Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998).

¹⁸ J. Aaron Simmons, "What about Isaac? Rereading *Fear and Trembling* and Rethinking Kierkegaardian Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007): 321, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Religiousness C: A Defense," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2004): 545, note 39.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 111.

²¹ See Hoffman, "Facing Threats," 453.

these terms, then, how we respond to our own desires is an index of our mode of existence.

There is thus an index of inward passion, expressed algebraically through each individual's relations to the "relative" realm of finite, temporal goods and the "absolute" realm of spirit. In other words, Kierkegaard gives us a formula for determining what is relative and what is absolute so that we can express our relations to these two spheres in fear and trembling. Note that this algebraic typology is not objective in the sense of applying to all cases in the same way. For example, the tragic hero described below will explain his or her actions in light of the social convictions of his or her community (for example, to save a nation or appease the gods). This gives us a normative yet flexible and culturally contingent framework for thinking about spiritual inwardness. As well, desire on these terms is an attribute of inwardness that cannot be generalized or abstracted away from the specificities of each individual's spiritual journeying.

This interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* opens to view a formal structure of an ordeal that faces each one of us: an ordeal of desire, uncertainty, and the choice to intensify one's passions, a choice which exacerbates the relationality of responsible subjectivity.²² Kevin Hoffman, for example, describes the ways in which the dramas of love and loss are relevant to each of us.²³ He concludes that "life, apart from an explicit divine command, presents each of us with a test similar to Abraham's."²⁴ Thus even if divine agency does not demand a particular sacrifice, the experiences of life itself, with unexpected events outside of our control such as terminal illness or the death of a beloved, demand of each of us the normative movements of resignation and faith. We can and should have passion for the finite—even as we acknowledge the fragility of a meaningful life, as Hoffman puts it.²⁵ This means fully engaging with whatever delights and produces meaning, without however grounding one's sense of self or finding ultimate security in such acts; it means becoming the subject of desire.

In the least passionate mode of existence described by *Silentio*, so impoverished that it is nameless, the individual absorbs the whims and pressures of his or her social world without developing a sense of consciousness or responsibility.²⁶ In the face of losses and tragedies, these "frogs in the swamp of life" scream that it is pointless to devote oneself to specific hopes or loves—rather, one should disregard the risks of such devotion by remaining unattached and uninvested.²⁷ A screaming frog might measure his or her erotic successes by competing with

²² J. Aaron Simmons makes this argument persuasively by focusing specifically on the particular identities of Abraham and Isaac in "What about Isaac?" As Simmons notes, this focus on relationality makes possible a closer kinship between Kierkegaard and Levinas (321).

²³ Hoffman, "Facing Threats," 444.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 446.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 450.

²⁶ In *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, Rudd refers to this as an existence-sphere before the aesthetic, calling it "the crowd life" (24).

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 41.

others according to the standards of bland corporate branding, keeping anxiety away by screeching about trivialities.²⁸ One might become “normal” as a screaming frog, for example, by adhering to whatever ideals are being currently upheld by reality television.

Slightly more determined, the “aesthete” is also unwilling to face the losses or impossibilities that the contingencies of life present. The aesthete thus resists making subjective commitments that will make him or herself vulnerable to such risks.²⁹ When the aesthetic mode poses as religious, seen for example in the consumer-based approach to Christianity found pervasively in the religious right, then on Silentio’s terms “faith has never existed because it has always existed.”³⁰ The kind of faithfulness that is prescribed by market imperatives not only precludes sin, as Silentio explains, but also precludes desire and passion. No stake has been claimed; no risk has been undertaken.³¹ An exemplary aesthete might become successfully “normal” by enjoying the trends of consumer culture, trends that thoroughly permeate religious as well as non-religious culture. As Mark D. Jordan explains, being “normal” often involves throwing an expensive wedding: “On ‘Christian’ call-in radio shows or ‘orthodox Catholic’ TV panels, in ‘biblical’ guidebooks for happy homes or ‘Marriage Encounters,’ we are offered—we are bombarded with—barely edited versions of mass-market marriage.”³²

²⁸ See Theodor W. Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Despite the appearance of sexual liberation in Hollywood, Adorno maintains that in fact “the actual spiciness of sex continues to be detested by society” (73). The culture industry, with its leveling effects, produces screaming frogs rather than stimulating actual desire and inwardness. This suggests a compelling contemporary need for existential critical theory.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 47. This is how Rick Anthony Furtak has put it recently: “The aesthete has no coherent view of life, no place where he feels at home in the world—he (or she) is threatened by friendship and seeks an unqualified freedom from any commitment. Recoiling from responsibility and shuddering away from love, the aesthete drifts like a phantom through the ruins of a foreign world” (63). See Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 82.

³¹ See for example Søren Kierkegaard, “The Seducer’s Diary,” *Either/Or Part I*. Ed. & Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987). In this text, Kierkegaard’s exemplary aesthete, Johannes the Seducer, exclaims, “How beautiful it is to be in love; how interesting it is to know that one is in love” (334). There is a detached bemusement through which boredom is evaded, and there is no call for any more personal or risky investment.

³² Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003): 37. Jordan describes the market imperatives which drive ostensibly religious marriage rituals: “More wedding theology is supplied in fact by *Bride* magazine or *GQ* than by any dozen academic treatises on holy matrimony. The icon loops circulate as highly repetitive scripts for marriage and sex, scripts that prescribe words to be spoken, but also actions to be done, looks to be copied, feelings to be practiced, and unrealizable ends to be craved . . . [T]he mechanical icon loops thoroughly infiltrate Christian teaching and worship” (36-7).

According to Silentio's typology, existence intensifies in the mode of the "tragic hero." This is an individual who seeks justification for his or her endeavors by appealing to social values and norms. It is striking to Silentio that the tragic hero speaks rather than keeps silent because such speech manifests the hero's public and non-problematic relationship to the ethical community.³³ Silentio explains, "The tragic hero expresses the universal and sacrifices himself for it,"³⁴ and so ethics loves the tragic hero.³⁵ Silentio's exemplary hero is Agamemnon, who explains the need for his daughter Iphigenia's sacrifice by relying on a rationale that coincides with his own community's commitments. The tragic hero demonstrates an intensified commitment to becoming "normal," and in the case of the religious right, the dictates of "normal" are magnified by being directly opposed to "sinful" acts. However, if we employ the language of Climacus and Anti-Climacus, described below, there is no sin-consciousness at work in this kind of understanding, since the tragic hero looks to the ethical realm as fully sufficient for fulfilling the condition.

