



Sin as Alienation On Khawaja's Interpretation of Kierkegaard

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Abstract: Noreen Khawaja's *The Religion of Existence* offers an interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard's account of sin and despair as an account of alienation and our struggle to overcome it. I argue that Khawaja's interpretation of Kierkegaard is incompatible with Kierkegaard's insistence that sin must necessarily be the sinner's own fault—a result of the sinner's own free choice. I consider two possible ways of harmonizing Khawaja's account with this claim, one proposing a fictive acceptance of fault for what is not actually one's fault, and one based on the claim that sin presupposes sin-consciousness, but argue that neither constitutes a satisfactory solution. I conclude that while alienation does constitute sin for Kierkegaard, it does so for a different reason than Khawaja proposes.

Keywords: Khawaja, Noreen; Kierkegaard, Søren; alienation; sin; despair; blame; responsibility; freedom; choice; Christianity.

Noreen Khawaja's *The Religion of Existence* carefully traces the development of a special kind of ascetic ideal through the history of existentialism.¹ As one part of this story, she presents a novel interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard's concepts of despair, sin, and repentance. Drawing on interpretations of Kierkegaard posed by later existentialist thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Khawaja interprets these concepts as having to do with alienation and the struggle to overcome it. This reading of Kierkegaard is an appealing one, and it sheds light on ontological concerns within Kierkegaard's thought that readers have tended to overlook. However, I find Khawaja's interpretation of Kierkegaard's concept of sin unconvincing. Specifically, I will argue that Khawaja's

account of sin implies that it is not the sinner's own fault, whereas Kierkegaard takes sin necessarily to be the sinner's own fault. I will consider two possible approaches to resolving this interpretive difficulty using the resources of Khawaja's account, but I will conclude that neither is satisfactory. Furthermore, while alienation is indeed sin in the Kierkegaardian sense, it is so for different reasons than those Khawaja offers.

An Overview of Khawaja's Account

On Khawaja's interpretation of Kierkegaard's authorship, one of Kierkegaard's core concerns is to provide a solution to Hegelian alienation—to the fact that each person finds herself in a world she did not create, governed by conditions and laws she did not choose. Kierkegaard's solution to alienation, on this account, is appropriation of the "givens" of existence:

¹ Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016. [Henceforth cited as *RE*]

taking those things one did not choose, and choosing them, freely deciding to make them one's own and to accept responsibility for them (RE 83-5). However, this appropriation has its limits: "the problem with appropriation is that no matter how resolutely, how single-mindedly one pursues this course of tireless spiritual labor, one can never fully catch up with givenness" (RE 88). As Khawaja puts it elsewhere, "the self's alienation goes all the way down" and cannot be overcome by mere appropriation (RE 87). We are radically free, and find fulfillment in freedom, and the proper exercise of radical freedom is to will to be oneself—but we are also "derived" beings, established by powers outside ourselves without our having any choice in the matter (RE 88). No matter how far down I dig into the foundations of my being, appropriating more and more, there is always still more that is alien to my will, and that is the ground on which the entire edifice of my existence rests. This radical alienation is what Khawaja takes Kierkegaard to mean by "despair."

Kierkegaard describes sin as despair "before God."² It follows that if despair is alienation, sin must be alienation before God. And so for Khawaja, sin is alienation interpreted in a particular way. To understand oneself as a sinner is to understand oneself "as responsible, in each instant, for an alienation that [one] cannot appropriate and cannot shed" (RE 105). Thus to come to understand oneself as a sinner is to come to understand oneself as responsible for one's alienation—to interpret one's alienation as guilt, rather than as mere unhappiness (RE 135). Sin, on Khawaja's account, is something like alienation-as-something-for-which-I-am-responsible.

Sin as the Sinner's Own Fault

One of the most surprising features of Khawaja's interpretation of Kierkegaard is that on Khawaja's account, sin is not the fault of the sinner—that is, it is not something the sinner freely chooses, nor is it the consequence of any of the sinner's choices. Indeed, this is much of the point of the concept of sin on Khawaja's account: sin is "a symbolic expression of one's capacity to assume responsibility for a situation one did not create" (RE 230-1). Sin "creates responsibility out of

nothing...sin theorizes the individual's ability to treat the given—that of which she is not the author—as the materialization of a debt for which she is responsible" (RE 203). The concept of sin, on Khawaja's reading, is the concept of something for which one is responsible despite the fact that it is not one's fault. In understanding oneself as a sinner, one takes responsibility for one's alienation—for the fact that one is a derived being, whose freedom is entangled in givenness—and makes that situation the basis of a life-long ascetic task. And so sin is essentially bound up with human freedom, but it is not the sinner's fault in the sense of being the object or consequence of some free choice.

