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Romans Through History and Cultures Seminar

Can Kierkegaard Help Us Understand The Role Of The Law In Rom 7:7-12?

Tools For A *Kierkegaardian* Reading Of Paul

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Why would one want to read Romans in relationship to Kierkegaard? Doesn't the Pauline text already offer enough difficulties of its own? Why add even more difficulties by trying to interpret it through a *kierkegaardian* lens? It is my conviction that some of Kierkegaard's categories of thinking, if carefully used, will aid our understanding of Romans rather than confound it further. I do not aim to propose a thorough interpretation of Romans through Kierkegaard's philosophy in this paper. Rather, I will try to show, that Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* offers some interesting insights into a careful reading of Rom 7:7-12. In a way, it will serve as a first test to decide whether it would be pertinent or not to pursue such an analysis of Paul's text any further. Quite evidently, reading Rom 7:7-12 through Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* will also mean discovering whether Kierkegaard wrote *Sickness Unto Death* bearing Romans 7 (and Romans more generally) in mind.

I am sure this opportunity to share my research in the "Romans through History and Culture Seminar" will allow me to refine my understanding of Rom 7 and to ameliorate my interpretation of the two major difficulties in the text, namely, who is speaking in this passage, and what exactly is Paul's understanding of the law—what is its role. The results will be the possibility of a better way of relating *Sickness Unto Death* and Romans 7: 7-12.

I will present my thoughts in the following manner: The first part will help us enter into the problem and will introduce these questions: "Was Kierkegaard inspired by Romans 7 when he wrote *Sickness Unto Death*?" and "Is it easier to understand Romans 7 when one keeps some concepts of *Sickness Unto Death* close at hand?". These two questions will be fully analyzed in the second part of my paper which will be divided into three distinct sections: First, there will be an analysis of Rom 7: 7-12 based on the two following questions:

“Who is speaking?” and “What is the law?” Second, there will be a reading of *Sickness Unto Death*, through several passages taken mainly out of book IV. Third, I will try to establish a relationship between the two texts. It will be more than a mere comparison. I will try to establish the influence of Romans 7 on *Sickness Unto Death* and show that Kierkegaard can and does indeed help us understand Romans 7. Finally, in my conclusion, I will evaluate how pertinent it is to use *Sickness Unto Death* for understanding Romans 7 and whether it is possible to apply this analysis to the entire letter of Paul.

There are several doors through which one can enter the previously posed questions. I’ve decided to recall two texts; one from Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death* and one from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

1. Discovering the questions

1.1. *In Sickness Unto Death*

The first text is taken from the opening lines of book IV, which begins the second part of *Sickness Unto Death* entitled *Despair is sin*^[1]. The quotation reads as follows:

Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself.* Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair. The emphasis is on *before God, or with a conception of God*; it is the conception of God that makes sin dialectically, ethically, and religiously what lawyers call “aggravated” despair (SuD, 77)

Allow me to say a few words about the context of this quote. *Sickness Unto Death* can be separated into two parts. The first part is titled *The Sickness Unto Death is Despair*. It is a phenomenological analysis of despair. This is the properly psychological portion of *Sickness Unto Death* where despair is analyzed in a psychological manner. In this section, the problem of human beings before God is not posed. In the second part, one realizes (as Kierkegaard himself describes it) that despair is qualified. Kierkegaard introduces the notion of “aggravated despair”, despair before God. Only in the second part will the Christian element appear in an accented manner. In Kierkegaard’s text, this is clearly indicated through the “before God” qualification.

^[1] Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Sickness unto Death: a Christian Psychological Exposition by Anti Climacus* (edited by S. Kierkegaard) (translated from the Danish by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 75. From now on, I will indicate quotations from *Sickness unto Death* with the abbreviation SuD, followed by the page number, in parenthesis after the quotation.

This quotation already indicates two elements that will retain our attention in our attempt to relate Romans 7 with *Sickness Unto Death*. First, it is important to note the qualification of sin as “before God”. Kierkegaard insists on it himself: “The emphasis is on *before God*, or with a conception of God”. For Kierkegaard, the “before God” presents a new definition of one’s self. He explains it in his first chapter (The gradations in the consciousness of the self [the qualification “before God”]):

The preceding section concentrated on pointing out a gradation in the consciousness of the self; first came ignorance of having an eternal self (C, B, a), then a knowledge of having a self in which there is something eternal (C, B, b), and under this, in turn (1-2, β), gradations were pointed out. This whole deliberation must now dialectically take a new direction. The point is that the previously considered gradation in the consciousness of the self is within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man. But this self takes on a new quality and qualification by being a self directly before God. This self is not longer the merely human self but is what I, hoping not to be misinterpreted, would call the theological self, the self directly before God. And what infinite reality [*Realitet*] the self gains by being conscious of existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God! (SuD, 79).

The qualification “before God” – we will see it in greater detail – allows Kierkegaard to do two things. First, it allows him to critique any definition of sin that would deny that sin gains a supplementary dimension when it is committed by someone who is conscious of being in front of God. Second, it allows him to introduce the possibility of offense, namely the possibility for human beings to refuse the fact that they are living as unique individuals before God (SuD, 83ff). The definition of sin as being despair with the consciousness of being before God is the first important thing to keep in mind when we begin reading Romans 7.

The second thing one should note is the tight relationship between sin and despair which is also expressed in the clause “not to will to be oneself or (...) to will to be oneself”. Kierkegaard has presented an understanding of despair with great care in the pages before book IV developing it from a number of different angles (despair as deadly sickness, despair as a universal phenomenon, despair as defined by finitude/infinity, despair as defined by consciousness). He also explains that despair is created by the fact that the self, as a relation that relates itself to itself, (SuD, 13), was established by a third entity. From this, two kinds of despair originate; one does not want to be oneself or one wants to be oneself (SuD, 14). The self cannot attain equilibrium by itself. Kierkegaard expresses this another way:

To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair. Therefore the other form of despair, in despair to will to be oneself, can be

traced back to the first (...). A person in despair despairingly wills to be himself. But if he despairingly wills to be himself, he certainly does not want to be rid of himself. Well, so it seems, but upon closer examination it is clear that the contradiction is the same. The self that he despairingly wants to be is a self that he is not (for to will to be the self that he is in truth is the very opposite of despair), that is, he wants to tear his self away from the power that established it (SuD, 20)

The problem of the desperate human being (and it can express itself in weakness or in defiance) is that he or she does not want to root himself or herself in that third entity that established the human being. Human beings try to escape from God, precisely the one who would allow them to become theological selves—the real selves that they should want to become. This truly is sin.