Communities from the religious right seek to consolidate heterosexuality as the natural, preordained expression of human sexuality by making reference to a specific conception of sin. The concomitant exclusion of non-reproductive, non-heterosexual acts, in the name of this particular concept of sin, presupposes two claims that are problematic: that sin as such is transparently identifiable when reference is made to the stability of heterosexual behavior; that educative and socializing practices are sufficient for recovering the "purity" of reproductive hetero-acts. At stake in this discussion is my attempt to justify the claim that the socially prescriptive approach to sin, which relies upon educative methods for securing faithfulness, precludes any critical consideration of the relations between sin and desire. Put differently, my argument hinges on the point that this conception of sin involves the willful denial of a meaningful relationship between desire and sin consciousness. I need to demonstrate that conversely there is an alternative, Kierkegaardian concept of sin which is invaluable for a queer religious engagement with desire for two main reasons: sin-consciousness disallows us from considering the ethical realm of education and communication to be sufficient for fulfilling the requirements of faith; conversely, it affirms a certain *spiritual* role for passion and desire as such.

³³ In *Fear and Trembling*, Silentio explains, "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; he is open, and in this disclosure he is the beloved son of ethics" (113).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 87 and 113. Silentio contrasts the tragic hero with the "spurious" sectarian knight who attempts to become a tragic hero at a bargain price. Silentio writes, "The sectarians deafen one another with their noise and clamor, keep anxiety away with their screeching. A hooting carnival crowd like that thinks it is assaulting heaven, believes it is going along the same path as the knight of faith, who in the loneliness of the universe never hears another human voice but walks alone with his dreadful responsibility" (80). This reminds me of the bargain heroes of the religious right like Ted Haggart who recently disclosed his "perversities" despite his vocal protestations of hetero-conformity.

I call the misunderstanding of sin at work within the religious right *educative sin* because it appeals to education as a means for redemption. Educative sin refers to external behavior that is intersubjectively recognizable, depending above all on so-called natural acts of heterosexuality. This sin is therefore public, rather than private, and it is determined solely by reference to prevailing social norms. Ann Burlein, for example, cites one of *Focus on the Family's* guidebooks on homosexuality, which constructs a division "that differentiates 'good' homosexuals, who discipline homoerotic desires (either by not acting on those desires or by feeling shame when you do), from militant homosexual activists, who want the whole pie (social legitimacy for homosexuality)."³⁶

In this example, sin refers to external criteria, recognizable through reference to the social norms of the community. Moreover, these norms are understood to be the site of the battle between the Christian right and the rest of secular North America, hence the need for guidebooks and the dissemination of "teachings" on how to bolster one's Christian "identity."³⁷ Above all, such guidebooks demonstrate that specific desires can be identified as sinful and can be disciplined through abstention from acts and through correctly gendered roles and expressions. How to be successfully heterosexual involves "correct" gender expression and the rejection of all nonheterosexual acts as sinful and incompatible with a Christian identity.

This rhetoric, which mobilizes the language of "sin," reflects prevailing socio-cultural assumptions about the boundaries of heterosexual identity. In her analysis of legal discourse, Janet Halley shows how the category "heterosexuality" maintains coherence and stability because members are bribed to keep silent about its actual lack of homogeneity. Members accept such a bribe because of the threat of expulsion from the category and because of the material and social privileges gained through membership. In other words, the members that comprise the group "heterosexual" do not necessarily act or experience desires in conformity with the terms of membership: "The resulting class of heterosexuals is a default class, home to those who have not fallen out of it. It

³⁶ See Ann Burlein, *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Christian Right Converge* (Durham: Duke UP), 141.

³⁷ The shelves of Christian bookstores throughout North America are filled with such manuals which are aimed at children, parents, married people, religious leaders, professionals, etc. See James Dobson, *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004). In this text, one of his many educative guidebooks, James Dobson casts his prescriptions in explicitly military and patriotic terms: "Just as the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 by the empire of Japan served to energize and mobilize the armed forces of the United States, it would appear that the vicious assault on marriage and the church in recent months has begun to reinvigorate people of faith. I see indications that the church is marshaling its forces and preparing to meet the challenge" (23). By imbuing his religiosity with military fervor, Dobson demonstrates unwittingly the comment made in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous text *Fear and Trembling* that the idea of the church is not qualitatively different from the idea of the state. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 74.

openly expels but covertly incorporates the homosexual other, an undertaking that renders it profoundly heterogeneous, unstable, and provisional."³⁸

Whereas to the tragic hero, the norms of the ethical community hold out the promise of transparency and existential satisfaction, from the vantage point of queer critique, we see that these norms impose unequal hierarchies and non-transparent demands. Halley demonstrates how "the homosexual" is an object of heterosexual knowledge; even definitions that seek to recognize "homosexual" personhood in order to advance equal rights rely upon an opposing category of exclusive, fixed heterosexual personhood. Definitional incoherence is able to maintain material dominance through what Halley calls "definitional politics."³⁹

There is also a form of definitional politics at work in the construction of Christian identity. A Christian identity can be externally recognized through extended reference to "sinful" acts that deviate from the so-called natural heterosexual created order. It is a white, suburban, overly nostalgic family that is idealized by the religious right.⁴⁰ One obvious strategy for undermining these nostalgic ideals is to assert alternative grounds for identity, claiming authenticity for homosexuality through biological arguments about the innateness of same-sex desire or historical arguments about the precedents of same-sex desire.⁴¹ Such a strategy, however, reaffirms the definitional politics that enables the marginalizing of non-normative, non-coherent identity categories because it depends upon affirming the "normalcy" of gay and lesbian citizens, and it sustains a faith in the very meaning of identity as established by socially recognizable normative behavior. It therefore fails to interrogate the ways in which Christian identity politics rely upon a narrow, overly prescriptive and social concept of sin. In contrast, queer theory resists such identity politics in favor of anti-identitarian affirmations of desire. As Tim Dean explains, queer theory moves past the "straightjacket" of identity, "insisting that 'queer' is opposed not simply to 'straight,' but more broadly to 'normal.'"⁴²

A logic of sin that relies upon social and material resources, like education and therapy, presupposes that redemption can be found in social norms. I suggest

³⁸ Janet E. Halley, "The Construction of Heterosexuality," *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 86.

