

## Kierkegaardian vision and the concrete other

PATRICK STOKES

*Department of Philosophy, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia  
(E-mail: pastokes@unimelb.edu.au)*

**Abstract.** The ethics expressed in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* has been subject to persistent criticism for its perceived indifference to concrete persons and failure to attend to the other in their individual specificity. Recent defenses of *Works of Love* have focused in large part on the role of vision in the text, showing the supposed "blind" empty formalism of the emphasis on the category of "the neighbor" to serve a normative model of seeing the other correctly. However, when this problem is viewed in the broader context of Kierkegaard's phenomenology of moral vision, two further, thus far unanswered, problems emerge: How can we see the other and the moral demand they represent at the same time, and how can we see the other and our own condition at the same time? This paper draws on other Kierkegaardian texts to show how Kierkegaard's model of moral vision allows for the simultaneity in vision necessary to overcome these challenges.

### 1. Introduction

A recurrent theme in contemporary continental ethics, most strikingly illustrated in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, is the centralisation of alterity as the locus of moral value. This privileging of the "residue" of individual persons that resists conceptualisation or prediction finds its expression in a normative outlook, which may be distilled into the formula "act in such a way that you always respect the absolute singularity of the other, and/or the irreducibility of otherness."<sup>1</sup> Such an outlook is innately hostile towards norm-based ethical systems which, in that they aspire to universality, necessarily generalize across persons, eliding the concrete specificity of persons from whence their moral value is derived.

Perhaps few individual works of moral philosophy have been as roundly condemned from this perspective as Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. Virtually from the outset of Kierkegaard's 20th century reception this work has drawn repeated accusations of acosmism, abstract indifference to persons in their concrete specificity, and an apparently callous indifference to worldly inequality and suffering. In a typically

Kierkegaardian irony, a string of influential critics such as Theodore Adorno<sup>2</sup> and K. E. Løgstrup<sup>3</sup> have found this book about “love” to be Kierkegaard at his most otherworldly, inhuman, patronising, austere and isolationist.

The defense of Kierkegaard against these charges has been sustained, compelling and sophisticated. One of the most significant developments in Kierkegaard Studies in recent years has been an increased focus on the specifically visual and perceptual aspects of Kierkegaard’s moral psychology. Commentators such as M. Jamie Ferreira<sup>4</sup> and Arne Grøn<sup>5</sup> have discerned a central role for perception in Kierkegaard’s phenomenology of moral experience, one that connects Kierkegaard to more recent moral perceptualists such as Iris Murdoch.<sup>6</sup> Moral perception plays a particularly central role in *Works of Love*, where it is precisely the contrast between adequate and delinquent *ways of seeing the other* that constitutes the success of moral agency itself. Such an approach to this text has proven useful in refuting the criticisms levelled against it. By emphasising the role of vision, Ferreira has shown that Kierkegaard’s dialectic of seeing and blindness is ultimately directed to allowing moral agents to see the other *correctly*; that is, to see the other as a specific and individual moral patient but shorn of the myriad distractions posed by morally irrelevant differences.

Yet the claim that Kierkegaard develops an inhumanly abstract ethics that efface the other in their concrete individuality is a curiously persistent one. As Sylvia Walsh rightly observes, the charge of acosmism against Kierkegaard, like other oft-laid accusations of subjectivism and irrationalism, seems to recur periodically no matter how frequently or compellingly it is refuted.<sup>7</sup> Though Walsh may contend that the objections raised by Adorno and Buber<sup>8</sup> in particular have received more attention than they deserve,<sup>9</sup> nonetheless they do seem to resonate with many of *Works of Love*’s readers. That this is so, and that the “myths” about *Works of Love* that Ferreira seeks to dispel nevertheless retain their currency, suggests, as Ferreira admits, that there is definitely *something* in the text that engenders such responses.<sup>10</sup>

Part of what critics like Adorno and Løgstrup<sup>11</sup> are responding to is the sense that the ethics of *Works of Love*, which directs vision to the curiously vacant concept of “the neighbor” (*den Næste*) reduces the actual selves we encounter to contentless ‘vehicles’ or occasions for the apprehension and enactment of normative demands. It is perhaps not generally noted in discussions of these criticisms that in this, *Works of Love* is not alone. In several places, Kierkegaard discusses persons as disclosing moral demands in ways that seem to draw attention away from the specific other and towards the ethical demands placed on the agent (and,

concurrently, the agent's moral status itself). By reducing concrete others to sites of disclosure of ethical tasks in this way, Kierkegaard makes his ethics susceptible to the charge of failure to attend to the other's alterity and unique, irreducible particularity. Hence a specific problem common to (at least) *Works of Love*, *For Self-Examination* and *Practice in Christianity* emerges: How can I see the other as disclosing a normative moral demand and *at the same time* see them as an irreducibly individual other? And how can I see my own moral status, as disclosed by the ethical demand, and *still* see the other? How does the Kierkegaardian account avoid a turning away from the other (seen as person in need or moral exemplar) to address the moral challenge they pose? Whilst the distinctions between these problems must be kept clear, we may speak of a general "problem of indifference to the concrete other" across Kierkegaard's signed and pseudonymous works as encompassing these discrete questions. The claimed shortcomings of the ethics of *Works of Love* can thus be seen as a subset of this broader problem.