With Kierkegaard's definition of sin, we are confronted by aspects of an explanation for sin that resonates with several Pauline concepts. Specifically, these aspects are the "before God" dimension, and the importance of the definition of the self. The "before God" dimension insists on the fact that sin is always committed with the conception of being before God. And the definition of the self allows one to see how important a correct understanding of anthropology is when one has to explain what sin is. We should remember these elements when we will analyze Romans 7 in greater detail. Let us now turn to the second quotation that will guide us further in our discovery of the question at stake.

1.2. In Paul

The second text comes from Romans 7: "What then do we say? The law is sin? No! But I would not have known sin, if it had not been for the law (...)" (Rom 7: 7). The context of this verse is a discussion of the role of the law in Romans which is introduced in several passages throughout Romans, particularly 3:20, 3:31, 4:15, and 5:20. In these verses, Paul makes very strong statements about the role of the law, but he does not explain any of the reasons behind these affirmations. It is not until chapter 7 that Paul takes the opportunity to develop his understanding of the role of the law. A quick look at the different occurrences of the law vocabulary in Romans confirms this. The term "law" (*nomos*) appears at its highest density in Rom 7 where there are nineteen occurrences (in Rom 2:12-27 there are 11 occurrences; in 3:19-31, there are 7 occurrences; in 4:13-16, there are 4 occurrences; and in 5:20 – 8:7, there are 27 occurrences). But, even more importantly, after Rom 7, Paul rarely uses the term. There are only a few isolated occurrences of the *nomos* vocabulary (in 9:31, 10:4, 13:8, and 13:10). Obviously, with Rom 7, Paul is finished explaining the problem of the

law. Therefore it can be ascertained that chapter 7 seeks to resolve, if not in a definitive manner, at least in a satisfying manner, the question of the law in Romans. This also explains why this discussion is found in such a surprising part of the letter since Rom 6 and Rom 8 deal with the justification of humanity.

Verse 7 itself – and we will go back to the role of this verse when we’ll present the structure of the passage – introduces the entire section 7b-25. It functions as a *propositio* for 7-25^{2[2]}. Its language is found throughout the rest of the passage and the explanation of what it affirms– which does not differ from 5:20 and 7:5 in its meaning – is the goal of the entire passage. The meaning of the verse is quite clear—the law unveils sin.

What are the issues to which we need to remain attentive? The first question is why and how does Paul understand the role of the law to be the unveiling of sin. Also, it is important to uncover what nuance *egnwn* carries. What does “know” mean exactly? The passage seems to indicate that it is not only a matter of intellectual knowledge, but also of practical knowledge. The law does not simply make one know what evil is (one could then think that this awareness of evil would suffice to avoid doing evil) but the law actually leads one to do evil. The goal of the law is perverted. Paul will explain in the rest of this section how this perversion takes place—through sin. For now, let us remember that the law grants an active knowledge of sin. In Paul’s way of understanding the world, the law is more on the side of the sin, flesh, and death pole, than on the side of the faith, spirit, and life pole. We will also have to ask what sin is for Paul. In the end of verse 7, sin seems to be summarized in *epiquimia*—desire or covetousness. What then is *epiquimia*? And to what human attitude does it refer? The final question that needs attention becomes “How can we relate this verse, which introduces many of the issues of Romans 7, with the Kierkegaard quotation previously discussed?”

1.3. A first hypothesis

The only aims of this hypothesis are to see how some elements of Romans 7 find echoes in *Sickness Unto Death* and to see if we should keep in mind the concepts developed in *Sickness Unto Death* when we read Rom 7. Kierkegaard says that human error only becomes sin when it is consciously acted out with the knowledge of being in front of God. In Kierkegaard’s language, the law would make sin visible for human beings because it places

^{2[2]} Jean-Baptiste ÉDART makes the same claim in “De la nécessité d’un sauveur. Rhétorique et théologie de Rm 7:7-25”, *RB* 105 (1998), p. 359-396, here p. 361, 362, 368.

them in front of God. The “before God” dimension leads human being to an intellectual understanding of sin. But it does more, as the law does more in Paul. It confronts human being with the possibility of being a single and unique individual before God, of being the one that she or he really is. The fact of being before God offers the possibility of being saved but also puts humans in a position of being offended. In this hypothesis, sin is understood, in a very *kierkegaardian* fashion, as the human refusal of establishing his or her self in God. We encounter here, perhaps, a resonance of the Pauline *epiqumia*. This first “perhaps” shows, if needed, that this first hypothesis has to be tested through a reading of the texts. If it resists that reading, how can it be refined through a subtler way of reading the texts? This is what we’ll see.

2. Exploring the question

One can choose to start with the “source” text—to let it speak—while keeping in mind the hypothesis (an new interpretation of the text of Romans 7 through *Sickness Unto Death*). The law reveals, accentuates and creates sin because it places humans, in their mistakes, before God. The law makes human beings realize they’re in front of God. They are offended by this fact and, therefore, sin. Sin uses the law to actualize itself in human beings. Therefore, let us examine what the “source” text says about this.

2.1. Analysis of Romans 7:7-12

2.1.1. Division and structure of the text

The main difficulty with the division of the text (7-12)^{3[3]} is whether or not to include verse 13 in this passage (placing it at the end of the pericope at verse 12). To make this decision, one can rely on certain textual indications. Verse 13 introduces a new rhetorical question into the passage, which would seem to indicate that this verse starts a new unit. However, verse 13 has verbs in the past tense, and verse 14 introduces a long passage with verbs in the present tense. The verb tense indicates that verse 13 should go with what comes before (verses 7-12). However, because verse 13 introduces a new rhetorical question, it could also be placed at the start of a new section, which would include verses 14-25.

^{3[3]} This is how Moo (Douglas J. MOO, *The Epistle to the Romans* [NICNT XXV], Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996, p. 432) and Wilckens (Ulrich WILCKENS, *Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 2. Röm 6-11*, Zürich – Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger Verlag – Neukirchener Verlag, 1980, p. 74-75) divide the text, but Fitzmyer (Joseph A. FITMYER, *Romans* (AnchB 33), New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 462-463) includes 13 in the passage that starts in 7.

If one devotes his or her attention to verb tenses, one would obtain the following results: 1-3 (present tense); 4-13 (past tense); 14-25 (present tense). If one focuses on the division brought about by rhetorical questions, the passage would be divided: 1-6; 7-12; 13-23; 24-25. I prefer the latter division. As was mentioned earlier, the problem is that this division removes verse 13 from verses 7-12 and includes it with 14-23. However, Jean-Baptiste Édart sees this verse as a transition between the two parts^{4[4]}. His argument in favor of this goes as follows: the literary form of the text shows that the question in verse 13, even if it does not add new elements to the debate, has a very specific function. Four times in Romans, a form similar to the one in verse 13 (a rhetorical question answered by *mh genoito*) introduces Paul's reasoning (6:1-2 introduces the development that ends in 6:14; 6:15 functions as an entry way for 6:16 – 7:6; 7:7 starts the section 7:7-25; and 9:14 inaugurates 9: 15-23). Édart thinks that Rom 7:13 can serve a similar function. The difficulty – and Édart is well aware of it – becomes the relationship between Rom 7:13 and Rom 7:7. If verse 7 already introduces 7:7-25, one can ask why one needs another introduction in verse 13. Édart argues that one can conceive the relationship like this. Verse 7 expresses the thesis, made up of three elements: sin, the fact of getting to know sin, and the role of the law in the process of knowing sin. Verse 13 refers to two of these three elements: sin and role of the law. The third element – knowledge – is, according to Édart, developed in the *ina* clauses (so that it would be manifested as sin and that it would become very sinful).

