

# Kierkegaard and Feminism: A Paradoxical Friendship

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It is easy to label Søren Kierkegaard a typical nineteenth century misogynist. He often makes snide comments about woman's nature, mocking with utmost irony her "great abilities" and sneering at the possibility of her emancipation. He declares outright against the social and political equality of the sexes, even while asserting the inherent equality of all people before God. Given this, it is understandable that Kierkegaard leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many feminist readers; much of what he has to say about women is hard for a female philosopher to swallow. However, reading Kierkegaard as a straight misogynist is highly problematic. Due to the pseudonymous nature of most of his work, reading Kierkegaard incautiously can cause a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding.

The task a critical feminist reader of Kierkegaard undertakes is not an easy one: any attempt to sort Kierkegaard's voice from the playful voices of his various pseudonyms is complicated by obvious obstacles, but the rewards of such an effort may be well worth the trouble. The point of embarking on this project is at least two-fold: on the one hand, as historians of philosophy it is important to distinguish the truly patriarchal and misogynistic philosophers from those who may have been female-friendly (if not feminist); on the other hand, this task may help us to see if there is some benefit to be reaped from a feminist reading of Kierkegaard. Yet as feminists we may be able to reap a great many benefits from reading Kierkegaard critically even without fully uncovering his personal thoughts on women. The fact of the man's misogyny (or lack thereof) is perhaps less important to feminism than the various questions and challenges he posed to Western philosophy. Even though he often expressed a misogynistic attitude, Kierkegaard also took a hammer to the cold foundations of traditional Western philosophy; he opened up a space within philosophy for existentialism, and as a result of this space feminism has been able to develop.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, I will explore the complex relationship between Kierkegaard and feminism in the following paper.

To begin with, I will consider the complexities that arise for feminist interpretation as a result of the pseudonymous nature of Kierkegaard's works. Keeping these lessons in mind, I will investigate the negative aspects of Kierkegaard's relationship to feminism: the misogyny throughout his pseudonymous works. I will do so via a look at his first published work, a very short essay entitled "Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities," and by examining the disparaging manner in which women are depicted in his renowned novel *The Seducer's Diary* from *Either/Or*, as well as other offensive allusions to women throughout the Kierkegaardian canon in order to set up the challenge of Kierkegaard to feminism. Then, the focus of this paper will turn from the negative to the positive aspects for feminism in Kierkegaard's philosophy. His discussion of Mary and other female knights of faith throughout his work may prove to be female empowering; additionally, Kierkegaard's discussion of equality before God must be thoroughly investigated in order to see whether this might have some benefit to feminists today. By employing some of the essays in Léon and Walsh's anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, we can gain an idea

as to how Kierkegaard has been read by recent feminists in order to see what a feminist employment of Kierkegaard would look like. Following this discussion, I will explore the connection between Kierkegaard's existentialism and Simone de Beauvoir's existential ethics of ambiguity. From this investigation we can see how Kierkegaard may be of use to feminism in yet another way, and in ways that have yet to be disclosed.

## **Stumbling Through the Funhouse: The Complications of Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms to Feminist Interpretation**

Interpreting Kierkegaard is problematic due to the fact that he wrote with two hands: with his right hand he wrote as himself, and with his left he adopted a number of pseudonyms so that he could express himself indirectly through his aesthetic works. These various pseudonyms seriously complicate the matter of reaching a critical understanding as to what Kierkegaard himself believes: "The world of the pseudonyms is a world of stratagem and illusion, a world of trap doors and hidden panels, where one is never quite sure where one is or to whom one is listening. In this questionable territory the critic must proceed with great caution, for the persona he at one moment identifies with Kierkegaard may in the next turn out to be only the author's foil" (Thompson 1972, vi). As we attempt to journey through this Kierkegaardian funhouse, we must keep in mind that things are not always as they seem. Though it is easy to be duped by this great dramatic ironist, Kierkegaard would not have wanted for us to focus only on the theatrics once the curtain has come up: the whole scene, including the stage, the audience, and the theatre itself must be taken into account.

Hence, it is essential that we think of these pseudonyms as players in a drama Kierkegaard has created, and not hold the director or the playwright immediately responsible for the words of his characters:

The role of Kierkegaard is rather that of the stage director. He stages his pseudonyms, or rather altogether they make up the performance, the unfinished dialogue about the possibilities and impossibilities of human life. He was also himself a personal participant in – and spectator to – the existential crises or alienation of humanity. Kierkegaard was a dialectician and the confrontation still works: no two of us are today completely agreed about what he meant: we are still uncertain about what existence is – and that was precisely his intension. (Bertung 1997, 54)

It would be wrong to assume the pseudonyms express Kierkegaard's own thoughts, just as it would be wrong to assume that King Lear speaks for Shakespeare. He distanced himself from the pseudonyms to the extent that he even wrote reviews of his own pseudonymous works. In this way, he formulated the poststructural idea of a text as opposed to a book – in a text the author is irrelevant. Should it occur to someone to quote the text, Kierkegaard asked that they cite the pseudonym (Kierkegaard 1992, 627); Kierkegaard himself is merely the author of the authors. He uses the pseudonyms to express different views, different voices, but mostly to get people to move towards Christianity via indirect incitement.

Why does he need the pseudonyms? Why not speak to us directly? Because for Kierkegaard direct communication is "suited only for unimportant matters – grocery bills, logical truths, taxonomies. To talk about ourselves and what makes our lives ebb and flow (what Kierkegaard called 'the ethico-religious'), we must use language in a different way, letting metaphor replace literal sense, and ambiguity fertilize the private spaces of our imagination" (Thompson 1972, vii). The ambiguity of the human condition requires that we do not speak directly about it; Kierkegaard wrote pseudonymously because he believed the

nature of human consciousness to be itself ambiguous, and so indirect communication can actually be a more effective means of expression.

Along similar lines, there is another reason why Kierkegaard chose to write pseudonymously; Kierkegaard felt it is impossible to write a book about God and Christianity (the great paradox) directly, but to write a book and revoke it is not the same as allowing it to remain unwritten. It is written, and then it is erased by the pseudonym – that is better than never writing it at all. Through the use of the pseudonyms, his texts unsay what they have said, in order to keep what is said alive. The indirect discourse allows him to communicate with people without interfering with their God-relationship. He can push his readers, incite them, without laying any claim to the insights they may gain from the texts. This is important because the pseudonymous works are addressed to a world that conceives itself to already be Christian; the pseudonyms intend to clear away this illusion. Kierkegaard has to convert people to Christianity when they already think they are Christian, so he uses the left hand to do this.