If perceptualist (or at least vision-centred) responses are successfully to answer the charges laid against *Works of Love*, it will need to be shown that Kierkegaard's model of vision can supply the simultaneity required here. A specific phenomenology of vision must be provided that makes possible the apprehension of the concrete other simultaneously with a self-regarding apprehension of one's own moral responsibilities and culpabilities. The task of this paper is to supply such an account. In what follows, I will outline specific loci of the charge of indifference to the concrete other (including but not limited to the familiar examples in *Works of Love*). I will then consider the replies that have been given to this charge, and show that these require something more in order to succeed: namely, a self-reflexive model of vision. Such a model is indeed to be found by considering other sources in the Kierkegaardian corpus, where this claimed simultaneity and self-reflexiveness play key roles in the Climacan and Anti-Climacan accounts of vision and imagination. I also gesture toward ways in which this model is implicit in our experience of a class of natural and moral evils, such as genocide and famine, where both individual suffering and the scale on which such suffering occurs are essential to comprehension of the evil, neither element reducible to the other.

## 2. Selves as mirrors and exemplars

The capacity of other persons to reveal or disclose moral demands to us is a theme which permeates Kierkegaard's entire authorship. A particularly

striking example of this is to be found in Kierkegaard's (non-pseudonymous) discussion of the correct approach to reading Scripture in *For Self-Examination* (an account that would also seem to apply to any text, religious or not, that imparts some moral content). The experience of reading Scripture is, for Kierkegaard, an immediately self-reflexive one in which one 'sees' oneself in the figurative "Mirror of the Word" (FSE, 7–51),<sup>12</sup> in which moral agents see their own condition reflected to them in conceptual content which ostensibly does not include them. Seeing oneself in Scripture is essentially a matter of seeing the text as addressing the reader personally and directly (FSE, 35), a process that centrally involves identifying with the characters found in Scriptural narratives.

It is this identification that King David fails when the prophet Nathan relates a parable to him, forcing Nathan to articulate the essential point of the narrative: "Thou art the man" (FSE, 38). The purpose of the parable is to disclose David's guilt to himself through a self-reflexive engagement with the narrative, one that takes the form of seeing oneself *as* the guilty man described. In the same way, Kierkegaard re-tells the Good Samaritan parable and claims we are to understand that the Priest and the "practical" man who pass by the injured man without helping *is us* (FSE, 40–41). We are to *see* our co-identity with the person presented in the story in a way that immediately addresses itself to *our* moral condition, not theirs.

Yet this identification with the characters presented in Scripture seems to efface the other as other, by removing their alterity and individuality from our apprehension of them. In effect, when we look at these others, we see ourselves in a new evaluative light; yet in seeing ourselves it would appear we no longer see the other or attend to their concrete specificity. Moreover, what is presented in the parable leads to an *immediate* departure from the narrative and its inhabitants to the real-world moral context of the listener: "Then when the parable ends and Christ says to the Pharisee, "Go and do likewise", you shall say to yourself, "It is I to whom this is addressed-away at once!" (FSE, 41). Insofar as the other is immediately transfigured into an imperative for moral action, our concern for *this* other is immediately converted into a concern for our own moral condition.

This need not bother us unduly in that the characters in parables (if "characters" is not too generous a term for such largely schematic figures) are presented as being *simply* vehicles for delivering a moral teaching in a relatively non-didactic manner. Obviously, we have no direct ethical responsibilities towards fictional characters, whatever moral imperatives they might disclose as being operative upon us. This point holds across the spectrum of literary depth and sophistication. The normative

imperatives I may discern while reading a novel or watching a play clearly don't extend to a duty to help the fictional characters themselves, however well-rendered their personalities and situational context may be. Rather, when we find our moral attention captivated by fictional persons, "our cognitive relations to such fictions is [...] that our 'aesthetic' emotions are not founded on belief, but on the entertaining of propositions unasserted."<sup>13</sup> The situation is complicated, however, when we move from Kierkegaard's discussion of the reading of Scripture in *For Self-Examination* to his account of admiration in *Practice in Christianity*. In this work, the pseudonym Anti-Climacus tells us that admiration of another is radically different from *imitation* of another; whereas imitation is the actualization of the demand the exemplar embodies, admiration is a mode of detachment designed to hold the moral requirement at bay:

What, then, is the difference between an admirer and an imitator? An imitator *is* or *strives to be* what he admires, and an admirer keeps himself personally detached, consciously or unconsciously does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired. (PC, 241)

Except where circumstances beyond my control make it impossible for me to try to emulate the object of my admiration- for instance, if I admire the good fortune or natural talents or beauty of another (PC, 241) – that which I admire makes a claim on me, a claim that I am to try to resemble it. If I admire an ethical exemplar, then insofar as the ethical is the universally human, the exemplar exercises a claim upon me: "I am to resemble him and *immediately begin* my effort to resemble him" (PC, 242, emphasis added).