Verse 7 is indeed referred to in verse 13, which represents somewhat of a synthesis of verses 7-12. Why then use it as the beginning of verses 14-25? For Édart, it is the literary form of the verse that implies this. For him, verse 13 is emphatic—the commandment manifests forcefully (*καθ υπερβολην αμαρτωλος η αμαρτια*) the sinful nature of sin. For Édart, the commandment can do that only through the action of sin—action that gives death. The work of sin is developed in verses 14-23, which also shows the law's incapacity of refraining from sin. This is the new aspect that verse 13 introduces. But this new aspect remains subordinated to verse 7, the passage's *propositio*.

Following Édart, I reach the following conclusion. Verse 13 is distinguished from verses 7-12 not because it would omit an important part of these verses, but because it summarizes them and adds a new element to them through its literary form. Chapter 7 can then be structured in the following manner:

^{4[4]} Jean-Baptiste ÉdART, *art. cit.*, p. 371.

1-6: establishment of a promise

7: Propositio: the promise is called into question through a rhetorical question

Human beings' situati



8-12: reaction to the proposition

13: Sub-propositio: the explanation in 8-12 is called into question

14-23: reaction to the sub-propositio

24-25: repetition of the promise

The passage receives its structure from the rhetorical questions and is framed by the promise. In my opinion, this structure justifies the separation of verse 13 from verses 7-12. This structure gives all of its weight and importance to the rhetorical questions that provide a certain rhythm to the epistle to the Romans. It respects the construction of Paul's thought around these questions. One should, of course, analyze Rom 7:7-12 in tight relationship with verses 13-25 and with the metaphor developed in Rom 7:1-6. However, in this paper, I will only consider Rom 7:7-12.

Three problems require closer scrutiny. Who did Paul intend to be the speaker behind the "I" in Rom 7:7-12? The answer to that question will help us understand the second problem—the role of the law. Finally, there is the question of sin in this passage. Let us first consider who is speaking in Rom 7:7-12.

2.1.2. Who's speaking?

The answers to this question have been very diverse and numerous. The focus of interest has mainly been on the question of whether the affirmations contained in Rom 7:7-12 could be attributed to Paul or not. If one decides that it is impossible for the passage to be autobiographical^{5[5]}, one has to decide whether Paul refers to Adam in this passage^{6[6]} (as the entolh vocabulary might suggest, as well as the general idea contained in the passage) or whether Paul makes Israel (before the events at Mount Sinai) the speaker^{7[7]} (as the quotation of the 10th commandment would make one think, as well as the idea that the "I, then, before

^{5[5]} Theissen thinks Rom 7 is at least partially autobiographical: Gerd THEISSEN, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1987, p. 178; 201.

^{6[6]} Ulrich WILCKENS, *Römer*, p. 79.

^{7[7]} Douglas J. MOO, *Romans*, p. 430-431.

the law, was alive”—this could only be said by someone prior to the gift of the Torah). A third interpretation considers this “I” as purely rhetorical, without any reference to the person of Paul or to any other reality^{8[8]}.

I cannot engage in a thorough discussion of every position held by scholars, but it does seem important to establish what kinds of references one can find behind the “I” that Paul employs in this passage. Identifying the “I” helps one to understand the concepts of sin, law, commandment, and desire.

Without affirming that there is absolutely no reference to Paul in the “I” of Rom 7, I think it is extremely difficult to understand this “I” as Paul, who tells of the conflict that he could have experienced with the law before he became a Christian^{9[9]}. The first reason this makes the identification difficult is that Rom 7:7-12 completely contradicts the portrayal Paul brushes of himself in Phil 3 (for example) where he refers explicitly to his Jewish existence before his conversion. The second reason lies in the fact that commentators who defend a strictly autobiographical interpretation of Rom 7:7-12 have trouble explaining what event Paul might be referring to in his life when he affirms that “then, without the law, he lived”, when he also describes himself elsewhere as having been circumcised on the eighth day (Phil 3:5).

In his commentary on Romans, Moo distinguishes two interpretative tendencies.^{10[10]} The first is that Paul realizes that he is sinful at his bar mitzvah. Gundry, Deissmann and Davies say that Paul was without real comprehension of the power of sin before his bar mitzvah, but when he became accountable to the commandments, sin sprang to life and Paul came to realize he was under the weight of sin. For the second interpretation, scholars refer to Paul’s conversion. Paul thought he was alive when he was accomplishing the law as a self-satisfied Pharisee. At the time of his conversion, he realizes that he was far from satisfying the demands of the law, and that he was in fact under the law’s condemnation. This interpretation goes back to Augustine.

Neither one of these two explanations are satisfying, mainly because they bring extra-textual explanations into the text of Rom 7:7-12. They refer to moments of Paul’s life about

^{8[8]} Werner KÜMMEL, *Römer7 und das Bild des Menschens in Neuen Testament*, München: Kaiser, 1974.

^{9[9]} Things might be slightly different in Rom 7:13-25 where the more personal tone indicates that Paul might have some personal experience related to the incapacity of doing the good one wants to do. It might be related to the fact that, as a Pharisee, the good he thought he was doing – persecuting the Christians – revealed itself to be a wrong when seen in the light of his new Christian existence. However, it might also be that Paul uses a very personal tone in 13-25 because he’s referring to a common human experience and tries to identify himself with it. He might well be using a personal tone to convince his reader, without in fact having gone himself through this dreadful experience. See also for a more general theory: Lauri THURÉN, *Derhetorizing Paul*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002, p. 1-50.

^{10[10]} Douglas MOO, *Romans*, p. 425.

which we have no evidence—we have no idea of how Paul experienced his bar mitzvah and Paul never says he felt the weight of the law’s condemnation. Therefore it is more reasonable to give up trying to find an autobiographical reference to Paul’s affirmations in Rom 7:7-12. However, one should not neglect the simple fact that Paul does indeed speak in the first person. If only through a rhetorical practice, Paul accepts the fact that the reader can ask the question of whether one can include Paul in the “I” who is speaking. There, the rhetorical concept of *prosopopoiia* or “speech-in-character” might be of help when interpreting this difficult passage.