Unlike the pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard does lay claim to the authorship of the *Upbuilding Discourses* and *Works of Love*; when referring to the confusion over the authorship of the pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard wrote:

My role is the joint of being the secretary and, quite ironically, the dialectically reduplicated author of the author or the authors. Therefore, although probably everyone who has been concerned at all about such things has until now *summarily* regarded me as the author of the pseudonymous books even before the explanation was at hand, the explanation will perhaps at first prompt the odd impression that I, who indeed ought to know it best, am the only one who only very doubtfully and equivocally regards me as the author, because I am the author in the figurative sense; but on the other hand I am very literally and directly the author of, for example, the upbuilding discourses and of every word in them. (Kierkegaard 1992, 627)

*Works of Love* is written in a different voice (or with a different hand) than the pseudonymous works. Expressed in *Works of Love* is the voice of a Christian writer, not a humorist, though it is written non-dogmatically. In this book, Kierkegaard does not use the humor or irony that are present in the pseudonymous works; the right hand straightforwardly expresses his own voice. He uses the right hand to write this sort of sermon, though he does not call it that – rather, he calls it an upbuilding (or edifying) work. These works of love are Christian deliberations; a deliberation is an awakening, a gadfly, a call to action. He wants these deliberations to touch our hearts and move us to Christian existential action.

However, the very notion of direct communication becomes hazy here. This is not just straight communication, because Kierkegaard is preoccupied with how he wants us to be touched by this discourse. It is not direct because he does not really want it to be: he wants to awaken love in the other, but in a selfless way. Only then can it actually be a work of love itself. A work of love preformed well is self-effacing. It is about God and the duty to the other, not about Kierkegaard. As Kierkegaard understands it, part of his duty to the other is to help them stand on their own, independent of him. So, Kierkegaard has to be somewhat indirect even in his direct works: the emphasis must be on God. Hence, though there is a rigorous difference between his Christian deliberations and his other, pseudonymous works, neither is entirely direct. Yet, it is safe to say *Works of Love* is written in Kierkegaard's own voice, the voice he lays claim to, and so is in fact more direct than his other texts in spite of his emphasis on his self-effacing duty to the neighbor.

Given all of this, what can a feminist reader of Kierkegaard take to be his own thoughts on women, and what should she dismiss as the irony or hyperbole of his pseudonyms? Can we take his view of women as it is presented in *Works of Love* to be his

honest thoughts on the matter, and reject all of the misogyny of the pseudonyms? And if we choose to do so, where does that leave us: can feminists even be satisfied with Kierkegaard's account of the male/female situation as it is given in *Works of Love*?

These questions demand of us another, perhaps more important question concerning a critical reading of Kierkegaard: as we strive to figure out what Kierkegaard really thought about women, to iron out his own implicit philosophy of women, we must ask ourselves if this is possible or even really desirable. There may be no way to uncover Kierkegaard's true thoughts regarding women, for the pseudonyms may cloud and confuse any firm understanding of this. But is there no point in a critically feminist reading of Kierkegaard other than to reveal the personal thoughts of the man? Perhaps it would be of more benefit to feminism not to read Kierkegaard in search of his own personal stance on the woman question, but rather to read him in an exploratory manner as one who has exposed new avenues of thought, new ways of examining the woman question. This may be the only way we can fairly read Kierkegaard; any attempt to unearth the "core" of his philosophy has been infinitely complicated by his modes of expression. And, as Thompson tells us, such an attempt may be futile:

There may be no 'core' of Kierkegaard's authorship to be 'penetrated.' Henriksen's metaphor suggests that the essential meaning of Kierkegaard's work still lies hidden, to be revealed by an as yet unidentified critical approach. But if the earlier discussion of duplicity and indirect communication is to be taken seriously, we may have to construct a new metaphor for talking about Kierkegaard. Instead of thinking of his authorship as having a *single* core of meaning, we might think of it as having (like a multifaceted jewel) many *different* meanings depending on the angle from which it is illuminated. (Thompson 1972, vii)

So, as we attempt to situate Kierkegaard within the feminist discourse in some way, either positively or negatively, what we are in fact doing is exploring these possible meanings, meanings that give birth to a plethora of constructive and deconstructive questions. Such questions are the vanguards of feminism, for they are motivators of feminist discourse and instigators of revolutionary thought.

In order to further explore these questions, let us now turn to an examination of Kierkegaard's picture of women as it is given throughout his indirect discourses. Though we must take caution to dance with the pseudonyms and not with Kierkegaard himself,<sup>2</sup> we must also consider seriously the possibility that Kierkegaard is not as distant from his pseudonyms as he would have us believe. Because Kierkegaard's relationship with the women of his text is riddled with ambiguity, we will be forced to draw our own conclusions as to how to read the indirect discourses on women so that we may attempt to gain insight into this enigmatic relationship.

## **Kierkegaard's Early Thoughts on Women**

Kierkegaard's first published piece came in the form of a terribly misogynistic essay, ironically titled "Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities." In this very short and satirical essay, Kierkegaard (using the pseudonym "A.") "paints exaggerated pictures of transformations that, in his opinion, are likely to occur in the wake of female liberation. He resorts to ridicule [...] and pokes fun at the woman presumptuous enough to cross the boundaries naturally allotted to her sex" (Léon 1997, 118-119). In part, Kierkegaard was responding in this essay to the uprising of women in France, which accompanied other revolutionary ideas of the time. His piece also came as a response to a similar piece written by a fellow student, Peter Lind, but Kierkegaard's essay demonstrates a far more cutting wit than that of Lind. And unlike Lind, Kierkegaard chose to publish this first essay

pseudonymously, which must not be ignored as we examine it; though it cannot be known for certain whether or not Kierkegaard meant what he said in this essay about women, the fact that he distanced himself from these misogynistic statements cannot be taken lightly. Still, he was the author of the pseudonym, and so he is connected to the essay indirectly. This means that his misogyny cannot be wholly dismissed.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym A. presents woman by way of irony as Western patriarchy has traditionally done: he mocks woman for her lack of philosophical inclination, her domestic nature, her nagging tendencies, and her supposed connection to nature. He does so in such a way that the naïve reader might actually believe that he is praising woman for these attributes, when in actuality he draws the stereotype of woman in such a negative light that no one would consider emancipating her.

History throughout the ages shows that woman's great abilities have at least in part been recognized. Hardly was man created before we find Eve already as audience at the snake's philosophical lectures, and we see that she mastered them with such ease that at once she could utilize the results of the same in her domestic practice. [...] Yet not all were thus torn from life in order to brood on more abstract subjects. A great majority sought rather to assert their competence in life. As speaker, woman has so great a talent that she has made history with her own special line: the so-called bed-hangings sermons, curtain lectures, etc., and Xanthippe is still remembered as a pattern of feminine eloquence and as founder of a school that has lasted to this very day, whereas Socrates' school has long since disappeared. Although Christianity was certainly hard on women by forbidding them to speak at meetings, it still allowed them an arena for their eloquence inside the home. And when the rabbis forbade them to put in their word, it was solely because they were afraid that the women would outshine them or expose their folly. In the Middle Ages, the countless witch trials sufficiently showed the deep insight woman had into the secrets of nature. (Kierkegaard 1978, 3)

Because this scathing presentation of women was Kierkegaard's first published piece, we may read it as his early thoughts on woman's liberation; however, the fact that he employed the pseudonym complicates this reading. Let us now look at some of his other pseudonymous works in order to gain a greater idea as to whether this thread of misogyny continues throughout his indirect discourses, and so that we might decide what this means for a feminist reading of Kierkegaard.