³⁹ Halley, "The Construction of Heterosexuality," 93. See also Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996): "Homophobia is an assertion of control over the category 'homosexual.' Homophobes try to seize the power of definition," 143.

⁴⁰ In *Lift High the Cross*, Burlein argues that *Focus on the Family* constructs a counter-memory in which a white suburban model of family, exemplified in the 1950s, constitutes the ideal towards which today's family must strive (135).

⁴¹ Mark D. Jordan notes that gay and lesbian apologetics for same-sex marriage often depend upon the authority of nostalgic invocations of historical precedents. See Jordan's "Arguing Liturgical Genealogies, or, The Ghosts of Weddings Past," *Authorizing Marriage: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Marriage*. Ed. Mark D. Jordan et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 111.

⁴² Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 225.

that we could approach the figure of the ex-gay Christian as the tragic hero: an individual who is resolved to remain within the realm of the ethical, with all the sacrifices that entails.⁴³ As recently described in Tanya Erzen's ethnography, the ex-gay movement looks to "correctly" gendered behavior as one of the signs that distinguishes natural ("Christian") acts from deviant acts.⁴⁴ Education, rationality, and knowledge are therefore upheld as antidotes to sinful transgression, demonstrated for example by workshops on gender expression. Whereas an individual who upholds Christian identity might well experience non-heterosexual desire, by committing to this identity, he or she also commits to maintaining a distinction between desire and action. According to Erzen's ethnography, the Christian right tends to distinguish between what they ascertain to be unapologetically secular "gay identity" committed to the "gay lifestyle" and what they acknowledge to be homosexual desire. Because the ex-gay movement differentiates between homosexual desire and acts, on their account the queers in the Castro and the Christians who give up the "gay lifestyle" belong to different identity categories. The efforts to regulate desire bring into effect a highly disciplined formation of subjectivity: I am homosexual, and I promise not to act.⁴⁵ Of course, in this logic of sin, non-heterosexual acts violate the commitments of a Christian identity. As Erzen's ethnography demonstrates, the coherence of this hetero-identity is belied by the very term "ex-gay" that publicly marks the so-called success of those who reclaim their restored heterosexuality through the saving powers of Christianity.⁴⁶

Silentio's typology of modes of existence further deepens with the "knight of resignation," who accepts the uncertainties and risks of intense desire. Socrates, for example, expresses the infinite resignation, which according to Silentio is how an individual gains consciousness of his or her "eternal validity;"⁴⁷ this means that the individual becomes attuned to another realm, beyond the social realm of expectations and norms, which heightens the stakes of one's choices and actions. It is important to note that the resignation is not of something lacking in

⁴³ Along similar lines, Simmons suggests that we can see the divine command theorist as a tragic hero: "the duties to one's family are to be trumped if the will of God demands it," 327.

⁴⁴ See Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press). The ex-gay movement is wonderfully parodied by the film *But I'm a Cheerleader* in which Natasha Lyonne's character, under suspicion of lesbian behavior by her parents, is sent to "straight camp" in which queer kids undergo educative therapy that focuses on "correct" gender expressions (Lions Gate, 1999).

⁴⁵ In *No Future*, Edelman notes a similar example, citing Pope John Paul II who states that "homosexual persons who assert their homosexuality" suffer an "objective disorder" and therefore possess an "inclination. . . toward an intrinsic moral evil" (cited 89). Cast in the religious terms of love and compassion, this rhetoric reifies a mutually exclusive relationship between one's desire for an object of (same-sex) desire and one's sexual acts.

⁴⁶ See Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 165.

⁴⁷ *Fear and Trembling*, 69 and 46.

some way but of something valued for its own sake.⁴⁸ An individual's investment in what Hoffman calls "earthly felicity" actually deepens with resignation. This might seem counterintuitive at first read, for we often use the word "resignation" to refer to disinterested or apathetic attitudes. In contrast, by resignation, Silentio is referring to the willingness to confront the loss of or threats against one's own highly personal attachments (as in: I realize that my object of desire is vulnerable to change and many other forms of finitude; even so, I deepen my commitments to my passions in the face of this acknowledgment).

This however is only one of the two movements of faith. It is the "knight of faith" who makes both movements, and it is the religious mode of faith in which the desire of finite goods, of happiness, and of the miracles of unexpected pleasures is most intensely valued and at odds with socio-ethical norms and expectations. The knight of faith fully invests in the pleasures of finitude *and* expects without qualification the miraculous or paradoxical. Moreover, the knight of faith willfully occupies the place of the exceptional, which is a place of anxiety and distress because there is no relief in the form of rational explanations.⁴⁹ A knight of faith is alone in many senses—alone before the paradox, which no one else can interpret or explain, alone despite the proximity of others who cannot in principle make sense of the knight's actions, and alone because the knight is a witness and not a teacher.⁵⁰ In other words, there is no way for the knight to make sense of the path to faith for any other individual. Abraham—or more abstractly put, the single individual—cannot make himself understandable to anyone.⁵¹

There is a terror to this point. Speech would seem to alleviate what Silentio identifies as the "anxiety, the distress, the paradox" of an event that defies the social norms by which we order our lives together.⁵² For example, Abraham cannot tell Isaac where they are going when they embark upon their travels, nor can he explain to his wife Sarah the nature of their trip. In reflecting on the nature of Abraham's silence, Silentio maintains that indeed, Abraham can only be silent.⁵³ If he were to speak, he would express the kind of justification that is only possible through reference to the norms of the existing moral order; he would subsequently undoubtedly be condemned as a murderer, since the

⁴⁸ In "Facing Threats," Hoffman notes that this interpretation contrasts with other accounts of the knight of resignation, in which the resignation is a form of despair which is then subsequently renounced by the second movement of faith (445). I am siding with Hoffman's descriptions of resignation as a movement which is positive in itself and is not immediately annulled by the knight of faith's second movement of absurdity.

⁴⁹ In *Fear and Trembling*, Silentio writes, "Abraham remains silent—but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. . . . The relief provided by speaking is that it translates me into the universal" (113).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 71 and 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60.

intention or act of killing one's son can only be seen as a direct transgression of the ethical norm to love and care for one's child.