Prosopopoiia, as Stowers explains it, is “a rhetorical and literary technique in which the speaker or writer produces speech that represents not himself or herself but another person or type of character”^{11[11]}. According to Stowers, *prosopopoiia* presents aspects of self-reflection and develops itself in the manner of a monologue^{12[12]}. For him, Rom 7:7-25 corresponds perfectly with the *prosopopoiia* structure. According to Stowers, the character that Paul depicts in this passage represents the barbarian woman, especially as she is presented in Euripid’s *Medea*^{13[13]}. *Medea* illustrates perfectly the human being who has completely lost his or her self-control. If Stowers’ presentation is indeed attractive, especially for verses 13-23, it impoverishes the theological meaning of the text, in particular verses 7-12, and it fails to highlight the role of the law, the definition of sin and the importance of *epiqumia*.

If one wants to keep the rhetorical tool of *prosopopoiia* to interpret these verses, one can notice the following elements in the text. First, the text carries strong references – even if they’re not explicit – to the text of Gen 2:4 – 3:14. If one looks at the Septuagint translation, the following parallels are possible: the use of the word *entolh*, which only appears in Rom 7 and Rom 13:9 and stems from the same root than the verb *entellw*, found in Gen 2:16-17 to carry the order of God to Adam: “And the LORD God commanded Adam, saying: ‘From every tree in the garden, you will eat for food, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you will not eat. In the day you would eat from it, you will die of death’”. The reference can, however, be considered as fortuitous. Are there other elements that might make the connection clearer? In Gen 3:13, Eve tries to justify herself before God in saying that the serpent seduced her and made her eat the fruit of the tree—*o ofi" hpathsen*. In Rom

^{11[11]} Stanley K. STOWERS, “Romans 7:7-25 as Speech-in-Character (*proswpopoiia*)”, in: Troels ENGBERG-PEDERSEN éd., *Paul in his Hellenistic Context* (Studies of the New Testament and its World), Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, p. 180-202, here p. 180.

^{12[12]} *Ibid.*, p. 192.

^{13[13]} *Ibid.*, p. 199.

7:11, Paul writes that sin “seduced me through the commandment”: ἡ ἀμαρτία ἐξηπάτησέν. The same root is used in both cases. Furthermore the meaning of each verse corresponds to the same theme. It is the gift of the commandment, manipulated by the serpent (is it possible to equate the serpent with sin?) that leads to disobedience. We meet yet another parallel theme—the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve, after they have eaten the fruit, become equal to God, having obtained the knowledge of what is good and evil. The problem varies a little in Rom 7 where human beings know sin through the commandment. However, the fact of knowing sin (in both cases, γινώσκω is used) does indicate that human beings also know good. This interpretation is confirmed by verses 14 and following since, in these verses, human beings know good (ἀγαθόν) and evil (κακόν) but cannot accomplish good. In both texts, one can also notice that γινώσκω does not only imply an intellectual knowledge of what is good and evil, rather, a practical dimension is envisioned.

Even if one doesn't place a lot of weight on these similarities in vocabulary (they can make us attentive to a possible relationship that needs to be confirmed), it does seem clear that Rom 7:7-12 presents similarities to Gen 2:4 – 3:14. The text becomes clearer if one thinks that Paul had Adam in mind when he was writing it. In Gen 3 the serpent alters the meaning of the good commandment given by God. The commandment then indirectly provokes the rise of human sin and the death of the human beings (since they don't have access to the tree of life in the garden; a tree from which God had not prohibited eating the fruits^{14[14]}). The narration in Gen 2:4 – 3:14 corresponds rather well to the content of Rom 7:7-12. And, the reference to Adam could still be present to the hearer's mind since Paul names the character in Rom 5:14.

Two elements can call into question the reference to Adam behind Rom 7:7-12. First, the fact that the serpent is not explicitly identified with sin. Second – and more importantly – the fact that ἐπιθυμία is not mentioned in the Genesis story. Of course, one can say that it is ἐπιθυμία that drove Eve towards eating the fruit (verse 6: “and the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was agreeable to the eyes, and that it was appropriated for intelligence, and, taking its fruit, she ate, et gave also to her man, with her, he ate”), but the vocabulary and the idea itself do not explicitly appear in Gen 2:4 – 3:14.

But the interdiction μή ἐπιθυμήσει" does quote the 10th commandment of the decalogue in a shortened form (Ex 20:17 and Deut 5: 21 LXX), which implies a strong reminder of the gift of the law to Israel at Mount Sinai. One can argue whether it is possible to say that the 10th commandment has to be understood as summarizing the entire Torah. Rom

^{14[14]} cf. Robert G. HAMMERTON-KELLY, *Sacred Violence. Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

7:7-12 should then be seen as an exclusive reference to the history of Israel. It seems unnecessary to try to demonstrate this. One can very well think that Paul chooses this commandment because it allows him to introduce a reference to the story of Adam and Eve as well as to the gift of the Torah at Sinai.

I would like to propose the following result for the identity of the “I” in this passage: Paul, following the general idea of *prosopopoiia* has an imaginary character speak in that passage. It would indeed be hard to imagine that Paul would suddenly introduce a direct discourse of Adam in this passage. On the contrary, to construct that character, Paul relies heavily on the story in Gen 2:4 – 3:14, which matches his goal in this passage. And, since Paul wants to discuss the role of the law and not limit himself to the commandment made to Adam, Paul uses a quotation of the 10th commandment. He also employs in parallel fashion the vocabulary of *nomos* and *entolh* (that only appears here and in Rom 13:9 in the epistle to the Romans). This allows him to introduce in his “I” discourse strongly referenced to Adam the problem of the Torah given to Israel at Mount Sinai. The reference to Paul’s biography is rather limited in this case, and one can ask why Paul chooses to speak in the first person at all, rather than simply present his ideas, with clear references to Adam and to the gift of the Torah at Sinai—the two traditions building up that passage (Adam being present in a stronger manner than the gift of the Torah^{15[15]}).

I think this choice can be explained through an argumentative strategy. The fact that Paul uses an “I” in this passage gives him the opportunity to introduce himself in the background of the character he’s constructing through *prosopopoiia*. Through the “I” that Paul uses, the hearer of the letter can imagine being that “I” of which Paul speaks. Since this “I” refers to traditions the hearer knows, he or she can identify with this “I” even more easily, and enter the “I”’s world of experience. If the “I” in Rom 7:7-12 does not explicitly speak of a personal experience of Paul, it can address events that Paul’s hearers know. Thus, they can really enter into his discourse, which portrays a figure they can identify with^{16[16]}. In a way, this is a form of indirect communication – a concept developed and abundantly used by Kierkegaard – a way of communication that allows the author, through the use of a pseudonym (perhaps an echo of *prosopopoiia*), to present a way of being to a reader considered in his or her existence of existential subject.