### **The Depiction of Women in *The Seducer's Diary*: Misogyny as a Means to Blacken the Breast**

*The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard's attempt to wean Regine Olsen from their relationship via indirect communication,<sup>3</sup> contains a great deal of misogynistic commentary on the nature of women. Behind the guise of numerous pseudonyms, Kierkegaard presents women stereotypically as beings-for-others: for men. *The Seducer's Diary* therefore adds another complication to a feminist reading of Kierkegaard. Because Kierkegaard's own authorship is hidden within the authorship of the pseudonyms "like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle" (Updike 1997, viii), it is difficult to determine whether the sexist view of the seducer reflects Kierkegaard's own attitude towards women, or whether he distanced himself from it precisely because he did not share the seducer's extreme misogyny. This is a puzzle that will perhaps remain forever unsolved, but again we must take seriously the words of the pseudonym in order to gain some glimpse into Kierkegaard's own thoughts on women. Unlike the aforementioned essay "Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities," *The Seducer's Diary* is in many ways autobiographical, and so we may be forced to assume

that some of the seducer's thoughts on women mirror Kierkegaard's own. On the other hand, the nature of the *Diary* might also be a hindrance to this sort of reading: because Kierkegaard wrote *The Seducer's Diary* so that Regine would turn away from their relationship (as a means of blackening the breast for weaning, as he later says), we perhaps should not take the seducer's words as Kierkegaard's own, simply because the words were meant to repel Regine from him. His sexist comments could have been his particular method of repellent; the misogynistic remarks of the seducer perhaps were directed towards Regine so that she would be scandalized by the comments and think Kierkegaard a villain. With this in mind, it is necessary to explore the view of women presented by the seducer in the *Diary* so that we might better understand the problem at hand.

John Updike, in his foreword to *The Seducer's Diary*, situates Kierkegaard within a long tradition of misogynistic philosophers. He explains that Kierkegaard harbored distaste for the sexual side of life, and implies that he blamed women for this. Updike tells us that for Kierkegaard woman is man's destruction, which explains Kierkegaard's breaking of his engagement to Regine: "'Woman,' he wrote in 1854, 'is egoism personified.... The whole story of man and woman is an immense and subtly constructed intrigue, or it is a trick calculated to destroy man as spirit.' [...] Kierkegaard's breaking the engagement perhaps needs less explaining than the imperious impulse that led him into it" (Updike 1997, xii). So, while we may be inclined to separate Kierkegaard's own view of women from that of the seducer, this is indeed the same brand of misogyny that we find the seducer spouting throughout the *Diary*.

The seducer repeatedly makes misogynistic claims, such as "a young girl first becomes interesting in her relation with men. The woman is the weaker sex" (Kierkegaard 1987, 54), and "woman's fundamental qualification is to be company for the man" (Kierkegaard 1987, 55). According to the seducer, women belong to nature, not reflection or intellect: intellect is the negation of womanliness.<sup>4</sup> As such, she is naturally a being-for-other:

I shall attempt to consider woman categorically. In which category is she to be placed? In the category of being-for-other. [...] Here in turn, from a different angle, we must not let ourselves be disturbed by experience, which teaches us that very seldom do we meet a woman who is truly being-for-other, since the great majority usually are not entities at all, either for themselves or for others. She shares this qualification with all nature, with all femininity in general. All nature is only for-other. (Kierkegaard 1987, 178)

Woman is mothering and matter; she does not exist in the existential sense. Man is intellect, and woman exists only for man – she is developed by him, molded to be just the way he likes her (Kierkegaard 1987, 127). Men, on the other hand, exist only for themselves, and so are the true existential subjects. Woman is immanence, whereas man is transcendence – woman is of nature, whereas man is beyond nature. Hence, she is for-other in a most profound way: she is nothing without man to develop her, and even then she is not a being-for-herself.

God, when he created Eve, had a deep sleep fall upon Adam, for woman is man's dream. The story teaches us in another way that woman is being-for-other. That is, it says that Jehovah took one of man's ribs. If he had, for example, taken from man's brain, woman would certainly have continued to be being-for-other, but the purpose was not that she should be a figment of the brain but something quite different. She became flesh and blood, but precisely thereby she falls within the category of nature, which essentially is being-for-other. Not until she is touched by erotic love does she awaken; before that time she is a dream. (Kierkegaard 1987, 179)

The seducer tells us that woman exists in a sort of vegetative state; she becomes free only through man, and even then the freedom is illusionary (Kierkegaard 1987, 180-181).

The depiction of women drawn throughout *The Seducer's Diary* is typical of a patriarchal male philosopher, but does Kierkegaard agree with the seducer regarding this conception of woman's nature? Was Kierkegaard just another Western misogynistic philosopher, a man of his time and in congress with the rest of his colleagues? Or did he purposefully distance himself from the seducer via a pseudonym so that his own view of women could remain detached from this literary project? Is his misogyny indeed only a method by which to wean, and so a sort of negative maieutics meant to awaken Regine to the knowledge that he is bad for her? In order to explore these questions further, let us now turn to the view of women we glimpse throughout Kierkegaard's other indirect discourses.

### **Kierkegaard – A Friend for Feminists: Female Knights of Faith**

In Kierkegaard's great exposition of faith, *Fear and Trembling*, women are depicted in quite another light. This work is again written in the voice of a pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, and yet the reader may justly feel inclined to hear Kierkegaard's own voice in Silentio's words. Unlike the earlier pseudonymous discourses, *Fear and Trembling* can almost be read as a transition piece to the direct communication of Kierkegaard's religious works. Though it is clearly meant to be indirect, the tone of *Fear and Trembling* is far more religious than aesthetic or ethical, and so forces the reader to take the message a bit more seriously as Kierkegaard's own thoughts. For this reason, it is especially interesting to examine the view Silentio presents of women. Contrary to the earlier pseudonymous works, *Fear and Trembling* portrays a few women worthy of feminist admiration.