As the knight of faith, Abraham looks to a higher *telos* than the ethical *telos*, and so he suspends the ethical in the name of this higher *telos*, enacting what Silentio calls "the teleological suspension of the ethical."⁵⁴ The "ethical" is therefore limited in terms of its spiritual relevance for the individual.⁵⁵ It is important to clarify that when Silentio identifies the ethical realm as the "universal," he is referring specifically to language, family, and social relations; he is therefore making reference to a particular social order and not to a formal conception of universality. If "speaking the universal" means expressing the socio-ethical norms of one's community, as Silentio indicates, then the faithful individual suspends the Hegelian and not the Kantian ethical. "The ethical" in question here is the embodied, particular realm of traditions, education, and family.⁵⁶

Fear and Trembling thus does *not* stage a confrontation between the right and the holy.⁵⁷ Rather, the text stages the problem of the relative and the absolute: the faithful individual takes up a relative relation to his or her social order and an absolute relation to the absolute. The movement of faith thus occasions a crucial shift for the single individual: the realm of socio-ethical norms becomes relative, and the relation to what we could call the eternal becomes absolute. In Westphal's descriptions of the formal event of the suspension, the subject is overcome by its other; the other reveals its insufficiency, incompleteness, and relativity. Since this transition is formal, the content of each suspension is different, depending on the individual's existential intensity.⁵⁸ Moreover, given that the algebraic relation between the relative and the absolute is subjective, only the individual can determine the existential value of his or her own passions.⁵⁹ According to Silentio's critical theory, the faithful individual affirms

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁵ C. Stephen Evans puts it this way: "This ethical life sees itself in religious terms as providing salvation," "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006): 216.

⁵⁶ Merold Westphal argues convincingly that the "teleological suspension" refers to the Hegelian, and not Kantian, ethical law, "Johannes and Johannes: Kierkegaard and Difference," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments* Ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1994): 13-32. The formal conception of the law is *not* what is "suspended" by Abraham's faithful response to the divine call but rather the historically contingent and substantive particular law of the ethical community (namely, Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*).

⁵⁷ Again, this is Westphal's formulation, with which I agree and seek to elaborate in relation to queer analyses of so-called "ethical" processes of normalization.

⁵⁸ Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B," *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*. Ed. George B. Connell & C. Stephen Evans (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 113.

⁵⁹ I am siding again here with Hoffman's analysis, "Facing Threats," 449. Hoffman emphasizes the point that Abraham has invested fully in his love for his son, which involves the passionate leap of resignation (being willing to risk the loss of the loved one) as well as the leap of faith (trusting that Isaac will be returned to him). I would

deeply his or her own desires while at the same time denying any absolute or binding force to social norms and values.⁶⁰

This brings me to the claim that *Silentio* can be read as an unexpected ally with contemporary queer theorists. I need to qualify here that I am not drawing *Silentio* together with those arguments, made by gay and lesbian activists, that tend to emphasize the pressing need to legalize—or, in the case of countries like Canada, maintain the legal status of—same-sex marriage. Such arguments frequently look to the institution of marriage as supplying not only the necessary recognition of one's desires and relationships by the state but also the sufficient condition for participating fully as citizens in civil society. Moreover, the current legal arguments in favor of same-sex marriage tend to rely upon robust conceptions of "sexual orientation" and homosexual identity.⁶¹

In contrast, rather than calling for the right to marry and thereby upholding the liberal ideals of equality and individuality, the queer move towards anti-identitarian politics displaces marriage from such a place of prominence. Indeed, according to the recent analyses undertaken by queer critics, arguments that have a long history within feminist theory, marriage is a highly regulatory, culturally specific, juridical practice with inevitable exclusionary effects.⁶² Marriage here refers not simply to a set of laws but, much more importantly, to a wide set of regulatory conventions and normative expectations about gender expression, class-based material aspirations, racialized conceptions of

like to resist another interpretation of desire, seen for example in Edward Mooney's claim that "Johannes presupposes an objectivity of moral value. He never doubts that fathers should love their sons or that Abraham should love his God. Without this moral objectivity we could not account for the possibility of error in evaluative judgment," "Getting Isaac Back: Ordeals and Reconciliations in *Fear and Trembling*," *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, Ed. George B. Connell & Stephen C. Evans (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992): 73. Rather than aligning the knight of faith with an "objective" moral order, then, I will follow Hoffman in arguing that the knight of faith is not and cannot be aligned with the social expectations of his or her specific community.

⁶⁰ *Silentio* stresses the fact that "the movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but yet in such a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact," *Fear and Trembling*, 37, italics mine. After making the "movements of infinitude," faith makes the "movements of finitude" (38); "by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one's desire totally and completely—that is over and beyond human powers, that is a marvel" (48, italics mine).

⁶¹ See Siobhan Somerville, "Queer Loving," *GLQ* 11, no. 3 (2005): 343. According to Kathleen M. Sands, progressive religious arguments in favor of same-sex marriage similarly rely upon what she calls "a dubious appeal to the notion of a fixed homosexual orientation," "Public, Pubic, and Private: Religion in Political Discourse," *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, Ed. Kathleen M. Sands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 64.

⁶² As only one example, Michael Warner emphasizes the exclusionary effects of the institution, explaining, "The ennobling and the demeaning go together. Marriage does one only by virtue of the other. Marriage, in short, discriminates," "Beyond Gay Marriage," *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, Ed. Wendy Brown & Janet Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 260.

citizenship, and often overdetermined religiosity. Marriage as a historical set of laws and practices is one of the ways in which “natural,” “healthy”, and “righteous” acts and identities gain meaning through their differences from what is “criminal,” “deviant,” and “sinful.”⁶³ The task for critical theory, then, is to subvert the very existential meaning that marriage as an exclusive institution purports to hold for individuals.

I want to highlight the spiritual stakes of this queer critique by reading it in light of Kierkegaard’s *Silentio*. First, I need to clarify that while faith is marked by the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” when we think about the subjective import of institutions, there *is* no monolithic ethical community.⁶⁴ Juridical regulations including those that determine who is legal to marry whom bear significantly different implications for individuals. Such laws contribute to the production of disciplinary practices which in turn subtend categories which privilege some and criminalize others. For example, if we look at immigration law, we will find the production of sexualized categories, like the “homosexual” or the “adulterer,” which have historically been refused entry into the United States because of what Siobhan Somerville calls fantasies of “national purification” and the “logic of blood purification.”⁶⁵ Through reference to these deviant categories, the category of “married, gender conforming heterosexual” gains a robust identity as healthy, normal, and reproductive.