So understood, my admiration for a person whose life is a model of moral goodness is actually a strategy for *evading* the responsibility conferred by their example, "a cunning that seeks evasion and excuse" (PC, 242). The admirer never goes beyond the mere spectator relation of a theatre-goer to the action of a play (PC, 244). Yet, we might reply to Anti-Climacus, at least the admirer is still contemplating the person they admire. When we move from admiration to imitation, it appears that the admired one is lost from view altogether as we focus on our own tasks and moral condition:

I promptly begin to think about myself, *simply and solely* to think about myself. When I am aware of the other person, this unselfish, magnanimous person, I promptly begin to say to myself: Are you such as he is? I forget him completely in my self-concentration. (PC, 242 emphasis added)

This sounds very much as if Anti-Climacus is claiming that the demand given in the exemplar causes the self to ignore the exemplar and concentrate on itself. The “other person vanishes more and more as he is assimilated into me” (PC 242–243). Anti-Climacus qualifies the language of “forgetting” the admired one by claiming they are not so much forgotten as transfigured into an ideal to be actualized, “a requirement upon my life, like a sting in my soul that propels me forward” (PC, 242). As such, they remain imaginatively present, but transfigured entirely into the mode of ideal requirement, not concrete person. Whilst Anti-Climacus does not seem to regard this account as exhaustive of the manners in which we can engage with others, with respect to exemplars at least we do seem to be faced with a curious dichotomy here: Either we see the other in their otherness (and thus risk failing to carry out the ethical demand they disclose), or we immediately depart from considering their concrete actuality and focus on our own condition. In short, it appears we cannot regard the other for more than a moment before we must “forget him in my self-concentration.” To anticipate somewhat, what we need here in order to escape this bind is an account of vision which explains how we can *simultaneously* apprehend the other *and* consider the judgments of our own moral status they represent. We need a mode of vision that is at the same time self-reflexive and other-regarding. Before considering how certain features of Kierkegaard’s phenomenology of vision can help us out of this difficulty, we will consider the charge of indifference levelled against *Works of Love* in light of this broader accusation that Kierkegaardian moral vision effaces the other in their otherness.

### 3. Seeing the neighbor

This charge of insufficient attention to the individual as a concrete, specific, particular being is, on the surface, particularly easy to level against *Works of Love*. Since Adorno, this work, built around the Scriptural injunction to love the neighbor (Matthew 22:39) has been accused, by virtue of its insistence upon loving the neighbor *qua* neighbor without regard to their concrete particularity, of directing its concern to the purely formal category of “neighbor” (*næste*) rather than actual persons. In response to the scriptural question “Who, then, is one’s neighbor?” Kierkegaard offers an account that seems to hollow out the neighbor completely:

The concept “neighbor” is actually the redoubling of your own self; the “neighbor” is what thinkers call “the other”, that by which the

selfishness of self-love is to be tested. As far as thought is concerned, the neighbor does not even need to exist. If someone living on a desert island mentally conformed to this commandment, by renouncing self-love he could be said to love the neighbor. (WL, 21)

This claim that the ethics of the “Royal Law” can be satisfied without achieving any relation at all to an actual other person has seemed troubling to some commentators. Peter George provides an instructive example of such an objection to Kierkegaard’s “second ethics”, holding that the “ethics” of *Works of Love* are actually profoundly anti-social.<sup>14</sup> George claims that, in reducing all human relationships to the God-relationship (God becomes the object of love, and the neighbor and beloved are accordingly loved only *through* the loving of God); in decrying reciprocity and thus reducing relationships to one-sided affairs; and in describing the love of neighbor in a way that effaces the actuality of the other, Kierkegaard articulates an entirely inward-looking ethics on which genuine social relations cannot be built. As Løgstrup puts it, “Never before has ethics so shut itself in and so shut out the world as it has in Kierkegaard’s thought.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, *Works of Love*, perhaps more overtly than any other Kierkegaardian text, is concerned with the place of *vision* in our moral engagement with others. It decries certain ways-of-seeing<sup>16</sup> and insists on the normative value of other ways-of-seeing: “one sees the neighbor only with closed eyes, or by looking *away from* the dissimilarities. The sensate eyes always see the dissimilarities and look *at* the dissimilarities” (WL, 68). This emphasis on vision means we can add to the charge that the category of ‘neighbor’ effaces the other-as-other another possible objection: that in moral vision the other-as-actual-person is reduced by the self-concerned moral seer to a mere surface of emergence for a moral imperative. Hence, if Kierkegaard’s entire moral psychology is to be shown to be adequate to the experience of concern for others *as others*, rather than as bare loci of duty, we need to show that this psychology contains the resources for attending sufficiently to concrete persons.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard attempts to supply a corrective to forms of love, which, in aiming at an object of preference or inclination, essentially loves an “other-I”, and is therefore effectively self-love (WL, 53–54). All forms of preferential love, including *Elskov* (somewhat unhelpfully translated “erotic love” in the *Kierkegaard’s Writings* series) being grounded in preference, turn out upon examination to be fundamentally selfish. Thus far at least, Kierkegaard seems to be pointing to the discriminatory aspect of these preference-driven forms of love, arguing instead for an ethic built, as Ferreira notes, on a type of willing blindness

to the concrete differences and distinctiveness of individuals.<sup>17</sup> All persons are subsumed under the rubric of *den næste*, which is a category of pure duty (the duty to love). Kierkegaard does allow that we can *have* a beloved or a friend, but such a relation must be secondary and subordinate to the duty-directed neighbor love: “Your wife must first and foremost be to you the neighbor; that she is your wife is then a more precise specification of your particular relationship to each other” (WL, 141). Yet the lack of personal content essential to the concept of *den næste*, which “is like the category ‘human being’” (WL, 141), seems to foreclose whatever could be considered essential to “preferential” love.