A notable example of one such woman in *Fear and Trembling* is the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. Silentio asks, "Who was as great in the world as that favored woman, the mother of God, the Virgin Mary?" (Kierkegaard 1983, 64-65). Mary is remarkable not because God chose to bless her, favoring her above other women, but because she (like Abraham before her) had faith in the paradox: she was a knight of faith. The blessing God bestowed on Mary was also a curse; no one else was aware of the divine nature of her pregnancy, and so to the world she must have been thought of as a woman of ill repute. She was pregnant and not yet married, and only she was certain of her own virginity. As a result of this "blessing," Mary suffered the anguish of Abraham, and also shared his faith:

The angel went only to Mary, and no one could understand her. Has any woman been as infringed upon as was Mary, and is it not true here also that the one whom God blesses he curses in the same breath? This is the spirit's view of Mary, and she is by no means – it is revolting to me to say it but even more so that people have inanelly and unctuously made her out to be thus – she is by no means a lady idling in her finery and playing with a divine child. When, despite this, she said: Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord – then she is great, and I believe it should not be difficult to explain why she became the mother of God. She needs worldly admiration as little as Abraham needs tears, for she was no heroine and he was no hero, but both of them became greater than these, not by being exempted in any way from the distress and the agony and the paradox, but became greater by means of these. (Kierkegaard 1983, 65)

Though Mary is not the main subject of *Fear and Trembling*, Silentio's admiration for her is evident enough; Mary is also often admired by Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms, and by Kierkegaard himself in his direct communication.

There is another woman in *Fear and Trembling* who is described as a knight of faith: Sarah, from the book of Tobit. Sarah, the young daughter of Raguel and Edna, had been married seven times. On each one of her wedding nights, her new husbands had died tragically. When Tobias desires to marry the forlorn Sarah, she consents to it with faith in God that this time her husband would not perish. Despite all of her earlier disappointments, she maintained her faith that she would be allowed her love this time (Kierkegaard 1983, 104). Silentio is a great admirer of Mary and Sarah, for these women had faith in the paradox, and did not succumb to infinite resignation in the face of suffering; Mary had faith that everything would be all right as she trusted God and allowed him to use her as Jesus' mother, and Sarah had faith in God that she would not always have to endure the death of a new husband, in spite of her past matrimonial misfortune.

From these examples we can see that some of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms did have great respect for certain women, and believed that women are also capable of being faithful. The importance of this cannot be underestimated: while Kierkegaard's earlier pseudonyms expressed serious misogyny, the negative view of women is not shared by his latter pseudonyms, or at least not consistently. As Kierkegaard began to write more and more on the subject of religion – and as he began to write directly with his right hand, signing his texts with his own name – this notion of a sort of egalitarianism between the sexes increases; we begin to hear him say that men and women are equal before God. Yet by this is Kierkegaard promoting a feminist message? Or is something else going on entirely? Let us now explore this issue of egalitarianism further so as to better understand the possible shift in Kierkegaard's view of women.

## **Kierkegaard and Equality**

According to Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and Kierkegaard himself in *Works of Love*, we are all absolutely equal before God. Whether one is a king or a carpenter, whether one lived during the year 0 or 2003, each person is equally responsible, and can equally have an absolute relationship to the absolute. Our worldly circumstances do not affect our relationship to God. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms believe that inwardly we each have an interior space (a space that is not constituted by social structures), and this is where our one-to-one relationship to God exists. Because of this God-relationship that each one of us is capable of having, there is a leveling effect which occurs, the leveling of the "before God." All human differences are leveled; we are all equal before God.

It is important to note that *Works of Love* is not signed pseudonymously: Kierkegaard meant for this work to be direct; he wrote it with his right hand. This comes about as he discusses the differences between the love of the neighbor and pagan love. By "neighbor" Kierkegaard refers to all human others, including our enemies. The love of the neighbor is commanded by God, and as such is non-exclusionary and egalitarian. (This is opposed to pagan love – erotic love and friendship – which is really another form of self-love and is based on inclination, not duty). We all must love our neighbors equally, and not allow ourselves to feel a preference for some over others, or allow our own self-interest to interfere with our duty to our neighbor.

However, this equal treatment of all our neighbors does not lead to equality of all people on earth – Kierkegaard is not advocating a revolution so that everyone will be equal politically, economically, and socially. On the contrary, Christian love is all about the spirit, and so not concerned with these worldly issues. Christianity does not want to take away dissimilarity: it is merely worldliness. Rather, we must lift ourselves up above earthly dissimilarities. So, Kierkegaard is not calling for political change; religiousness does not translate into politics. Just because we are equal before God does not mean that we should be socially equal in the world. The social/political order is a secular (pagan) order, and so

has nothing to do with Christianity. Inequalities do not matter to the existential Christian, for life is like a stage play: when the curtain closes on actuality, all of the costumes (the earthly garments of dissimilarity) come off; then, we are all just people before God.<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard tells us that death is the ultimate equalizer: it shows us clearly that God makes us all from one type of clay. Sure, the rich get bigger grave plots, but in the end all the worldly riches amount to no more than another half a foot of cemetery room! These earthly dissimilarities are that unimportant (Kierkegaard 1995, 346).

When this view is applied to woman's liberation, it becomes difficult to use Kierkegaard's notion of equality before God to feminist means. Kierkegaard himself spoke against woman's emancipation in *Works of Love*, saying that Christianity does not desire the worldly equality of women:

What abominations has the world not seen in the relationships between man and woman, that she, almost like an animal, was a disdained being in comparison with the man, a being of another species. What battles there have been to establish in a worldly way the woman in equal rights with the man – but Christianity makes only infinity's change and therefore quietly. Outwardly the old more or less remains. The man is to be the woman's master and she subservient to him; but inwardly everything is changed, changed by means of this little question to the woman, whether she has consulted with her conscience about having this man – as master, for otherwise she does not get him. Yet the conscience-question about the conscience-matter makes her in inwardness before God absolutely equal with the man. What Christ said about his kingdom, that it is not of this world, holds true of everything Christian. As a higher order of things, it wants to be present everywhere but not to be seized. Just as a friendly spirit surrounds the dear ones, follows their every step but cannot be pointed to, so the essentially Christian wants to be a stranger in life because it belongs to another world, a stranger in the world because it belongs to the inner being. In the name of Christianity, fatuous people have fatuously been busy about making it obvious in a worldly way that the woman should be established in equal rights with the man – Christianity has never required or desired this. It has done everything for the woman, provided she Christianly will be satisfied with what is Christian; if she is unwilling, then for what she loses she gains only a mediocre compensation in the fragment of externality she can in a worldly way obtain by defiance. (Kierkegaard 1995, 138-139)

Feminism is intrinsically focused on worldly change, and so for Kierkegaard to say that the equality he is speaking of is not a worldly equality immediately prevents a feminist appropriation of Kierkegaard's notion of equality. Though we may all be equal before God, this does nothing to help aid the feminist cause of equality here on earth. Theoretically, Kierkegaard's concept of the equality of all humans before God is helpful to egalitarian feminists who believe bodily differences between men and women are irrelevant in terms of determining a person's worth or capabilities, but practically speaking it is useless to feminists who desire change in the here and now.