Of course, identification with the normal can and does occur through practices like what Halley calls “taking the bribe” of heterosexual conformity;⁶⁶ as stated above, this means disavowing the incoherence of the class of heterosexuality by denying any desires or actions that do not comply with heteronormative prescriptions. On Kierkegaardian terms, such bribe-taking by an individual

⁶³ See Halley, “The Construction of Heterosexuality.” As stated above, Halley’s analyses of legal discourse demonstrate how heterosexual “identity” codifies itself, despite its incoherence as a category, by relying upon its opposition to the deviant category of homosexuality. While this language does not make use of overtly religious categories, the religious right itself relies upon an opposition between “natural heterosexuality” and “sinful homosexual acts.” See also Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*.

⁶⁴ To make this claim is to assert a religious perspective, along Kierkegaardian lines, which presupposes that the single individual is heterogeneous with the ethical. I am advancing the unconventional thesis that such a claim of heterogeneity has a lot in common with the insights upheld by queer theorists. Kierkegaard’s religious pseudonyms like Climacus and Anti-Climacus, who are analyzed below, explore more fully the heterogeneity of the individual, calling it “sin” and “defiance.” If we stay within the terms of *Fear and Trembling*, *Silentio* argues that the ethical realm itself cannot confront sin because of its intersubjective rationality and its requirements which extend to all members of the community; it would be utterly incoherent for the ethical to make sense of sin: “An ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline but if it affirms sin, then it has *eo ipso* exceeded itself” (99). This is one reason that I am suggesting that queer theory’s emphasis on heterogeneity should be understood religiously, rather than ethically.

⁶⁵ Somerville, “Queer Loving,” 355.

⁶⁶ Halley, “The Construction of Heterosexuality,” 83.

involves inflating the ethical to divine or absolute status. Given the particulars of the ethical community's current preoccupation with straightness and gender conformity, it is certainly tempting to succumb to certain ontological attachments to identity and prescribed versions of desire (as in: *because* of what I claim to be my natural, essential hetero-identity, I desire this expected other-sexed object). Such conformity is rewarded, and, moreover, my sense of righteousness becomes more secure, given the difference between myself and those deviant non-conformists.

I am arguing here that such subjective attachments to the "normal" demonstrate an over-valuation of the finite or relative. When an individual willingly confronts the risks and uncertainties of desire, he or she moves towards resignation or even faith, according to Silentio. In contrast, on the same terms, fixing one's desires in relation to overly certain dictates of "nature" precludes spiritual inwardness.⁶⁷ This may occur through the sanctioning of a religious community, but it also may occur in reference to socio-cultural hegemonic prescriptions. Silentio explains that "the idea of the church is not qualitatively different from the idea of the state."⁶⁸ Of course, the religious right does make use of explicitly religious vocabulary in order to claim that sexual desire and gendered behavior are in fact a matter of eternal fixing. For example, Erzen explains in her ethnography of the ex-gay movement that it "believes that no matter how many sex acts you have committed, there is still the possibility of healing and grace if you publicly confess." Deviant acts must be identified and fully disclosed to the community in order to secure a transformed identity, one which disavows all perversions from the hetero-norm: "[t]he individual who experiences a sexual fall can still become a new creation in Christ as long as his transgressive behavior does not continue to recur."⁶⁹

On Kierkegaard's terms, such an approach to sexual desire demonstrates neither faith, nor a confrontation with sin. As described above, justifications to one's community ground one's existence in ethical, not religious terms. From within the ethical realm of language and social norms, faith looks like either inscrutable silence or outright transgression, and socio-ethical means cannot reliably judge between the two. As the knight of faith, Abraham stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, which means that there can be no mediation from the realm that has now become "relative."⁷⁰ How do we make sense of religious discourse, then, like that of the religious right which mobilizes sin-language to dictate gendered and sexual prescriptions for the faithful? By relying on socially transparent actions, such discourse restricts itself to the educative conception of

⁶⁷ If there is no teleological suspension of the ethical, Silentio tells us, then the ethical itself claims the status of the divine, *Fear and Trembling*, 68. In other words, ethical prescriptions become idolatrous, religiously speaking.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 176.

⁷⁰ Silentio himself cannot understand Abraham; similarly, philosophy also should also know its own limitations and not attempt to supply faith, *Fear and Trembling*, 33 and 37.

sin in which, as Silentio explains, "all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal."⁷¹

In contrast, queer critical theory, in general, looks beyond socio-ethical norms and identities in search of resources for change. In the most striking example of this refusal, it tends to forego reliance upon "sexual orientation" as a robust rallying cry for social change.⁷² It thus avoids the temptation of elevating identity to an absolute status. Put differently, there is a humility to queer theory, religiously speaking. By humility, I refer to a certain willingness to value intensely the workings of desire in everyday life, affirming its meaningfulness and fragility in the face of diseases, prejudice, fleetingness, and contingency. At the same time, this religiousness that I perceive also emerges from refusing to turn to one's own "identity" as a robust and redemptive source of belonging. This also means refusing to participate in the *ressentiment* that grounds one's own righteousness in an identity that is diacritically opposed to another's deviance.⁷³

II. Sin as Ignorance or Sin as Perversity

I want to intensify this argument by turning to two other Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, Climacus and Anti-Climacus, in order to elaborate a queer conception of sin and how it contrasts with the educative sin upheld by the religious right. I will argue that a confrontation with sin, as described by the pseudonyms, affirms a certain perversity that is upheld by queer theorists. This surprising affinity leads to a critical anti-homophobic theory of desire.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus makes the intriguing claim that to understand and to understand are two different things.⁷⁴ He distinguishes between a Socratic definition of sin, which posits ignorance as the source of wrongdoing, and a religious or Christian conception of sin, which describes rationality as simply insufficient for approaching the problem itself. According

⁷¹ Ibid., 56.