^{15[15]} If one thinks that Romans is addressed to a mainly Gentile community in Rome, it also allows Paul to universalize his discourse more easily.

^{16[16]} Lauri THURÉN, *Dheretorizing Paul*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002, p. 121 note 132 goes in the same direction: “However, *ego* is here a good literary device: it identifies the apostle with Adam, the addressees and all humanity. It also allows the rhetorical merger with a more personal, emotionally affective *ego* at the end of the chapter”.

A short excursus will show how Kierkegaard says it. The quotation is fairly long, but it casts an interesting light on what Paul does when he uses that “I”.

2.1.3. Excursus

The quotation is taken from the “Post-Scriptum”^{17[17]}:

La méthode indirecte fait de la communication un art différent de ce que l’on admet généralement, quand on s’imagine que le rôle du penseur est de présenter son message à une personne instruite pour qu’elle en juge, ou à un ignorant pour qu’il s’en instruisse. Mais l’on n’a cure de la suite, de ce qui rend si justement la communication dialectiquement si difficile; on ne voit pas que le lecteur à qui on s’adresse est un existant et que là est le point essentiel. Il est moins difficile d’arrêter un homme dans la rue et de rester soi-même immobile pour lui parler, que d’avoir à dire en passant quelque chose à un passant, sans demeurer soi-même sur place ni retarder l’autre, sans l’inviter à suivre le même chemin, en l’engageant au contraire à poursuivre sa route : telle est la situation d’un existant vis-à-vis d’un autre existant, quand la communication a trait à la vérité entendue comme intériorité de l’existence^{18[18]}.

Earlier, Kierkegaard says: “Exister dans ce que l’on a compris, cela ne peut pas être transmis directement à un esprit existant, pas même par Dieu, et à plus forte raison par un homme^{19[19]}”. Quite evidently, Paul does not think of an entire theory of indirect communication when he writes to the Roman community using “I”. However, he does think of them as “existential subjects”. This leads him to tell them one of his truths by using an “I” discourse that gives him the opportunity to include them in what he’s telling them. The “I” of Rom 7:7-12 does not need to represent Paul himself, Adam or the people of Israel. Paul uses these three sources to express one of his convictions and to bring his hearers to live in that truth. But this he can only do through indirect communication.

The next question that needs to be discussed is the difficult role of the law in this passage. This discussion will be shorter.

^{17[17]} I apologize for the quotations in French but I was unable to find an English version of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragment* in the Swiss libraries.

^{18[18]} Søren KIERKEGAARD, “Post-Scriptum définitif et non scientifique aux Miettes philosophiques par Johannes Climacus édité par S. Kierkegaard”, *Œuvres complètes Vol. 10*, Paris, Édition de l’Orante, 1977, p. 257s.

^{19[19]} *Ibid.*, p. 255

2.1.4. The role of the law

If one accepts the fact that, in Rom 7:7-12 one finds traditions related to Adam and to the gift of the Torah at Sinai, it becomes clear that the law of which Paul speaks is the Jewish law, the Torah (at least in Rom 7:7-12; things might change slightly in verses 13-25). On this basis, one can also assimilate *entolh* and *nomos*. *entolh* is the law in its very concrete aspect and highlights the relationship with Gen 2:4 – 3:14. *nomos* illustrates the link to Torah as a collection of laws and as a collection of affirmations which guide the life of human beings. At first sight, what Paul says about the law in Rom 7:7-12 might seem hard to keep together. If one follows the text of Rom 7:7-12, one discovers that Paul writes the following things about the law:

- - the law isn't sin
- - sin remains unknown without the law
- - the law that says: "You shall not covet" brings covetousness
- - without the law, sin is dead
- - the commandment gives life to sin
- - sin, using the commandment, kills
- - the law is holy, the commandment is holy, just and good.

In Rom 7:7-12, Paul tries to show that the law and the commandment are not evil things in themselves. If they're put on the side of sin and death, it is only through the work of sin that manipulates them. The fact of associating the law with sin and death was quite blasphemous for a Jew, since the gift of the law was supposed to bring human beings life. One can see that idea expressed in Deut 30:15-20 for example:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (NRSV).

Here, the law is understood as the power of God that offers life^{20[20]}. The issue, in Rom 7:7-12, is to know whether Paul critiques the law because it fails in its mission to give life and finds itself on the side of death and sin^{21[21]} or whether Paul tries to exonerate the law of that failure, keeping it on the side of life and showing that it fails because it has been manipulated by sin^{22[22]}. It seems that verse 12 of chapter 7 favors this last interpretation. Paul does not want to give an active power to the law in the salvation process – the affirmations at the beginning of Romans show this clearly: 3:28, 4:15, 5:20 – but he does say in Rom 7 that the law remains a gift of God, even though it is perverted through sin. How does Paul then understand the law?

According to Jürgen Becker, for Paul, the law always meets a human being who is already sinful (which corresponds to Rom 7:7b—the law does not create sin in itself, it brings the knowledge of sin) – one who cannot obey the law. But in Judaism (and Deut 30 shows it well), the law meets a human being who can choose between good and evil. Becker says it like this: “In distinction to this, for Judaism the life (and death) function of the Torah is linked to the human ability to choose freely between good and evil (Sir 15:11-20; *Pss. Sol.* 9:4-5; 4 *Ezra* 8:55-56)”^{23[23]}. Since Paul develops a pessimistic anthropology, he could consider the Torah as a power of life only if it has the power of breaking the sinful state of the sinner. But, for Paul, this it cannot do. The relationship with Gen 2:4 – 3:14 shows the role of the law—it should protect the life of human beings (in this way, it is holy, just and good) but it cannot do this because it is manipulated by sin (a power that dwells in human beings in a non-active state before the law steps on the scene). Sin could not in itself lead human beings to death, since only the law contains the power to bring human beings life and death. Sin needs the condemnation of the law to lead human beings to death.

Since Paul accuses sin of being responsible for the perversion of the law, Paul can preserve God’s role and the law’s role concerning the emergence of sin. But Paul does not suppress human responsibility in the existence of sin: sin provokes covetousness in human beings and human beings let themselves be seduced. Human beings would rather trust sin – that perverts the law – than God. Thus, this clarifies the status of the law. However, the way the law is manipulated by sin remains obscure. Becker says: “But it [the commandment] turns

^{20[20]} Cf. Ulrich LUCK, “Das Gute und das Böse in Römer 7”, in Helmut MERKLEIN éd., *Neues Testament und Ethik. Für Rudolf Schnackenburg*, Freiburg: Herder, 1989, p. 220-237, here p. 229.

^{21[21]} Cf. Ulrich LUCK, *art. cit.*

^{22[22]} Cf. Ulrich WILCKENS, *Römer*, p. 74; 80; 83.