It should further be noted that not only was Kierkegaard uninterested in worldly inequality, he almost seemed to promote it, both in *Works of Love* (as the above comments indicate) and in his pseudonymously written *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Johannes Climacus complains about democracy at the end of the *Postscript*, claiming that it forces everyone into political participation and is nothing better than a form of tyranny. For this reason, he favors monarchy because it leaves the individual person alone to his thoughts (Kierkegaard 1992, 621). Of course, he said this during a very revolutionary period in history, and so it is somewhat understandable that he

was uneasy about politics. As a member of the upper rung of society, Kierkegaard undoubtedly did not like the personal threat of political revolution; and so while he may have believed we are all equal before God, he also may not have wanted people to force social worldly equality on him.

## **Feminist Interpretations of Kierkegaard**

Given all of this, how might a feminist attempt to interpret Kierkegaard? As is evident from the previous discussion, such an attempt is complicated by numerous factors: a feminist reader of Kierkegaard must take into account the pseudonymous nature of much of his work, and hence must also acknowledge the lack of a pseudonym attached to the upbuilding, religious works; she must address the various misogynistic and misogynist comments Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms utter; a feminist who desires to utilize Kierkegaard's notion of equality before God for feminist ends must be aware that this equality is not of this world, and so does not motivate any social change. All of this and more must be considered so that a reading does not grant Kierkegaard the title of feminist unduly, and also so that we do not criticize him undeservingly. In their edited anthology of multifarious endeavors to determine how Kierkegaard fits into a feminist scheme, Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh – along with a variety of feminist authors and Kierkegaard scholars – tackle this difficult problem. *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* presents the varying and dynamic ways in which feminists can read Kierkegaard.

Many of these feminist interpretations can be examined through the previous discussion of Kierkegaard in this paper. For example, Wanda Warren Berry examines the problem of misogyny in *Either/Or* as it compares to the equality of all people before God in her essay "The Heterosexual Imagination and Aesthetic Existence in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Part I." Berry reads the androcentric view of women presented in *Either/Or* as negatively maieutic, rather than his actual viewpoint from the mouths of his pseudonyms. Berry believes that Kierkegaard is "subverting fixed or stereotyped ideas of masculinity and femininity" so as to show "the limitations and the risks inherent in emphasizing difference and in depicting each sex as being fulfilled only through the other" (Léon and Walsh 1997, 6). Berry's reading of Kierkegaard paints him in a positive light as a philosopher who aims to instigate constructive change in both men and women.<sup>6</sup> She comes to this conclusion as a result of Kierkegaard's notion in his religious writings (which, as discussed earlier, are signed with his own name) that all people are equal before God:

To the stereotype of woman as 'being-for-others' corresponds that of man as being-for-self,' with the result that, if man is able to separate himself from the 'for-other' moment of his own self, or relationality, woman is granted no 'for-self.' [...] By being 'for-others,' women, whose self-image is essentially 'for man,' are victims of an enemy whose views they have internalized. Yet, they are no more ontologically 'for-other' than men are ontologically 'for-self': Both man and woman are equally 'before God.' For a fuller treatment of these questions, Berry directs the reader to *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) where, although emphasized, the 'generic difference,' or inherent differences between the sexes, is declared ultimately irrelevant within the context of the religious. (Léon and Walsh 1997, 6-7)

In this reading, the latter religious writings of Kierkegaard are thought to reveal his true thoughts on the sexes, and his earlier aesthetic works are merely the means by which he pushes people towards existential action.

Birgit Bertung reads Kierkegaard in a similar manner in her essay "Yes, A Woman Can Exist"; for Bertung, Kierkegaard is a sort of gadfly, an instigator who writes his misogyny in order to goad women towards existential action. Given this cancellation of

sexual distinction expressed in his religious writings combined with the pseudonymous nature of his aesthetic works, Bertung claims that we must read Kierkegaard dialectically, taking into account the fact that his aesthetic writings are not always meant to be read literally (Bertung 1997, 52). Kierkegaard uses indirect communication, Bertung believes, because he intends for the reader to misunderstand his true meaning; only through this method will the reader reach self-understanding and be motivated to existential action. Bertung claims that this even applies to women,<sup>7</sup> and she goes so far in her defense of Kierkegaard as to claim that “any discrimination against women is in my opinion a projection by the reader. Kierkegaard in his entire philosophy tried to draw attention to this misunderstanding” (Bertung 1997, 66). Read in this way, Kierkegaard becomes a sort of feminist.

In perhaps a more balanced approach to interpreting Kierkegaard for feminism, Jane Duran argues in her essay “The Kierkegaardian Feminist” that in spite of the expressed misogyny in *The Seducer’s Diary* and other works, Kierkegaard is in fact a friend of feminism in that he critiqued traditional Western philosophy for attributes that recent feminists have identified as androcentric (its privileging of detachment and objectivity) and opened up a space within philosophy which recognizes the subjectivity and the particularity of people, a focus that is emphasized in feminist theory. Duran claims that what “distinguishes the thought of Kierkegaard from typical androcentric styles of thinking – divorced, detached, and objectifying, such as those found in Kant or Descartes – is, on the one hand, its emphasis on specificity, individuality, and a holism that emphasizes connectedness, and on the other hand, its predilection for devoted commitment and passionate attachment to others” (Léon and Walsh 1997, 17). Sylvia Walsh shares this variety of interpretation, acknowledging the debt feminism owes to Kierkegaard for this revolution in Western philosophy. This interpretation of Kierkegaard is of particular interest as we examine the relationship between Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir in the final section of this paper.

Not all of the feminists who interpret Kierkegaard in Léon and Walsh’s anthology read him in a positive light, and most strive to balance the positive with the critically honest and often negative. But none of the essayists in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* read him as a straight misogynist, though it would have been far easier to simply label him a woman-hater than to truly navigate through the complicated landmines that are his works; like all philosophers of the nineteenth century, he is an obvious target for such an attack. What feminist interpreters of Kierkegaard instead strive towards is a way of reading him that benefits feminism, either by reclaiming him as a different sort of feminist or by exposing the logic behind his misogyny. When read in this way, Kierkegaard proves to be a valuable resource for feminist philosophy.

## **Kierkegaard and Beauvoir**

Yet another way to examine the impact of Kierkegaard on feminism is to observe the ways in which he influenced the thinking of Simone de Beauvoir, arguably the most illustrious feminist philosopher of our time. Beauvoir reflects many of Kierkegaard’s concerns, and takes his notion of the situated existential subject to another level by utilizing existentialism as well as phenomenology within a feminist framework. Though she rarely mentions Kierkegaard in her philosophical writings – only a few times in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*,<sup>8</sup> and when she mentions him at all in *The Second Sex* it is to criticize his negative view of women<sup>9</sup> – Beauvoir owes a great deal to Kierkegaard philosophically. Because this helps us to understand the import of Kierkegaard to feminism via another (as of yet scarcely charted) avenue, some of the ways in which Kierkegaard has influenced Beauvoir’s philosophy will be explored in the final section of this paper.