⁷² As one example among many, Dean writes, "To free a theory of sexuality from the ideological constraints imposed by gender categories also permits us to divorce sexuality from the straitjacket of identity. Another way of putting this would be to say that psychoanalysis enables us to think sexuality apart from the ego," *Beyond Sexuality*, 221.

⁷³ Of course, it is important to consider that such a refusal opens up queer theory itself to the critique issued above against the discourse of the religious right. Janet Halley exemplifies such a self-reflexive critique in her recent polemical text *Split Decisions*. She writes that what passes for queer theory can also be moralizing and discriminatory because of "its failure, so far anyway, to produce interesting nondismissive and normatively unfringed work on the queerness of masculine male heterosexual desire for the sexy femininity of women. And it is in love with the edge, implying contempt for the average, the everyday, the reassuringly persistent," *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 114.

⁷⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Ed. & Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 92.

to Anti-Climacus, the constituent of willed wrongdoing or defiance is missing from the Socratic understanding of sin. He therefore concludes, "If sin is being ignorant of what is right and therefore doing wrong, then sin does not exist."⁷⁵

In the first, Socratic order of understanding, I might lack understanding of something due to my cultural assumptions and historical situatedness. For example, I might make the argument that the ritual of marriage follows a centuries-old model and therefore needs to be permanently safeguarded through legislation.⁷⁶ We can rectify this understanding through further study, and our collective social understanding will improve with scientific and cultural innovations. For example, recent studies demonstrate that marriage as a ritual is historically and culturally bound and therefore that the consumer-based, heterosexist ideal of marriage upheld by the religious right is only several decades old.⁷⁷ These claims seek to rectify the first order of misunderstanding at work in the same-sex marriage debate, namely that we can even appeal logically to a historical ideal of heterosexual marriage. For such rethinking to be possible, there needs to be a certain openness towards uncertainty—what Socrates or Climacus would call passion for knowledge. There needs to be a willingness to rethink or even relinquish one's reliance about the truth of certain claims; there needs to be an awareness of the possibility of error and ignorance.

It is noteworthy that there is subjective passion at work in this first order of understanding. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus points out that it is the will that excludes doubt from certainty, rather than disinterested abstract thinking, and so doubt and belief are "opposite passions."⁷⁸ On Climacus's terms, then, we can apply the term "belief" to first-order understanding. Faith even in this ordinary first-order sense is not a simple matter of belief in dogma. Rather, I become more uncertain about who I am as I seek wisdom, and I make a leap of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁶ An exemplary version of this claim can be found in the opening lines of a recent book by James Dobson, a spokesperson for the religious right and an advocate of a strictly educative conception of sin. Dobson begins his text *Marriage Under Fire* with the declaration, "Behold, the institution of marriage! It is one of the Creator's most marvelous and enduring gifts to humankind. . . . Five thousand years of recorded history have come and gone, yet every civilization in the history of the world has been built upon it" (1). Dobson substantiates this statement by citing a book entitled "The history of Human Marriage" published in 1922.

⁷⁷ See Jordan, "Arguing Liturgical Genealogies." Elsewhere, Mark D. Jordan asks "Why do we expect that there has been a coherent and comprehensive Christian account of any sexual union?" in his text *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 112. Queer believers can also make the mistake of looking to a mythical or historical "pure" Christianity by which to ground a vision of a more inclusive religious community. In this case, the will to certainty can risk excluding the kind of passion invoked by Climacus' discussions of first-order beliefs.

⁷⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. & Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987): 84.

belief in spite of uncertainty.⁷⁹ While a teacher may serve as the occasion for further learning, reflecting the spirit of Socrates by prompting a listener to look inward and reflect on her own understanding, I must confront my own will to certainty. This means resisting the temptation to idolize my teacher or any other therapeutic aid that might resolve my epistemological anxieties and thereby impede my passion for learning.

This first-order of understanding holds relevance for queer critique. If doubt and belief are opposite passions, then Climacus makes a claim similar to that of Nietzsche—namely, that one’s willed ignorance or willed certainty cannot be overturned solely through appeals to rational argumentation. On these terms, homophobic prejudice, for example, cannot be overcome simply by appeals to debate and knowledge; rather, it is by attending to our subjective investedness in knowledge that we begin to confront our own prejudices and biases. It isn’t reason itself but the mode of reasoning that is at issue: not simply what I believe but how I believe it. Put differently, the mode of existence in which I seek the truth is more important than the particulars of what I think, argue, confess religiously, or seek to legislate.⁸⁰ In Kierkegaardian terms, I appropriate the “what” of a truth in and through the “how” of existing, in my choices, actions, and above all self-understanding. I thus demonstrate whether or not there is commensurability *between* what I know and what I will.

For example, the term “pervert” can be subjected to critique at this first-order level of understanding. According to 19th century sexologists, “pervert” was a medical category, reflecting highly specific assumptions about “diseased” gendered and sexual behavior which often coincided with the social policies of eugenics.⁸¹ According to Arnold I. Davidson, Freud’s innovations shifted the meaning of perversion, replacing the medical conception of *instincts* with the psychoanalytic concept of the *drive*. If, as Freud wrote, the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely “soldered together,” then there is in fact no such thing as perversity.⁸² The American Psychological Association finally removed

⁷⁹ Rudd puts it nicely: “There is, then, at the basis of all substantive knowledge, an attitude of will, a willingness to commit oneself to what is dubitable. . . . The choice remains: to stand back from our natural inclination to believe, from our natural willingness to take things for granted, and insist on skeptical suspension of judgment; or to make the decision to thrust aside the possibility of doubt, and re-engage with our natural, pre-reflective certainties. What Kierkegaard reminds us is that this is a choice,” *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 39.

⁸⁰ Elsebet Jegstrup argues that this constitutes Kierkegaard’s critique of liberal political theory in that the emphasis on the *how* of existence transforms freedom and equality from abstract rights into the obligations to which each human being is committed. See Jegstrup, “A Questioning of Justice: Kierkegaard, the Postmodern Critique and Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 23, no. 3 (1995): 428.