^{23[23]} Jürgen BECKER, *Paul. Apostle to the Gentiles*, Louisville, KY : Westminster-John Knox Press, 1993, p. 396.

inexplicably into the impetus of covetousness followed by trespass and death”^{24[24]}. We will see later if our reading of Kierkegaard might help us understand the mysterious influence of the law on the surfacing of covetousness and sin.

For now, it matters only to say a couple of words about sin in Rom 7:7-12 even though the concept is not explicitly defined in this passage.

2.1.5. What is sin?

So far, we’ve seen that Rom 7:7-12 speaks of the law as bringing sin to knowledge. In this passage, sin is always related to the commandment against *epiqumia*. In order to understand what sin is, one has to understand what *epiqumia* is. Since Rom 7:7-12 does not give a real explanation of what either sin or *epiqumia* are, it seems logical to look at the two texts that Paul uses in Rom 7 to build his argument: Gn 2:4 – 3:14 and the quotation of the 10th commandment of the decalogue.

In Gn 2:4 – 3:14, when Eve agrees to listen to the serpent and eats the fruit, she’s guilty of not obeying God’s commandment. She trusts the snake that distorts God’s commandment more than she trusts God himself. She refuses to depend completely on God since she’s ready to believe one of God’s creatures, instead of trusting the creator. The consequence of this misplaced trust, of this challenge to God’s authority, is that she loses – and Adam with her – access to the tree of life and therefore she will die. She enters a new state. She knows what is good and evil, which makes her like a god. Her sin (although the word is never mentioned as such in Gen 2:4 – 3:14) was that she failed to trust God. This lack of faith or trust in God was made evident when she gave in to the temptation of the snake and desired to become like God. She wanted to become more like God than remain as a creature. She wanted to be like God, to rule her own life rather than trust in God for the life and position given to her. She escaped her human condition. If one remembers what Kierkegaard said about despair, one can say that Eve refuses to be what she really is, a creature, and tries to root herself in herself, even though she knows herself to be before God. This understanding of sin is not defined like that in Rom 7:7-12, but it can be inferred from the concept of *epiqumia*.

Epiqumia in Rom 7:7-12 represents sin in general. The relationship with Gen 2:4 – 3:14 could be presented in the following manner: you shall not covet what you’re not supposed to have in order to become what you’re not supposed to be. Again, the creature’s status is endangered. Here, the reference happens through the decalogue, that prohibits

^{24[24]} *Ibid.*, p. 397.

covetousness of the neighbor's house, or field, or servants, or ox and donkey, or of anything that belongs to the neighbor. Covetousness is the desire for what one does not have. It is a negative attitude towards God's will which foresees what human beings need. In relationship with chapter 4 of the epistle to the Romans, one comes across a representation of what is not sin in the attitude of Abraham. With Abraham, faith – which is the opposite attitude of sin according to Rom 14:23 – is presented as the decision to trust completely in God, to be dependent upon God. Abraham hopes against all hope (Rom 4:18), he trusts God before any other thing. The contrary attitude is sin: to trust in something or somebody else than God. Even if these definitions are not stated in Rom 7, one can think these concepts are behind the use of the word. However, the definition is not completely satisfying for Rom 7 where one needs to be reminded that sin is a power opposed to God, a power that takes hold of human beings. Sin seems to be more than merely disobedience to the law (although it is also that) since it is also a power that seizes human beings. But it is not clearly explained in this passage.

Let us summarize the results of our work on Rom 7:7-12 in order to simplify the comparison with Kierkegaard.

2.1.6. Summary of results

- - The "I" in Rom 7:7-12 is based on traditions related to Adam and to the gift of Torah at Mount Sinai. It is a device of indirect communication used by Paul.
- - The law is manipulated by sin. However it is not assimilated to the negative pole of sin-flesh-death by Paul. Paul objects to its role as saving power in the salvation process. It is unable to lead human beings to life, as it promised. Because of that, it is criticized. It remains holy, good and just because its intentions were good. Only sin perverted it. We'll see how passages of *Sickness Unto Death* might help us to understand the way the law makes sin even more sinful.
- - Sin in itself is not defined in Rom 7:7-12. It's strongly related to *epiquia*, covetousness and a lack of faith. Is it the wrong attitude of human beings who want to escape their creature's condition? Can the concept of despair help us understand what sin is?

We will now turn towards *Sickness Unto Death*.

2.2. *Analysis of Sickness Unto Death*

I will read Kierkegaard's texts in close relationship with Rom 7:7-12 in order to see how the relationship between them affects our understanding of Kierkegaard and how Kierkegaard, in return, helps us understand Rom 7:7-12^{25[25]}.

2.2.1. Pertinent texts in *Sickness Unto Death*

The first passage is found in the first chapter of book IV of *Sickness Unto Death*. The text follows Kierkegaard's own reflections on the various degrees of self consciousness and on the new quality the self takes when it finds itself before God:

It was a very sound idea, one that came up so frequently in an older dogmatics^{26[26]}, whereas a later dogmatics very frequently took exception to it because it did not have the understanding or the feeling of it—it was a very sound idea, even if at times it was misapplied: the idea that what makes sin so terrible is that it is before God. It was used to prove eternal punishment in hell. Later, as men became more shrewd, they said: Sin is sin, sin is no greater because it is against God or before God. Strange! Even lawyers speak of aggravated crimes, even lawyers make a distinction between a crime committed against a public official, for example, or against a private citizen, make a distinction between the punishment for a patricide and that for an ordinary murder.

No, the older dogmatics was right in maintaining that because sin is against God it is infinitely magnified. The error consisted in considering God as some externality and in seeming to assume that only occasionally did one sin against God. But God is not some externality in the sense that a policeman is. The point that must be observed is that the self has a conception of God and yet does not will as he wills, and thus is disobedient. Nor does one only occasionally sin before God, for every sin is before God, or, more correctly, what really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty one has the consciousness of existing before God (SuD, 80)

I would like to note the following points that might help us understand Rom 7. Kierkegaard introduces a degree of difference between human error and sin. For Kierkegaard, human error only becomes sin when it is committed before God—when the culprit is conscious of being before God. Kierkegaard even goes so far as to say that, before God, sin is raised to infinite power. Here we are not far from Paul's affirmation in Rom 7:13, where sin is manifested in all its sinful violence through the law. But there is also an echo of Rom 7: 7, 8.

^{25[25]} For matter of space, I will only refer to texts in Kierkegaard that help us understand Rom 7 or in which an idea could be traced back to Rom 7. I will not analyze passages that develop themes particular to Kierkegaard's thought.

^{26[26]} According to the note in the French edition of Kierkegaard's work, the old dogmatic refers here to the Lutheran orthodox theology of the 16th and 17th centuries, in opposition to the liberal theology of the 18th century: Søren KIERKEGAARD, "La maladie à la Mort: un exposé psychologique chrétien par Anti Climacus (édité par S. Kierkegaard", *Œuvres complètes Vol. 16* (traduit du danois par Paul-Henri Tisseau, revision par Else-Marie Jacquet-Tisseau), p. 163-285, here p. 236, note 60.