Though Kierkegaard is considered to be the father of existentialism, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre emphatically denied the influence of the Dane on his own existential philosophy. It was Sartre's friend, lover, and companion philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, who admitted Kierkegaard's influence on her philosophical development. In her autobiography *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir tells the tale of her philosophical growth; originally enamored with the comfort of the Hegelian System (as were so many philosophers of the 1930s and early 1940s), Beauvoir began to turn away from what she recognized as a false source of solace, and moved towards Kierkegaard's existentialism.

'I went on reading Hegel, and was now beginning to understand him rather better. His amplitude of detail dazzled me, and his System as a whole made me feel giddy. It was indeed tempting to abolish one's individual self and merge with Universal Being, to observe one's own life in the perspective of Historical Necessity.... But the least flutter of my heart gave such speculations the lie. Hate, anger, expectation or misery would assert themselves against all my efforts to by-pass them, and this 'flight into the Universal' merely formed one further episode in my private development. I turned back to Kierkegaard, and began to read him with passionate interest.... Neither History, nor the Hegelian System could, any more than the Devil in person, upset the living certainty of 'I am, I exist, here and now, I am myself.'" (Poole 1998, 55)

From this we can see that Kierkegaard had an effect on Beauvoir's development as a philosopher, perhaps more than he is given credit for. Though Beauvoir employs a great deal of Hegelian concepts, it is clear from this statement in her autobiography that she sided with Kierkegaard in his dislike of the Hegelian System, favoring existence over Hegel's ideality.

In order to properly understand the profound impact Kierkegaard had on feminism through Beauvoir, we must keep in mind the philosophical tradition from which Kierkegaard defected. Not only was the Hegelian System highly problematic for the existential philosopher, but Western philosophy's epistemological conceptions were also found to be deficient. Western philosophy had hitherto traditionally conceived of the knowing subject as "an autonomous, dispassionate, detached individual who has the capacity to adopt the stance of an independent, neutral observer in relation to the external world and to suppress or eliminate personal, or merely subjective, feelings, interests, and values in coming to know and describe that world" (Walsh 1997, 268).<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard's rejection of universalism and the objective knower, which came in the form of a harsh criticism of the Hegelians, ripped the fabric of traditional philosophy to shreds. He brought philosophy back to the existing world, and validated the experiences of existing subjects; by placing the emphasis on the particular over the universal, on the subjective over the objective, Kierkegaard dramatically questioned the way we think of truth and choice.

This is especially significant to keep in mind as we examine the influence of Kierkegaard on Beauvoir. These are some of the same questions asked by Beauvoir, questions central to her own philosophical explorations:

What is the relation between an individual's freedom and the givenness of his or her situation? What is the nature of self-identity? How is the individual related to society? What is the ontological structure of an individual's relation to the world? How does one make moral choices without a set of universal moral absolutes? What is the relation between truth and the knowing subject? These crucial questions are all inspired by Kierkegaard [...]. They are also the key questions for Beauvoir. (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 61)

Kierkegaard's existential subject, taken up by subsequent existentialists such as Sartre and Beauvoir, pushed aside the old objective knower of philosophy, and introduced a new philosophy of subjectivity in place of the old universal systems. The impact of all of this on Beauvoir's thought is profoundly evident in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Beauvoir locates herself within the Kierkegaardian tradition of existentialism in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir 1948, 9-10). In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir undertakes the project of developing an existential ethics. She presents an ethics that is not systematic, but rather situated: relational, and yet also individualistic. Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity has its roots in Kierkegaard's existentialism; however, for Beauvoir God is not a part of the existential picture. Starting with the existential assumption that "existence precedes essence" – there is no outside guiding force determining a person's actions and character, and so there are no absolute, external justifications – Beauvoir attempts to reveal how humans can manage to act ethically within this existential framework.

Though *The Ethics of Ambiguity* reflects Kierkegaardian notions throughout, I will only briefly touch on these connections for the purpose of showing the Kierkegaardian roots of Beauvoir's feminist philosophy. In this work, which is arguably the most philosophical of her writings, Beauvoir elucidates many Kierkegaardian themes; among other things, she discusses the importance of the existential moment and human freedom, describes the problem of seriousness, and expresses a dislike for universal ethical systems.

Beauvoir draws out the importance of freedom and the existential moment in her discussions of the "aesthetic attitude" and oppression. A person falls into the aesthetic attitude when she stops actively living life, resigning herself to the idea that the present is merely a "potential past." The serious person – one possessing the aesthetic attitude – is detached from the real living of the world; this person ceases to participate in life in the here and now. This refusal to live in the here and now is to Beauvoir a denial of freedom, since the present is the moment of choice. To every person the present exists as an engagement; we act and are situated within this existential moment. Our actions require freedom, which only realizes itself by "engaging itself in the world" of the here and now. This existential understanding of the importance of freedom inspired Beauvoir's feminist philosophy, which is evident in her analysis of oppression, or the denial of freedom to another human being. When a man oppresses another, he cuts the other off from the future and makes her into a thing. But humans are *not* things: "rational animals," "thinking reeds," we are subject and object, a part of this world of which we are a consciousness (Beauvoir 1948, 7). In other words, we are ambiguous. Oppression is an evil because with it man attempts to deny this ambiguity, (and hence to deny freedom), to his fellow humans. Freedom is a "universal cause" (Beauvoir 1948, 90), and as such all humans should seek to assist others in the attainment of their freedom. Freedom for the individual must be realized, since without the free individual, society would be nothing. Freedom entails that the individual be allowed to possess hope for and to make decisions regarding the future, and yet not forget to live in the present: "Existence must be asserted in the present if one does not want all life to be defined as an escape toward nothingness" (Beauvoir 1948, 125).

This is the importance of the existential moment, the here and now: "If one denies with Hegel the concrete thickness of the here and now in favor of universal space-time, if one denies the separate consciousness in favor of Mind, one misses with Hegel the truth of the world" (Beauvoir 1948, 122). If we live too much for the future, we cease to live; there is comfort in the thought of a future of absolutes, a future in which all is resolved, but this is an empty comfort. Human undertakings are finite. Though this is a daunting realization, it must be made so that we can live fully in the here and now. The action we have chosen must be enough justification for us without the "mythical Historical end," since we can never know if this end will be realized (Beauvoir 1948, 128); the ethical ramification of this concept of the existential moment for Beauvoir is that each action must be considered on its own merits, and not merely justified by an appeal to ends.