Some of the more extreme claims in *Works of Love* that critics such as George alight on can be dismissed relatively easily. One alone on a desert island can conform to the Royal Law “as far as thought is concerned” (WL, 21) – yet this threshold case is so far removed from everyday moral experience as to have no real bearing on the experience of actual humans.<sup>18</sup> Pia Søltoft notes that many readings of this passage that accuse Kierkegaard of acosmism miss the obvious fact that the object of the passage is the *concept* of the neighbor, not actual persons, and that “to love one’s neighbor in fact requires that there be at least *one* other person present to the self.”<sup>19</sup> The passage is concerned with what *thought* requires in order to conform to the Royal Law, not what is required to practice it *actually*.<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard claims one of the purest works of love<sup>21</sup> is that of remembering one who is dead (WL, 345–358). This work is the “most unselfish” (WL, 349) because “one who is dead makes no repayment” (WL, 350) and so there can be no possibility of reciprocity between lover and object of love. Here, the duty to love is apparently discharged not towards a concrete other but a non-being. Yet the notion of a moral duty to the dead is intuitively accepted in everyday moral life. Our concern for the dead-respecting their corpses, honouring their memory, keeping promises made to them while alive- does treat the *person* who has died as the object of this moral concern, despite their no longer existing.<sup>22</sup>

In other respects, however, it is difficult to exonerate Kierkegaard completely of the charge of blindness to the other in their concrete particularity. Ferreira notes that even those commentators who hold that the abstraction implicit in the category of “neighbor” successfully co-exists in *Works of Love* with emphases on distinctiveness and difference fail to account for how these might be compatible.<sup>23</sup> Ferreira attempts to show that the compatibility consists in these rival emphases belonging to two different contexts: a context of “law,” characterised by a purely formal analysis (a statement of the law) and “love,” to which is proper a material analysis (a description of love).<sup>24</sup> The ‘blindness’ to morally irrelevant distinctions actually emerges as a clearing away of those factors that, by



distracting us, *themselves* make us blind to the other in their concrete, morally compelling actuality.<sup>25</sup> Grøn makes a similar case with his emphasis on *Works of Love*'s insistence on "ways of seeing" that variously disclose or obscure the distinctiveness of the other;<sup>26</sup> nor are we to substitute the actual other for "*an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person should be*" (WL, 164 original emphases). We are to become blind to those differentiating factors that obscure our essential kinship with the other – "Law" serves to direct our loving attention to all through the catch-all category of the Neighbor, but our duty remains specifically to love the people *we see* (WL, 154–174). As Ferreira puts it, "Even if the call on us by all is equal in principle, our duty is to respond to need as manifested in our actuality."<sup>27</sup>

Ferreira makes a sound textual and exegetical case and her divisions into two contexts can comfortably be accepted. However, on the level of moral psychology this division into contexts does not tell us how the empty formalism of the normative category of *den næste* and attention to the other in their concrete particularity are to be held together. If *vision* is central to the moral psychology of *Works of Love* (as the text makes clear and as both Ferreira and Grøn emphasise), how are we to combine these disparate elements in a unified apprehension of the other that is adequate to their particularity as well as the ethical demand they disclose? How are we to *see* both the other in their concrete distinctiveness *and* the apparently abstract formal requirement to love the neighbor *qua* neighbor (purged of distracting specificities) without losing sight of one or the other or alternating diachronically between the two?

#### 4. Ideality and the concrete

To answer these questions we need to turn to the description of moral experience given in *The Sickness Unto Death*, in which Anti-Climacus ("author" of *Practice in Christianity*, with its critique of ethically impotent admiration) develops a phenomenology of moral imagination with significant implications for the present discussion. *The Sickness Unto Death* is an exploration of the psychological phenomenon of 'despair' (*fortvivelse* – etymologically, intensified doubt). For Anti-Climacus the self is properly a "synthesis" of diametrically opposed finite and infinite qualifications (SUD, 13). The 'stuff' of selfhood is expressed as a set of binary oppositions – temporal and eternal, possibility and necessity, mental and physical etc – which resist mediation. This duplex nature allows the self to enter a state of despair by immersing itself in the infinite categories at the expense of the finite, or vice versa. The former case is the

“despair of infinitization” in which the self loses itself in the infinite such that its experience is disconnected from the finite world the self inhabits. Such a despair expresses itself in the self’s “feeling, knowing and willing” (SUD, 31), with symptoms appropriate to each. Infinitized *knowing* is absorption in knowledge which does not relate to the knower’s concrete context, under which conditions “the more knowledge increases, the more it becomes a kind of inhuman knowledge, in the obtaining of which a person’s self is squandered” (SUD, 31). Infinitized *willing* is decision which never translates into action or find expression in concrete behavior; just as infinitized knowing “squanders” the self’s epistemic capacities, infinitized willing wastes the self-actualizing power of agency.

It is the third expression of infinitized despair, infinitized *feeling*, that is particularly relevant in the present context. Anti-Climacus chooses to explicate this form of despair by describing it in terms of a person whose emotional identification with others amounts to no more than “abstract sentimentality”. The self whose feeling has become fantastic feels a form of pity, which is essentially meaningless, in that it has no real object:

When feeling becomes fantastic in this way, the self becomes only more and more volatilized and finally comes to be a kind of abstract sentimentality that inhumanly belongs to no human but inhumanly combines sentimentality, as it were, with some abstract fate – for example, humanity *in abstracto*. (SUD, 31)

This is a self whose object of sympathy or emotional identification essentially does not exist. Someone who is emotionally concerned by the plight of people who exist for the sympathizer merely as part of some overarching, amorphous abstraction – for instance, “the poor,” “the proletariat,” “the oppressed” – does not, on Anti-Climacus’ view, actually pity anyone. Their pity is not directed at *persons*, we might say, but only at the *idea* of persons. And this looks very close to *den næste*, which the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love* does equate explicitly with the category of the “human being”:

The other human being, that is the neighbor who is the other human being in the sense that the other human being is every other human being. Understood in this way, the discourse was therefore right when it stated at the beginning that if a person loves the neighbor in one single other human being, he then loves all people. (WL, 58)

Note the similarity with Derrida’s formula *Tout autre est tout autre*, “Every other (one) is every (bit) other”; the individual other, in their

otherness, stands simultaneously for otherness as such and all individual others who participate in alterity.<sup>28</sup> Yet at least one actual, present human being is involved here. Anti-Climacian “abstract sentimentality” belongs to no human because it is not in fact a relation between humans (merely between a human and the idea of humans), and therefore stands in only a false relation to the lived experience of the sympathizer. It is not, despite appearances, a self’s relation to the moral situation they find themselves in at all. *Works of Love* seems to make the same point when it decries the “wasting” of love on the unseen (WL, 163). Ferreira notes the congruency here with Richard Rorty’s rejection of the notion of a sympathetic identification with “humanity in general”<sup>29</sup> – if we are to experience genuine empathy it must be with beings who, whether actually present or merely envisaged, exist on the level of concrete particularity. We cannot truly identify with abstract groups, only with individuals. When we are swept up with this sort of ‘universal pity’ we are in fact feeling sorry for no-one, or at least, no-one actual.<sup>30</sup>

Genuine sympathy, then, must be found in a concern for actual persons, not merely the idea of persons. Yet if the ideal needs the concrete for authentic moral concern to be possible, the concrete too needs the ideal. A true comprehension of certain evils requires me to understand the full scope of that evil across all its sufferers, not merely individual instances of it. This is why the evil of genocide is more than the sum of however large a number of individual racially, ethnically or sectarian motivated murders. As is all too familiar, we often lapse into a dehumanising mode of speaking about genocide in which the concrete suffering of actual humans is abstracted into large numbers that seem ‘meaningless’ to us. The suffering of individuals demands our attention if we are genuinely to *understand* what is done when such crimes are committed. But equally, the scope of the crime is also part of its qualitative evil, because the attempted destruction of an entire race is an evil over and above mass-murder; yet this is not to say that the perpetrator commits the separable crimes of mass murder *and* genocide.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the *individual* is essentially a victim of genocide; it is not the case that they are merely murdered while the *sum* of such victims instantiates the further crime of genocide. Hence in some instances at least, morally salient facts are only revealed by a consideration that simultaneously keeps sight of both the suffering of the individual I see before me and the broader scale of the problem. This is, at least in part, why the use of the term “genocide” has been so fraught in discussions of events as long ago as the 1915–17 Armenian massacres or as current as the Darfur conflict. Even where the number of dead or the racial nature of the crimes is not in dispute, the attribution of genocidal intent transfigures a sum of hate crimes into a qualitatively new evil that

supervenes upon the existing moral facts. This point can be seen more clearly when a natural evil is compounded by a moral one. If I look at, say, a person dying of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, can I coherently accuse the developed world of callous indifference to *one* such sufferer in the way I can accuse it of indifference to *millions* of like sufferers? Scale here seems to be part of the moral evil itself, not a fact over and above the sum of individual suffering, though the evil still inheres precisely in what is being done to individuals, not masses of individuals.

This holding together of the individual and the abstraction in which they are subsumed such that neither is lost sight of is a key feature of Anti-Climacus' account of the correct operation of moral imagination. In his discussion of infinitized willing, for instance, it is made clear that the simultaneity of the posited moral ideal (apprehended imaginatively) and the concrete present is necessary for non-despairing moral cognition. To avoid despair, the self must:

continually become proportionately as concrete as it is abstract, so that the more infinite it becomes in purpose and determination, the more personally present and contemporary it becomes in the small part of the task that can be carried out at once, so that in being infinitised it comes back to itself in the most rigorous sense, so that when furthest away from itself (when it is most infinite in purpose and determination), it is simultaneously and personally closest to carrying out the infinitely small part of the work that can be accomplished this very day, this very hour, this very moment. (SUD, 32)

This simultaneity of ideal and actual in moral imagination amounts to a form of vision in which the object of moral vision is seen as a *task* (Danish *en opgave*, with etymological overtones of 'given'), a possibility, which "is related to the self as a morally binding authority."<sup>32</sup> Seen *as* task, the other retains their concrete specificity but at the same time is seen in relation to a posited ideal. In our apprehension of the other, the actual person before us is *unified* in our vision with the ideal claims they make upon us, neither element dissolving or collapsing into the other. The other presents themselves to me immediately as making claims upon me, not in such a way that the other is obscured by these claims, but appears in their moral fullness. This holds even where the other is an ethical exemplar rather than (or in addition to being) a moral patient. The life of Gandhi can become a prototype for me without my thereby losing sight of Gandhi himself in his human particularity and individual preciousness.