Humans know sin only through the law; without the law, sin is dead. For Kierkegaard, if humans don't know they're before God, their sin remains a human error.

One can ask the question of whether or not Kierkegaard understands the law to be the power that brings humans before God. If one keeps this in mind, the affirmation that sin used the law to make itself known to human beings becomes clearer. As long as there is no law to reveal to humans that they're before God, sin cannot spring to life. It remains, to use Kierkegaard's words, a human error. Only the law, that shows humans that they live before God, makes clear that when they are making a mistake, they're making it before God. Only this law allows sin to realize itself as an evil power inside humans, because humans now know they're acting against God.

However, Kierkegaard has not yet said that living before God depends upon the law and therefore it isn't clear why saying "you shall not covet" would provoke covetousness. Let us read further. The first chapter of book IV is followed by an appendix, entitled: "That the definition of sin includes the possibility of offense: a general observation about offense". It is quite useful to look at it more closely. Kierkegaard, to illustrate his understanding of offense, just exposed the example of a poor day-worker to whom the emperor offers to marry his daughter. If the day-worker doesn't have enough courage to believe this most extraordinary thing, he can only be offended by it: Why would an emperor give him his daughter to marry? He must be making fun of him. Kierkegaard continues:

And now, what of Christianity! Christianity teaches that this individual human being—and thus every single individual human being, no matter whether man, woman, servant girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student, or whatever—this individual human being exists *before God*, this individual human being who perhaps would be proud of having spoken with the king once in his life, this human being who does not have the slightest illusion of being on intimate terms with this one or that one, this human being exists before God, may speak with God any time he wants to, assured of being heard by him—in short, this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God! Furthermore, for this person's sake, also for this very person's sake, God comes to the world, allows himself to be born, to suffer, to die, and this suffering God—he almost implores and beseeches this person to accept the help that is offered to him! Truly, if there is anything to lose one's mind over, this is it! Everyone lacking the humble courage to dare to believe this is offended. But why is he offended? Because it is too high for him, because his mind cannot grasp it, because he cannot attain bold confidence in the face of it and therefore must get rid of it, pass it off as a bagatelle, nonsense, and folly, for it seems as if it would choke him (...). The uncharitableness of the natural man cannot allow him the extraordinary that God has intended for him; so he is offended (SuD, 85-86).

Kierkegaard develops his notion of sin through offense, which consists in the fact that one does not want to recognize that, as a particular individual, he or she is living before God. There are no clear echoes of this found in Rom 7: 7-12. For Kierkegaard, sin functions like this: I find myself before God. For me, it is too extraordinary. I refuse to believe it and I can only be offended by it and think that someone is trying to make fun of me by saying I can have a perfectly intimate relationship with God. Since humans cannot accept that they live before God, they become even more separated from faith. In Rom 7, the process goes like this: the law reveals sin and instead of guiding humans towards life – as it should – it leads them to death.

Here, one might find an indirect parallel. The goal of the revelation “before God” is to offer humans the possibility of an authentic relationship with God. But this offer is so extravagant to the human mind that, rather than bringing humans to faith, it leads them to offense. The role of the law is somewhat parallel. It too offers a privileged relationship to God. It offers to lead humans to life, but, perverted by the power of sin in humans, it only leads them to death. Sin would then be the fact of not being able to believe what God offers, of not being able to trust God when God offers the possibility to humans to live as a particular individual before God, or when God offers the law as a possibility to attain life. Humans cannot trust God, because, intrinsically, they refuse to understand themselves as related to God, which Kierkegaard expresses through the concept of despair and Paul through the reference to the Genesis story.

Kierkegaard continues his analysis of sin in Book IV, chapter II, with a passage which challenges the Socratic definition of sin. Again, an extract of this chapter will be useful because, within it, Kierkegaard explains more clearly how humans come to know they live before God. For Kierkegaard, the Socratic definition of sin is insufficient (“Sin is ignorance” [SuD, 87]). Indeed, “if sin is being ignorant of what is right and therefore doing wrong, then sin does not exist” (SuD, 89). For Socrates, it would be impossible for a human to do something unjust if he or she knew it was unjust. Kierkegaard opposes that definition (in agreement with Paul in Rom 7: 13-23). He says that the Socratic definition of sin is missing a category to explain the following transition. How does someone who knows what is right concretely accomplish what is right? According to Kierkegaard, “In this transition Christianity begins; by taking this path, it shows that sin is rooted in willing and arrives at the concept of defiance (...)” (SuD, 93). For Kierkegaard, in this passage from knowing what is right to doing what is right, a long process begins. It resembles the following scenario (SuD, 93ff). When a human being recognizes what is just and does not do it right away, he or she

waits before acting. While the human being is waiting, his or her knowledge of what is just fades. Soon, there is an agreement between the will of the inferior self and the knowledge. The human beings give up doing the right thing. For Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, it simply signifies that humans have not really understood what is right. Kierkegaard shows how he agrees and disagrees in this passage:

This means that the Greek mind does not have the courage to declare that a person knowingly does wrong, knows what is right and does the wrong; so it manages by saying: If a person does what is wrong, he has not understood what is right.

Absolutely right. And no *human being* can come further than that; no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is, precisely because he is in sin; all his talk about sin is basically a glossing over of sin, an excuse, a sinful watering down. That is why Christianity begins in another way: man has to learn what sin is by a revelation from God; sin is not a matter of a person's not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right (...).

Therefore the definition of sin given in the previous section still needs to be completed as follows: sin is after being taught by a revelation from God what sin is—before God in despair not to will to be oneself or in despair to will to be oneself (SuD 94-96).

The passage which challenges the Socratic definition of sin serves Kierkegaard in the sense that he is able to introduce the necessity of a divine revelation in order to understand the nature of sin. In book IV, Kierkegaard does not explain what this revelation is. He only says it comes from God. Of course, it is tempting to interpret it in the light of Romans 7:7-12 as the gift of the law, which makes humans aware of being in sin and then gives life to sin. Some elements in Kierkegaard's text invite this interpretation—the way Kierkegaard insists on the fact that humans, although they know what is just, will do what is unjust (which reminds one of Rom 7:13-25); Kierkegaard's affirmation that everything humans say about sin is intended to justify themselves (which could stem out of the observation of Eve's comments accusing the snake). The law – revelation – would then have the function of reminding humans of their own culpability in repeating that humans knew what was good but deliberately chose to do evil.