Existential ethics cannot make an appeal to any sort of absolute justification (Beauvoir 1948, 136), and so Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity is not a recipe for ethical action. Because Beauvoir's existential ethics rejects principles of authority and recipes for ethical action, it requires of people a little creativity. This is obviously very disconcerting: without any moral absolutes to fall back on, humans are forced to own their ethical decisions to a greater extent. (We cannot justify them with "Kant made me do it... damn that categorical imperative!" – blaming our actions on universal laws). But despite the trepidation we may feel, this is the way we form ourselves, the way we set up our values. Beauvoir describes this feeling of unease that we may feel as we attempt to own our freedom as "the anguish of free decision" (Beauvoir 1948, 149).

This brings us back to Kierkegaard, the originator of this notion of existential singularity. This ethics of ambiguity as described by Beauvoir is not the sort of universal ethics that Johannes de Silentio rejected in *Fear and Trembling*. This is rather an ethics that can be likened to the religious, singular decision of the faithful. In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham was not able to fall back on the universal edict "thou shall not kill," but rather he was forced to make a choice: he acted in faith, and so decided to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac. While faith is not a part of Beauvoir's existential ethics, it is clear that Kierkegaard's concept of an existential individual's decision, a decision that might contradict the universal, is an important part of Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. What Beauvoir describes as the anguish of free decision, Kierkegaard calls fear and trembling. Their shared critique of the serious man illustrates this similarity between them. For Beauvoir, the serious man is one who attempts to fall back on the universal, refusing to exercise his own freedom. This criticism of the serious man originated with Kierkegaard:

After Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also railed at the deceitful stupidity of the serious man and his universe. [...] The serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned. [...] There is the serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantages of ends which one claims are absolute. (Beauvoir 1948, 46)

The serious man "escapes the anguish of freedom" (Beauvoir 1948, 51), "dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice" (Beauvoir 1948, 49). The similarity between Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity and the ethico-religious singularity Silentio describes lies here, in the existing individual rising above the comfort of the universal in spite of the fear and trembling that accompanies freedom.

There are necessarily minor pragmatic differences between Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity and Kierkegaard's existentialism; for Beauvoir, the ethics of ambiguity is actually an ethics in that it involves other people in an essential way, while for Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* existentialism is primarily about the individual knight of faith and the God-relationship. Kierkegaard's existentialism is largely individualistic; he places great emphasis on the particularity of individuals, and even claims that the validity of the God-relationship rests on individual human differences (Kierkegaard 1995, 230). Though this may seem to be a drastic difference between the two, Beauvoir still shares Kierkegaard's focus on individualism, and so Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity does not really differ much.

Beauvoir's ethics is very individualistic; Beauvoir claims that the world has no importance without the individual and individual differences: "Arguing for an 'irreducible given that constitutes the individuality' of each one, Beauvoir defends individual differences and rejects the argument that persons can ever be identical" (Simons 1999, 114). Beauvoir's existential ethics centers around the way in which existential individuals deal with other existential individuals: "the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement

which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him" (Beauvoir 1948, 156). Part of the ambiguity of human existence is that we are both social and individual. "It is true that each is bound to all; but that is precisely the ambiguity of his condition: in his surpassing toward others, each one exists absolutely as for himself; each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects" (Beauvoir 1948, 112).

For Beauvoir, the sociality of humans means that subjective truth can be expanded to whole cultures, or to all of humanity. Without moral absolutes, humankind is free to determine what is true and what is false (Beauvoir 1948, 157-158). These subjective human determinations are finite, which may make them unsatisfactory for many who want the infinite in the form of universal truths and laws; the universal is far more mollifying. Beauvoir explains that this is why Hegel's system had been so comforting to her at one point, but "once I got into the street again, into my life, out of the system, beneath a real sky, the system was no longer of any use to me: what it had offered me, under a show of the infinite, was the consolations of death; and I again wanted to live in the midst of living men" (Beauvoir 1948, 158). Though existentialism fails to offer much consolation, "its ethics is experienced in the truth of life, and it then appears as the only proposition of salvation which one can address to men" (Beauvoir 1948, 159). Existential passion is enough for Beauvoir; she, like Kierkegaard, does not require the comfort of universal systems.

While Kierkegaard and Beauvoir share this existential passion, they disagree on the fundamental issue of religious faith. Whereas for Kierkegaard "Faith is the highest passion in a person" (Kierkegaard 1983, 122), for Beauvoir it cannot be a part of her existential picture. This is revealed in her diaries from the early part of her life, as Margaret Simons discusses in her essay "The Origins of Beauvoir's Existential Philosophy." Beauvoir writes of religion and especially of faith in her 1927 diary:

'Mademoiselle Mercier is trying to convert me;... and I'm thinking of the remark of Georgette Lévy [Beauvoir's friend and fellow philosophy student]: 'You will be tempted that way.' It's true. This morning... I passionately desired to be the girl who takes communion at morning mass and walks in a serene certainty. Catholicism of Mauriac, of Claudel... how it's marked me and what place there is in me for it! and yet I know that I will know it no longer; I do not desire to believe: an act of faith is the most despairing act there is and I want my despair to at least keep its lucidity, I do not want to lie to myself.' (Simons 1999, 113)

Beauvoir relates faith to a form of self-deception, and though it does sound appealing to her, she steers clear of faith and religion mainly because she does not want to become detached from the world of the here and now; Beauvoir's rejection of religious faith is rooted in her desire to preserve the truth of her existential experience, however humble it may be. For this reason, Beauvoir turns "to description of the phenomenal world" and she attempts "to construct a philosophy from her own experience" (Simons 1999, 117): an existential phenomenology.

Though Beauvoir moves away from Kierkegaard fundamentally in that she rejects the religious, and departs from him slightly in her attempt to create an existential ethics (which inherently had to involve the way individuals interact with one another), she only meant to improve on his original existential ideas: she wanted to accurately describe her own lived experience and to take the social nature of humans into account. In spite of these differences, she retains much of his ideas. A careful look shows the influence clearly; Beauvoir reflects Kierkegaard's concern for the preservation of individualism and his disdain for universal systems, and takes up his notion of the free situated existential subject, utilizing it throughout her feminist philosophy. Further, she maintains the validity of

subjective truth, and shares Kierkegaard's existential passion. Beauvoir made considerable use of the foundations Kierkegaard had laid out, and feminism has been richer for it.

## Reluctant Conclusions

It would be presumptuous to suppose that I can draw any real conclusion in this explorative paper. The possibilities for further exploration into the connection between Kierkegaard and feminism are nearly endless, and the terrain will continue to be rugged. Kierkegaard did not make it easy for any student of his thought to nail down his precise meaning when it comes to these issues, and perhaps feminism is all the better for it. The more we hermeneutically examine these works, the more we can learn – not only about Kierkegaard, but also about ourselves.