Importantly, the Anti-Climacian account contains no suggestion that such vision, which combines the concrete and the ideal, is diachronic in

character. The moments of apprehending the concrete and the ideal are not temporally separable, as if our attention was to alternate between one and the other. Rather, the ideal and the concrete are contained in a unified apprehension, analogous to Wittgenstein's description of what happens when we recognize an object:

605. And it is not so much as if I were comparing the object with a picture set beside it, but as if the object *coincided* with the picture. *So I see only one thing, not two.*<sup>33</sup>

It is only in light of this capacity of vision to transfigure the other-as-other morally that the emphasis on seeing the other *correctly*, in *Works of Love* and Kierkegaard's discourses on love's capacity to "hide a multitude of sins" makes sense. When my vision is transfigured by the command to love, my vision is reconstituted such that *what* I see will be different to what I saw when I looked unlovingly, seeking for faults or something to condemn.<sup>34</sup> In this Kierkegaard would agree with Murdoch's description of just "attention" to the other: Seen anew in a loving light, the other "is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on." Yet the other's "outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters."<sup>35</sup> The dialectic of *seeing-as* depends upon our capacity to see the concrete and the ideal unified in the one apprehension.

### 5. Self-referentiality and the other

This discussion of the Anti-Climacan model of vision and imagination has shown that the Kierkegaardian corpus can supply a compelling account of how it is we can simultaneously see the other in their irreducible specificity and perceive the moral demand they constitute. Put another way, we apprehend the other as a concrete being *seen in the light of* a moral ideal. But even if we concede this point, we have only disposed of half of the problem. For we don't just need to show that the ideal and the actual are to be seen together; we must also consider how I am to see the other-as-other and *my moral status* in the same moment.

As noted above, the discussion of exemplars in *Practice in Christianity* implies that, when the moral demand constituted by the other is apprehended, my attention shifts from the other to my own moral status: "I promptly begin to think about myself, simply and solely to think about myself [...] I forget him completely in my self-concentration" (PC, 242).

Thus while both the moral patient and the moral exemplar are both apprehended under the aspect of *task*, in the latter case at least, it seems my attention *turns* from the other to my own moral condition. This other is reduced to a ghostly “sting in my soul”; such reality as they have for me is absorbed into my concern for my own moral status (“Am I such as he is?”). Yet this is also a problem in the case of others who appear to me as tasks not because they are examples to follow, but because they require my assistance. An apprehension of the suffering other which does not turn to my own responsibility to the suffering person would be morally impotent – the agent would be, in some sense, suspended in pity in a manner directly analogous to the “admiring one” who never proceeds to emulation. So having posited a mode of vision in which the other is seen both as other and as moral demand (thus explaining how we are to see the neighbor as neighbor and as individual) we also need to account for how I can direct my attention to the other *and* to my own moral condition as revealed by the responsibility the other represents.

I have articulated this problem largely in terms of one of the Anti-Climacan writings (*Practice in Christianity*), and the answer is to be found in Anti-Climacus as well. As noted above, the Anti-Climacan ontology of self sees the self as a synthesis of diametrically opposed elements. But this is only part of the story:

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. (SUD, 13)

What qualifies the “relation between two” as self is that this relation “relates to itself”:

The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself (SUD, 13)

The ‘relation’ between disparate elements, which constitutes the human being only attains selfhood by relating itself to itself. In other words, selfhood only arises when the process of relating the concrete and ideal, physical and mental, sensuous and abstract, finite and infinite becomes self-reflexive. This sounds as if the relation is itself the object of reflection, but if this interpretation is allowed, it entails an episodic self that only exists in moments where the self is reflecting consciously upon itself. The human being would only become a self in those moments when it is actively thinking about *itself*; and barring some inhuman feat of

self-absorption, such a self would only exist for a relatively short time. Whilst Anti-Climacus does hold that the self is something to be achieved, and which can easily be lost (“The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all” – SUD, 33). But the idea of a self that exists only when it focuses its attention explicitly on itself is antithetical to the notion of a self that holds the concrete and ideal together in vision precisely in order to act in the world.

Therefore, the self-relation, which constitutes selfhood, cannot be itself an act of reflection, but must be non-reflective. Like Sartre’s concept of “non-thetic” consciousness, self-reflexivity must be “an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the relation of the self to itself is not a conscious *thought*, but is rather implicitly present *in* thought. Thought is self-referential without the self thereby being part of the *content* of thought. This self-referentiality is a central feature of consciousness as it is described in Kierkegaard’s only extended discussion of the structure of consciousness, the unfinished and unpublished *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, where it is expressed in the definition of consciousness as “interest”:

Reflection is the possibility of the relation. This can also be stated as follows: Reflection is *disinterested*. Consciousness, however, is the relation and thereby is interest, a duality that is perfectly and with pregnant double meaning expressed in the word “interest” (*interesse* [being between]). (JC, 170)

Having previously defined reflection as the ‘collision’ between the ideal and the actual, Climacus here introduces consciousness as the ‘actuality’ of reflection and further qualifies consciousness as “interest”, as the *self*-relation of the relationship between ideality and actuality. Such self-reflexivity supervenes upon the relation of the ideal and actual, and hence cannot *itself* be the object of consciousness. This structure, which is an analogue of the structure of the self in *The Sickness Unto Death*, makes self-relation something that attends consciousness without thereby becoming the intentional content of consciousness.