⁸¹ For a helpful collection of arguments by influential sexologists, see *Sexology Uncensored*, Ed. Lucy Bland & Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁸² Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. James Strachey. (Jackson, TN: Basic Books, 2000): 85. See also Arnold I. Davidson, “How to do the History of Psychoanalysis: A Reading of Freud’s ‘Three Essays on the Theory of

“homosexuality” as a mental disorder from the DSM in 1973. Indeed, according to Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, we can now claim that it is *homophobia* that is the illness in need of analysis.⁸³ In contrast to these epistemological developments, the religious right understands “perversity” as non-heterosexual deviance, recognizable through acts and behavior, and equates this perversity with sin. “Sin” in this case is a matter of social non-conformity, and righteousness a matter of becoming “educated”, albeit *contra* the consensus of the scientific community.

According to Anti-Climacus, this first order of understanding is limited, religiously speaking, and so it is not ultimately sufficient to look to science or philosophy for redemptive, critical resources. If Socrates can explain the difference between understanding and understanding, then there is no “sin” because if I do something that contradicts what I know or understand, then I simply demonstrate an insufficient understanding. In that case, the transition from knowing to willing lies solely in the realm of moving from ignorance to understanding. If I have the truth already within myself, and it only needs to be recollected, then there is no moving beyond Socrates. Anti-Climacus explains that “sin is not a matter of a person’s not having understood what is right but is of being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right.”⁸⁴

In the second order of understanding, therefore, there can be no appeal to rational debate in order to correct any misunderstandings, regardless of my own subjective passion for knowledge. According to Climacus and Anti-Climacus, the second order goes beyond Socrates in order to confront sin. Climacus explains that the learner “must develop the consciousness of sin as the condition for understanding.”⁸⁵ This means that I as a learner acknowledge that I am “in untruth” and that even Socratic philosophy cannot help me. I can only see “the paradox” by receiving the condition for such sight from “the god,” the god who is motivated by love.⁸⁶ The second order of understanding is beyond the category of the will in that the god provides the condition for understanding. Faith is then a condition for a more expansive knowing and willing. Here too we are beyond dogma, but in a more intensive sense; it is not the teacher’s teachings that supply the occasion for learning but the “teacher” or the divine.

And here we come to a more fundamental claim of perversity that is central to contemporary queer theory. Kierkegaard’s most religious expression of selfhood is sin-consciousness. In sin consciousness, I do not coincide with myself, despite

Sexuality,” *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁸³ Dean and Lane write, “The problem is not homosexuality but social attitudes toward it. We might even say that homophobia, rather than homosexuality, makes people ill,” “Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis: An Introduction,” *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Tim Dean & Christopher Lane. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 4.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 95.

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 93.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

my subjective passion; moreover, I do not have the resources within myself for “salvation.” Kierkegaard shows us that rational explanations for morality are not sufficient for instilling in individuals the motivation for actions and choices.⁸⁷ I do not have the condition for recollection, and there is no way to go beyond Socrates within philosophy.⁸⁸ Ultimately, sin consciousness means that I am in untruth because of my own freedom.

In queer terms, this religious confession coincides with the insight, upheld by many contemporary queer theorists, that, rather than arguing that there is no perversity, we can uphold the presupposition that we are indeed all perverts. In other words, prescribed objects of desire gain force through hegemonic socio-cultural forces and ethical norms, not through any existential—or spiritual—necessity. I argue that to assert the universality of perversity is to make a religious claim, rather than an ethical claim, affirming the relative nature of the relative. Perversity is not the converse of rightful, natural acts. Rather, as William Egginton has recently elaborated, perversity tells a story about ethics.⁸⁹ As Egginton demonstrates, the Pauline question about sin—“why do I do what I do not want to do?”—points to a perversity at the very heart of the law.⁹⁰ Egginton explains that although sin and the law are not the same, they are interdependent, and release from sin cannot come from “mere adherence to the law.”⁹¹ As Paul puts it in Romans, the law brings the knowledge of sin; therefore adherence to the law will not release oneself from the dialectics of sin.

Expressed Christianly, it is only through the gift of grace, *not* through any socio-ethical mediation, that release or “salvation” is possible.⁹² As a formal concept, then, sin as perversity cannot be reduced to specific, culturally ratified descriptions of sinful acts. Why do I do what I do not want to do? The religious right cannot engage this question because it leads to the limits of what the social moral code can legislate and because it highlights the close affinity between transgression, perversity, and the law. Instead, sin is a condition that we need to confront, as individuals, in fear and trembling. The hope here, religiously

⁸⁷ In his discussion of the relations between the will and knowledge, Anti-Climacus makes it clear that knowing, when it contradicts the will, will end up coming over to the side of the will, rather than safeguarding a productive role for rational argumentation. Anti-Climacus writes, “If willing does not agree with what is known,” then the will allows time to elapse, as knowing becomes more obscure and the “lower nature” gains the upper hand: “And when knowing has become duly obscured, knowing and willing can better understand each other; eventually they agree completely, for now knowing has come over to the side of willing and admits that what it wants is absolutely right,” *The Sickness Unto Death*, 94.

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 19.

⁸⁹ William Egginton, *Perversity and Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006): 73.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹² This Christian expression of the formal need for salvation thus contrasts with various techniques and therapeutic antidotes that the ex-gay movement proposes in the name of redemption. If I already have sufficient means for salvific behavior, I do not exhibit sin consciousness, nor, to put it more bluntly, do I exhibit actual faith.

speaking, is found in Kierkegaard's claim that one does not gain sin consciousness without also gaining faith itself. The hope, in terms of critical theory, is that existential passion deepens rather than releases us from responsibility for political and ethical projects.

Conclusion

In terms of his productivity for queer theory, Kierkegaard does not offer socio-ethical resources by which to call for and work towards the recognition of homosexual identity or the call for the emancipation of same-sex desire. Indeed, according to recent arguments by contemporary queer theorists, recourse to the traditional realm of ethical projects simply reinscribes a dependency on cultural fantasies and on social norms and values.⁹³ The religious right, by absolutizing ethical norms of gender conformity and heterosexuality, refutes the possibility that there is something *higher* than the universal—namely, the religious. If one spiritualizes a heteronormative identity, meaning that social and cultural norms are inflated with “eternal” or absolute status, one also at the same time disavows sin.⁹⁴ If one reifies a gay or lesbian identity, conversely, one also remains within the misunderstanding of perversity because one relies upon a stabilized, intersubjectively shared, communal conception of selfhood.