The parallel might not be that clear however. In Romans, the law stimulates sin. In Kierkegaard, the revelation of the nature of sin does not intensify the sinful actions of humans. It does not diminish them but neither does it multiply them. However, without that revelation, humans would ignore that they are in sin. They would also ignore that they are

before God. And it is precisely the fact of being before God that makes their human mistakes, sin. In a way, therefore, the revelation of sin does change the nature of human mistakes.

The revelation of what sin is does not help people stay out of sin. In the same way, the law, even though it reveals sin, does not lead people to life. For Kierkegaard, the revelation that sin is before God shows that sin is a position, and, because it is a position, humans cannot escape this position by themselves (he would agree with Rom 7:14-25). He expresses this in the following manner: “But Christianity, which was the first to discover paradoxes, is as paradoxical on this point as possible; it seems to be working against itself by establishing sin so securely as a position that now it seems to be utterly impossible to eliminate it again—and then it is this very Christianity that by means of the Atonement wants to eliminate sin as completely as if it were drowned in the sea” (SuD, 100). Let us try to summarize our results.

2.2.2. Summary of the results

- - Kierkegaard distinguishes between human error and sin. Human error only becomes sin when it is committed with the knowledge of being before God. Sin becomes entirely dreadful when it is before God. The “before God” category is essential to understand sin in Kierkegaard.
- - The “before God” category creates the possibility of an offense: a human cannot believe that he or she is a unique individual before God—that he or she is in an intimate relationship with God. Since humans cannot believe this, they become offended and move away from God.
- - Humans only become aware of sin through a revelation. It shows them that sin is the fact of not wanting to do what is just, when one knows what is just. It is in this way that the Christian definition of sin is different from the Socratic one.

Lets us go back to the relationship between the two texts, a relationship we’ve already touched on through the analysis of passages of *Sickness Unto Death*.

2.3. Relationship between the two texts

We’ve already noticed that there are echoes of Rom 7:7-12 in *Sickness Unto Death* and that in some passages, *Sickness Unto Death* helps us understand Rom 7:7-12.

1. When trying to identify the Pauline “I”, the concept of indirect communication developed by Kierkegaard makes it easier to understand what Paul might have wanted to do. He used an “I” that does not refer to his own person, but rather presents a character created from the traditions related to Adam and the gift of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The following remark must be made. Paul does not develop a theory of indirect communication. But what he does in Rom 7:7-12 fits nicely with what Kierkegaard describes as indirect

communication. The theory of indirect communication does help us interpret what Paul intended to do in Rom 7:7-12. It might be helpful because the theory of indirect communication arises from the difficulties a person rooted in existence meets when he or she has to transmit a truth, for example the Christian truth, to another person who is also grounded in existence. The common ground for Paul and Kierkegaard is that they both consider the person they address as a “subjective I”. If the style of Rom 7:7-12 is better understood through the concept of indirect communication, it might well be because this theory of indirect communication has been elaborated by Kierkegaard because of the conviction Paul gave rise in him, namely that each person is an existing subject.

2. The notion of being “before God” along with the notion of being offended – both being central in Kierkegaard’s understanding of sin – can help us assess how the law reveals sin and makes it even more sinful in Romans. Paul and Kierkegaard agree on the fact that humans cannot believe, cannot trust what God is offering them, be it through the law or through being “before God”. In Genesis, Eve trusts the snake more than she does God. She believes the snake instead of believing God and this brings her death. Eve cannot believe the commandment that promised her life. For Kierkegaard, human beings cannot believe that they are a unique individual before God. They get offended and plunge into sin. But it is the promise that offered a particular relationship to God that is the cause for this offense. In both cases, the gift of God leads to human beings revolting against God, because that gift is too much—it cares too much about people’s lives. It offers too much.

This interpretation can of course be called into question, since the commandment in Genesis imposes a restriction on humans. But this restriction does promise life. When Adam and Eve go against that restriction, it is then that they lose something—access to the tree of life in the garden of Eden. It is interesting for that matter to go back to the definition that Kierkegaard gives to offense—it is “unhappy admiration”. “For what is offense? Offense is unhappy admiration. Thus it is related to envy, but it is an envy that turns against the person himself, is worse against oneself to an even higher degree. The uncharitableness of the natural man cannot allow him the extraordinary that God has intended for him, so he is offended” (SuD 86). Here, human beings desire what in fact God has already given them. But they cannot believe they’ve received it, so they get offended. It is the offer of God itself that creates covetousness—the jealousy of human beings. Humans cannot stop coveting God’s offer when indeed they should believe it. Since they’re unable to believe it on account of their “uncharitableness”, they become offended. Maybe we hear here an echo of the Pauline

epiqumia, *epiqumia* produced by the divine gift itself, that humans cannot accept, but can only covet. This covetousness puts them in a wrong relationship with God.

I think this interpretation is interesting, however hazardous it may sound. The main difficulty is in integrating the commandment “you shall not covet” within this explanation. When the law says “you shall not covet”, does it mean (in a *kierkegaardian* fashion) that humans shouldn’t covet anything because they’ve already received everything from God (as is the case for Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden)? Human beings cannot believe that they’ve already received everything from God and they become offended by that promise. They get jealous of that offer, and begin to covet. So the commandment not to covet creates covetousness. This proposition is perilous, I admit, but at least it goes further than the traditional interpretation “what is forbidden attracts”.

3. The revelation about which Kierkegaard speaks and that allows humans to know what sin is might be the law. It shows sin, and places humans before God, but it does not offer humans an exit out of sin.

3. Conclusion

At the end of this exploration of the Pauline and *Kierkegaardian* texts, what is the result? Where is the interest in this kind of work on the Pauline text? I hope I have shown two things: First, texts of Kierkegaard do help us understand some of the issues in Paul better. Of course, it is the interpreter’s decision to relate a specific text to a passage in Romans, but this decision allows one to regain the important theological dimension of Paul’s writing. It is my conviction that reading Romans 7 when bearing Kierkegaard’s philosophy in mind helps one to see that even rhetorical choice (like the use of “I” in this passage) might have ideological consequences. I do not intend to say that Romans is a work of systematic theology, but I do think that it unnecessarily impoverishes the meaning of the letter if one fails to analyze the deeper convictions that might influence the writing of the epistle.

Second, I hope to have at least indicated how important it is to be conscious of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text, especially in reformed systematic thinking. In many issues, one can still feel the influence of Paul on Kierkegaard’s way of thinking, even if it is only in an indirect manner. It has been suggested that although Kierkegaard does not refer to Romans in an explicit manner, there are several connections between this Pauline epistle and the work of the Danish philosopher. In evaluating how important Paul has been for Kierkegaard, it would be important to consider Luther’s influence on Kierkegaard’s reading of Paul. Here, I did not have the opportunity to study the way Kierkegaard read Paul in depth. However, the

first results of an analysis of Romans 7 are promising. It seems to me that, from what Rom 7:7-12 has shown, it would be rather interesting work to deepen the understanding of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Romans.