And this is crucial in the present context, for if I am to avoid the “effacement” of the other warned of above, the moral evaluation of myself which I apprehend in seeing the other must not constitute the objective *content* of my seeing the other. My involvement in the moral demand contained in the figure of the other – and its attendant judgement upon me – must remain part of the non-thetic background of my vision. I must see the other but apprehend my guilt and/or responsibility without thinking *about* it. Put another way, where moral vision is operating

correctly I will not move *diachronically* from a contemplation of the self, text, or exemplar before me to an awareness of what *I* must do. Rather, the perception of the other and the non-thematised apprehension of my responsibility to the other's *claim on me* (as object of need or example of how to act) will be built into the one cognition. If the apprehension of the other and of my relation to the moral demand they disclose were contained in two temporally separable moments, then "repentance must become an object to itself, inasmuch as the moment of repentance becomes a deficit of action" (CA, 117–118). This temporal failure is indeed an inevitable factor in human moral experience, according to Kierkegaard – the temporal structure of moral existence itself exponentially compounds guilt, causing the self to "flee to faith in grace" (*Pap. IX A 153, n.d.* 1848) – but the *telos* is no less real for being finally unattainable.

In the case of sympathy with the other, the self-referentiality picked out by "interest" is crucial to an understanding of what is morally at issue in such apprehensions. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, "Vigilius Haufniensis" claims explicitly that sympathy (which, as Ferreira notes in relation to Humean moral psychology, is closely related to imagination)<sup>37</sup> must contain within it a form of self-referentiality if it is to operate in a fully ethical way:

Only when the sympathetic person in his compassion relates himself to the sufferer in such a way that he in the strictest sense understands that it is his own case that is in question [...] only then does the sympathy acquire significance, and only then does it perhaps find a meaning (CA, 120)

The "meaning" and "significance" here are explicitly ethical ones: the fullness of compassion requires a self-reflexivity for it to attain moral significance. Without this self-concern, sympathy becomes "a means of protecting one's own egotism" (CA, 120), a stratagem for keeping the other's suffering (which is only contingently not *my* suffering) at bay. A full understanding of the other's suffering requires my sympathetic identification with it ("there but for the grace of God go I" etc.) but if this is to remain attention to the other, and not turn in on itself to become a concern for my own welfare (or turn the other into "another-I"), this self-reflexivity cannot be allowed to become the *object* of cognition. The non-thetic nature of "interest" allows for the self-reflexivity necessary for sympathy while maintaining sympathy's status as a concern for the other rather than for ourselves.



## 6. Conclusion

The foregoing has argued that the “problem of indifference to the concrete other” across Kierkegaard’s texts requires for its solution a mode of self-referential vision. It has further been shown that such self-reflexivity is, indeed, to be found in Kierkegaard; it is prefigured in the structure of consciousness found in *Johannes Climacus* and is central to the Anti-Climacan view of moral vision and selfhood.

Such a conclusion may be controversial for two methodological reasons, which can only be superficially dealt with here. First, it may be taken to violate the prevailing Kierkegaardian orthodoxy regarding pseudonymity. In their effort to move away from the “blunt reading” of early Kierkegaard reception, commentators have taken pains to avoid conflating the deliberately polyvocal, multi-perspectival content of the authorship(s) into a single “Kierkegaardian” viewpoint. Fidelity to Kierkegaard’s texts require scrupulous attention to pseudonymity, and distortions from lack of such attention are all too easy to fall into. Yet this should not cause us to lose sight of important structural and thematic commonalities that cut across signed and pseudonymous texts. Some potentially valuable philosophical insights only emerge when we look to what is common across texts. Thus the evident contempt of commentators such as Roger Poole for those who “are determined to talk ‘philosophy’ with ‘Kierkegaard,’ whichever one of the strange many-coloured costumes he may choose to turn up in”<sup>38</sup> can blind us to useful ways in which we can *do* philosophy with Kierkegaard.

Second, it may be objected that while Kierkegaard’s moral psychology might *require* self-reflexivity to succeed, and may even assert it, this does not demonstrate its existence. Kierkegaard’s rich (and theoretically structured) descriptions of human experience are always susceptible to the charge that things simply aren’t as he describes them. Our purpose here is to show the internal plausibility of Kierkegaard’s moral psychology. Whether his phenomenology is adequate to our moral experience is another matter, one requiring a very different defense.

What the arguments above do show is that Kierkegaard’s account of moral vision is capable of overcoming charges that it effaces the other, whether the effacement is said to consist in privileging categories like *den næste* which appear to exclude concrete differences, in reducing the other to a cipher of moral duty, or in ignoring the other in our moral self-concern. “Interest” emerges as a crucial element in securing this proper attention to the other as other, by virtue of both the self-referentiality it insinuates into the combination of concrete and ideal in vision, and its non-thetic character. Taken together, these allow us to see the other in

their concrete specificity whilst simultaneously attending to the formal, ideal moral requirements they place upon us. Kierkegaard (and not just the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love*) is thus exonerated, and in the process, a compelling – if challenging – perceptualist redescription of moral cognition is brought into view.

## Notes

1. Sharpe, Matthew, “On The Dumb Sublimity of Law: A Critique of The Post-Structuralist Orientation Towards Ethics”, *Minerva: An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 7 (2003): 25.
2. Adorno, Theodore W, “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* VIII (1939): 418–419.
3. Løgstrup, K.E. *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968).
4. Vision is a recurring theme in Ferreira’s readings of Kierkegaard and is discussed in many places, but see especially *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); “Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard’s *Work’s of Love*, in *Kierkegaard Revisited Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, Vol. 1, eds N. J. Cappelørn and J. Stewart (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 206–222; and *Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) throughout, but especially pp. 50–52 and 99–116.
5. Grøn, Arne “The Dialectic of Vision in *Works of Love*”, in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, eds. N. J. Cappelørn and H. Deuser (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998).
6. For a discussion of the role of perception in Murdoch, see, e.g. Lita, Ana “‘Seeing’ Human Goodness: Iris Murdoch on Moral Virtue” *Minerva – An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 7 (2003): 143–172.
7. Walsh, Sylvia, “Other-Worldliness in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*: A Response” *Philosophical Investigations* 22(1) (January 1999): 80.
8. Buber, Martin, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1936).
9. Walsh, “Other-Worldliness in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*: A Response,” p. 80.
10. Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, p. 7.
11. Løgstrup, K.E., *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968).
12. The *Kierkegaard’s Writings* series will be referred to according to the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* system of abbreviations and format (Title, Volume: Page Number) and appear in this paper in the following order:  
 FSE *For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!* trans. H.V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).  
 PC *Practice in Christianity* trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991)  
 WL *Works of Love* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995)

- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980)
- JC *Philosophical Fragments* and “Johannes Climacus”, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press Princeton University Press, 1985)
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety* trans. R. Thomte and A.B. Anderson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980)
13. Furtak, Rick Anthony, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 58.
  14. George, Peter, “Something Anti-Social About *Works of Love*,” in *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, eds George Pattison and Stephen Shakespeare (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 70–81.
  15. Løgstrup, K. E., *Opgør med Kierkegaard* p. 63. The translation is Marilyn Piety’s as given in her translation of Pia Søtoft. Søtoft, Pia “The Presence of the Absent Neighbor in *Works of Love*”, trans. M.G. Piety, in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, eds N. J. Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), p. 114.
  16. The term is used in this context by Grøn. See Grøn, Arne “The Dialectic of Vision in *Works of Love*”, in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, eds N. J. Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), p. 148.
  17. Ferreira, M. Jamie, “Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard’s *Work’s of Love*,” p. 206.
  18. Kierkegaard does not seem to take particularly seriously the prospect that there *could* be a person who has never encountered another person. Kierkegaard has an apparent blind spot for threshold cases – for instance, his claim that we ultimately can neither help nor harm another spiritually seems susceptible to certain extreme, but plausible, counterexamples. See Jackson, Timothy P., “Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 243.
  19. Søtoft, Pia, “The Presence of the Absent Neighbor in *Works of Love*,” p. 117.
  20. Søtoft, Pia, “The Presence of the Absent Neighbor in *Works of Love*,” p. 118.
  21. George interprets Kierkegaard as citing the recollection of the dead as being more than just an example of a particularly pure love, but rather “a criterion for how love should be.” George “Something Antisocial About Works of Love,” p. 79.
  22. Gaita, Raimond, *The Philosopher’s Dog* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2002), p. 92.
  23. Ferreira, “Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*,” p. 206.
  24. Ferreira, “Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*,” p. 212. Ferreira takes herself to be making a different contrast to other commentators who divide *Works of Love* into “Law” and “Gospel” (Kirmmse, Bruce *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 312. She also sees her distinction as cutting across the division of *Works of Love* into two series, unlike other commentators.
  25. Ferreira, “Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*,” pp. 214–215.

26. Grøn, Arne, "The Dialectic of Vision in *Works of Love*," p. 148.
27. Ferreira, "Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," p. 219.
28. Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 82–115.
29. Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 189–198.
30. Though both Kierkegaard and Rorty seem to hold that the category of "human being" is devoid of content and therefore inadequate to genuine moral attention to the other, the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love* would have to reject Rorty's assertion that we need to find imaginative points of similarity between ourselves and others in order to feel concern for them. Rorty claims that human solidarity, of the sort evidenced by, for instance, those who helped persecuted Jews flee the Nazis in the Second World War, is not grounded upon a sympathy for people "as fellow human beings" *per se*. Rather, it is our imaginative ability to identify with people as fellow-sufferers that makes solidarity possible. Rorty asserts that it is far easier to make this identification in the case of a person who we can envisage as belonging to some classification we make of ourselves- this person is a fellow-father, fellow-business-person, fellow-Belgian. The classification of 'fellow-human' doesn't seem to be strong enough to overcome the categories of otherness – e.g. "a Jew, unlike me". On Rorty's line, someone who holds a concern for humanity as such invests their altruism in something so altogether abstract and artificial that real empathy with real people would be impossible. Real empathy requires imaginative re-description in terms we can relate to. For Kierkegaard, however, the duty to love the neighbor transcends all points of similarity (which would lead to "preferential" love) or difference (which would blind us to our kinship with the other as a member of our moral community). For Kierkegaard, the abstract is not to be *replaced* by the content of concrete social relations, but rather the abstract is to find expression in our relation to the concrete persons we see. In that sense, the Kierkegaardian ethic is more immediately inclusive than the Rortian (which does seek full inclusivity but as the end-state of an increasingly broad process of imaginary identification) and better able to explain the fact that many of those who *did* help Jews escape Nazi persecution reported that they did so precisely because the Jews *were* human beings, not because they saw any closer identification. See Cordner, Christopher *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 76–79.
31. For a useful discussion of the evil of genocide (and the claim that the Holocaust represents a new evil qualitatively greater than even genocide), see Gaita, Raimond, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love & Truth & Justice* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), pp. 131–155.
32. Elrod, John W., *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 57.
33. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (Revised German-English edition) trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1953), p. 157e. Final emphasis added.
34. Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p.105.
35. Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 17.
36. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958), p. xxix.

37. Ferreira, M. Jamie, "Hume and Imagination: Sympathy and "the Other," *International Philosophical Quarterly* V. XXXIV, 1:133 (March 1994); also *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 51.
38. Poole, Roger, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 64.