The connection between Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir is but one way to consider the importance of Kierkegaard to feminism. Despite the many complications Kierkegaard poses for feminist philosophy, there are just as many benefits to be reaped from feminist interpretations of and expansions upon his thoughts. Therefore, we cannot allow his assumed or even actual misogyny to prevent such explorations. Kierkegaard turned philosophy on its head, initiating a revolution that feminists can be unabashedly grateful for; the existential feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir is to a great extent a result of this legacy.

Kierkegaard's works should be read critically so that his misogynistic statements (and those of his pseudonyms) are not permitted to seep unquestioned into our consciousnesses, and yet we also must not refrain from reading him, discounting him due to our vexation with these statements: he still has a great deal to teach us, even if this lesson is fueled by indignation. The offence Kierkegaard inflames within his feminist readers can be educational and inspirational, as it motivates us to reject the androcentrism he puts forth. But I believe he has a great deal more to offer feminist philosophers than merely this angry call to feminist action, even if his exact place as a benefactor to feminist philosophy is complicated by the multiplicity of ways in which we can read Kierkegaard:

Was Kierkegaard a feminist maieutically pretending otherwise? Was he a good father who, with a little help from a feminist re-vision, can bring an important message of liberation to culturally conditioned women? Or do his very limitations make him a father whose insights should be carefully sorted out? Is he, rather, just another 'dead-beat dad,' who fails to deliver on the promise of freedom made to women? When all is said and done, does Kierkegaard teach us anything that can be useful for feminist theorizing, or for women interested in finding themselves outside the maze of patriarchal constructs? The answer is yes, insofar as his writings expose prejudices against women, subvert typically masculine modes of behavior and discourse, and, by privileging a disembodied, authorial voice, not only value, but also inscribe, the feminine. But it is also yes when emancipation is opposed, when equality is in(de)finitely postponed, when woman is depreciated, dichotomized, discarded, excluded, or spoken for, when stereotypes and essentialist statements about her nature are taken up and embraced. For, whether we agree, or disagree, much can be learned from an exposure whereby, either way, what is awakened is 'dead or sleeping consciousness.' (Léon and Walsh 1997, 21)

Awakening "dead or sleeping consciousness" was indeed Kierkegaard's intent in both his pseudonymous writings and his direct upbuilding discourses. Though it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to unearth a single core of meaning from Kierkegaard's philosophy, we can be confident in our understanding that Kierkegaard meant to incite a change in people:

he certainly desired to shake people out of their Hegelian slumber and awaken them to existential Christianity. While it is unlikely that he intended to motivate any sort of feminist awakening, he did effect a great change within the canon of Western philosophy, a change that has been felt profoundly by feminism. Feminism developed in the wake of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, and so it is well worth our while to continue on this journey through Kierkegaard's funhouse; in our efforts to explore his world of smoke and mirrors, (and even in our failed attempts to draw maps of the terrain), feminists gain insight into our own philosophical heritage and are inspired to ask revolutionary questions, questions that help to shape the future path of feminist and existential philosophy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard created a space within philosophy for the subjective, and so "if the gynocentric, seen from the standpoint of both feminist ethics and feminist epistemology, may be thought to be that which alludes to notions of specificity, connectedness, and particularity, rather than the universal, the detached, and the normative, it may be possible to analyze at least some of Kierkegaard's authorship in terms that may be useful – perhaps extremely useful – to feminist theory" (Duran 1997, 250).

<sup>2</sup> In "A First and Last Explanation," at the end of the *Postscript*, he asks us to "dance with" the "poetically actual author," and to refrain from becoming "encumbered with [Kierkegaard's] personal actuality" (Kierkegaard 1992, 628).

<sup>3</sup> "His journal of 1849 claims that he wrote it 'for her sake, to clarify her out of the relationship.' In 1853 he notes that 'it was written to repel her' and quotes his *Fear and Trembling*: 'When the baby is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast' (Updike 1997, xii).

<sup>4</sup> He describes man as intellect in the *Diary*: "Cordelia hates and fears me. What does a young girl fear? Intellect [Aand]. Why? Because intellect constitutes the negation of her entire womanly existence" (Kierkegaard 1987, 85).

<sup>5</sup> "Just look at the world that lies before you in all its variegated multifariousness; it is like looking at a play, except that the multifariousness is much, much greater. Because of his dissimilarity, every single one of these innumerable individuals is something particular, represents something particular, but essentially he is something else. Yet this you do not get to see here in life; here you see only what the individual represents and how he does it. It is just as in the play. But when the curtain falls on the stage, then the one who played the king and the one who played the beggar etc. are all alike; all are one and the same – actors. When at death the curtain falls on the stage of actuality (it is a confusing use of language to say that at death the curtain is raised on the stage of eternity since eternity is not a stage at all; it is truth), then they, too, are all one, they are human beings. [...] We seem to have forgotten that the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor's costume" (Kierkegaard 1995, 86-87).

<sup>6</sup> This reading of Kierkegaard as a sort of gadfly who attempts to provoke women maieutically may be farfetched, but it is not impossible to imagine that this was his intent. His hero, after all, was Socrates; in *Philosophical Fragments* Johannes Climacus praises Socrates for his maieutic method, claiming that this "relation is the highest relation a human being can have to another" (Kierkegaard 1985, 10).

<sup>7</sup> "He does not wish to stand in the way of any woman's own resolution of her existential situation, so he wishes to be misunderstood, and he must be said to have succeeded overwhelmingly. The use of this method, he thinks, is the only way he can make people react, and that is the whole aim of all his works, to get one to act for oneself, even if he has to trick the reader cunningly into the truth" (Bertung 1997, 53-54).

<sup>8</sup> (Beauvoir 1948, 9, 46, 133)

<sup>9</sup> (Beauvoir 1989, 143, 186, 256, 438, 720)

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<sup>10</sup> Feminists have widely claimed that this conventional Western understanding of epistemology “reflects a typically masculine way of relating to the world and thus actually represents an androcentric, male-biased, and male-constructed perspective rather than a gender-neutral stance toward reality” (Walsh 1997, 268-269). Because of this concept of objectivity and the neutrally observing knowing subject, women have been excluded from activities that are considered to require objectivity – activities such as philosophy and science – since women have traditionally been associated with the subjective (such as feelings, emotions, and personal relationships), which supposedly prevent women from being objective subjects. Sylvia Walsh shows that Kierkegaard helped to dispel this notion of the objective knowing subject, and instead placed a crucial emphasis on the existential subjectivity of the individual; Walsh argues in her essay “Subjectivity Versus Objectivity: Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* and Feminist Epistemology” that Kierkegaard is “both a philosophical precursor of and ally in this [feminist] critique” of objective epistemology, and also an “important resources for re-visioning the concept of subjectivity in a manner that does not collapse into an isolated subjectivism, on the one hand, or into a ‘chummy’ form of intersubjectivity that compromises the integrity of the individual, on the other” (Walsh 1997, 267).