These misunderstandings of sin contrast with a formal understanding of sin, which is incommensurable with the approach of bookkeeping or accounting of specific sinful actions. As a formal term, “sin” is not diacritically related to a non-sinful purity. It does not lead to optimistic ideals of therapeutic recovery. Moreover, it does not apply solely to a group of deviant individuals. Rather, this formal concept of perversity is strictly universal, applying to all individuals equally. What does not and cannot apply equally, however, is what it means to subjectively confront one's own sin in fear and trembling.

It is important to emphasize that the paradox of sin and perversity cannot be mediated. To give up the project of mediation is something Kierkegaard was arguing in mid-19th century Lutheran Denmark. To affirm the universality of perversity is to call for the subjective confrontation with sin on these specific

⁹³ See Edelman, *No Future*, and Penney, “(Queer) Theory.” Similarly, Tim Dean claims that “the ego, even the gay ego, is the enemy of desire,” in his article “On the Eve of a Queer Future,” *Raritan* 15, no. 1 (1995): 125. This means that queer critical theory should resist the urge to consolidate “identity” or “sexuality” through reference to substantive moral or social norms. That this continues to be a relevant point is made apparent by Lisa Duggan, who points out that there is a new “homonormativity” that drives new neoliberal sexual politics, evidenced by a privatized and depoliticized gay culture that does not challenge heteronormative institutions. See Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003): 51.

⁹⁴ By using the word “spiritualize” in this context, I am following Edelman's analysis in *No Future*. Edelman rejects what he calls the “spiritualization” of marriage and a reproductive logic of sexuality in the name of a Lacanian affirmation of perversity and the death drive (27).

grounds: we cannot appeal to reason or social norms to save us; we can undermine the prevailing heterosexist moral code as cultural fantasy and willed ignorance; the ego is in despair and needs the fear and trembling of existential inwardness.

However, a significant challenge to my analysis concerns whether I have undercut the possibility for the productive critique of injustice: what grounds for moral judgment open up when ideals of social legibility are called into question? Due to the teleological suspension of the ethical, Abraham cannot speak, and Socrates cannot illuminate the truth. What bases become available for rejecting homophobia? The same quandary can be posed to queer theorists as to those who find a kind of critical theory in the "suspension of the ethical".

I have several responses to this challenge. First, to assert a queer significance to the "suspension" of the ethical is not to affirm a salvific function to one particular expression of desire (ie. to identify same-sex loving as more righteous). Just as importantly, it is also not to imply that there is an automatic political or critical force to any or all same-sex sexual activities.⁹⁵ Rather, it is to point to a structural function of desire that has spiritual significance when examined through Kierkegaardian pseudonyms. When we consider the religious limitations of ethically bound conceptions like sexual identity, there seems to be a spiritual significance to claims like that made by Lee Edelman: "for queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one."⁹⁶ Put differently, to undermine the religious ideology of heterosexist prejudices also might include the affirmation of a certain sin-consciousness of queer theory.

Second, an existential encounter with the limitations of the "normal" intensifies, rather than alleviates, our individual responsibility for the very real forms of violence that result from our complicity with normalizing dictates. Elizabeth A. Povinelli has recently described the act "to queer" in terms of "disturbing

⁹⁵ In the words of Leo Bersani, "To want sex with another man is not exactly a credential for political radicalism," "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 206. Janet Halley glosses this point in her essay "Queer Theory by Men", signed by Ian Halley, *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 11, no. 7 (2004): 7-53. Halley hereby raises skepticisms about theoretical approaches that rely heavily upon identity politics and so assert claims of subordination which then substitute for productive critique (20). Similarly in Halley's new text *Split Decisions*, she points out the limitations of theories "that people think is queer theory" which often remains "homo-supremacist and gender-mobility-supremacist." She goes on to explain that one of the limitations of identity-bound theories, even those approaches which claim the designation "queer," preclude affirmations of, for example, "the queerness of masculine male heterosexual desire for the sexy femininity of women. And it is in love with the edge, implying contempt for the average, the everyday, the reassuringly persistent" (114). What I find especially valuable here is the suggestion that, conversely, attentiveness to the "average, the everyday" might indeed result in passionate and interesting queer methodologies. It is not the "edge" which secures queer critique. Rather, it is something much less certain or predictable, less tied to confessions of identity, political superiority, or moral superiority.

⁹⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 17.

identities and identifications, in pushing against legibility" in order to help illuminate the larger social matrix itself, a matrix which separates people and places them on different trajectories of life and death.⁹⁷ In terms of the inequitable material effects of heterosexist prescriptions, it is no coincidence that queer theorists endorse deep and wide-ranging skepticism towards liberal forms of normativity, especially in its current neoliberal manifestations. Approached existentially, this skepticism challenges us to find real ways to resist our own temptations to conform to consumer culture.

Finally, even as we accept the limitations of language and identity politics and the contingency of our ideals, we still live out our ethical passions in community. Merold Westphal identifies the kind of religious ethics that emerges from such acceptance as a "task for a lifetime."⁹⁸ Another way to put it would be, in queer disability theorist Eli Clare's words, to live with the hope of an authentic life, post-revolution. The opening lines of Clare's *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* align the metaphor of ascending a mountain with the existential longing for normalcy, assimilation, and privilege. Clare warns us, "Up there on the mountain, we confront the external forces, the power brokers who benefit so much from the status quo and their privileged position at the very summit. But just as vividly, we come face-to-face with our own bodies, all that we cherish and despise, all that lies imbedded there. This I know because I have caught myself lurching up the mountain."⁹⁹ Climbing a mountain represents for Clare the temptations of bad faith posed by a society that praises the "supercrip," the individualist body that, by overcoming social and material obstacles, reinforces prevailing ideologies of able-bodied normalcy. Clare is not condemning the desire to climb the mountain, per se, but rather the willingness to internalize and follow dictates which justify systemic forms of oppression. We can hold out hope for a post-revolution society, in fear and trembling, in part by affirming the transformative and, indeed, perverse workings of desire.¹⁰⁰

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Jaarsma, Ada S. "Queering Kierkegaard," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10 no. 3 (Summer 2010): 64-89.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Disturbing Sexuality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 576.

⁹⁸ Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B," 126.

⁹⁹ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁰⁰ It seems fair to say that it is the nature of this hope that is currently at issue in debates among queer theorists. Is this a utopic hope or an anti-social hope? For recent discussion on this question, see "Forum: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819-28 and Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, "Introduction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 421-32.