This feature of Khawaja's account is surprising because one point repeatedly emphasized throughout Kierkegaard's authorship is that sin, to be sin at all, must be the sinner's own fault—the result of the sinner's own non-necessitated free choice. The core definition of sin offered by Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* is "to be untruth and to be that through one's own fault."³ This definition is accompanied by an argument in which Climacus rules out all the alternatives: it cannot be that one has always been in untruth, nor can it be that it is God's fault that one is in untruth, nor can it be merely by accident that one fell into untruth. Therefore, the sinner's woeful state is "due to himself...he himself has forfeited and is forfeiting the condition" for understanding the truth (PF 15). Similarly, when Anti-Climacus argues that the "spiritless" person is a sinner (SUD 101), the justification he gives is that the person's spiritlessness is "his own fault. No one is born devoid of spirit" (SUD 102). The implication is that if his condition were not his fault, traceable to his own will, it would not be sin.

The text that most directly wrestles with the question of the source of sin is *The Concept of Anxiety*. This text tackles a typically Kierkegaardian paradox: to say that we are necessitated to sin would mean we are not to blame for the sin, which would mean it is not sin at all. But to say that it is merely accidental that all humans (other than Christ) have been sinners, or to suggest that there might be some humans (other than Christ) who have never sinned, would be unacceptable

² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Vol. 19 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1980, p. 77. [Henceforth cited as *SUD*]

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, or a Fragment of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1985, p. 15. [Henceforth cited as *PF*]

Pelagianism.⁴ But how can one coherently hold both that sin is the result of a truly free and thus blameworthy choice, while simultaneously holding that it is a non-accidental fact that every human being makes that choice? This paradox relies for its force on the premise that sin, to be sin at all, must be the sinner's own fault: "If it was not by guilt that he lost it, then it was not innocence that he lost; and if he was not innocent before becoming guilty, he never became guilty" (CA 35). It is true of each sinner that "he himself brought guiltiness into the world...he himself lost innocence by guilt" (CA 36).

A Fictive Interpretation

One tempting option for resolving the apparent tension between these passages and Khawaja's account would be to take the sinner's interpretation of herself as guilty to be a kind of fictive interpretation. As Khawaja points out, Jean-Paul Sartre explicitly advocates a fictive approach to appropriation: on Sartre's view, the correct response to the unchosen conditions of one's life is not merely to accept or resign oneself to them, but to treat each one "as if one had given it to oneself by decree... turning it into the occasion of new progress as if it was for this reason that one had given it to oneself."⁵ Inspired by Sartre, one might be tempted to interpret Kierkegaard as advocating a similar approach: perhaps the point is that although my alienated state is not actually something I have chosen, the best way of dealing with it is nonetheless to treat it as if it were something I had chosen—as something which is my own fault and which thus renders me guilty.

However, Khawaja does not endorse any such reading of Kierkegaard's account of sin and guilt, and any such fictive reading of Kierkegaard would be misguided. Kierkegaard's Judge William does argue that we should "take responsibility for" the unchosen conditions of our existence: he advises the reader to "appropriate in freedom everything that comes to you,

both the happy and the sad,"⁶ and to take each unchosen condition of one's life "as a task, as something for which you are responsible" (EO 260). However, these passages tell us to treat the unchosen givens of our lives as our "responsibility" only in the sense that they are our proper task, and thus a source of obligation—they do not assert that they are our "responsibility" in the sense that they are our fault, or the result of our own choice. They are manifestly not our fault, and Judge William does not suggest that we ought to treat them as if they were.

What is more, Kierkegaard's authorship elsewhere suggests that fictive acceptance of guilt would be demonic. The young man of *Repetition* imagines one in Job's position who, instead of complaining to God of his unjust treatment, "admit[s] that God is in the right, although he believes that he himself is," because "he wants...to show that he loves God" and that "he will be sufficiently noble to go on loving [God]."⁷ From a certain perspective, such a response from one in Job's position might sound noble and praiseworthy. But the young poet argues, rather plausibly, that it would be an expression of "an altogether demonic passion" (KR 207) and an "egotistical defiance" (KR 208) to relate to God in such a way. This view fits well with Kierkegaard's descriptions of the demonic in *Fear and Trembling*: the demonic person embraces deception rather than honest disclosure, embraces suffering when he ought instead to accept mercy and help, and arrogantly shoulders burdens that ought to be left instead to God.⁸ Thus Kierkegaard would not endorse any approach that involved pretending that one was not a derived being, or pretending that the unchosen features of one's life were in fact things one had chosen. That would be, from Kierkegaard's perspective, a defiantly faithless position to take. And so a Sartrean fictive interpretation of Kierkegaard on this point seems unpromising.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, Vol. 4 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1987, p. 250. [Henceforth cited as EO]

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, "Repetition," in *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, Vol. 6 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1983, p. 207. [Henceforth cited as KR]

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, Vol. 6 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1983, pp. 96-8.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, Vol. 8 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Reidar Thomte, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1980, pp. 34, 37. [Henceforth cited as CA]

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Carnets de la drôle de guerre: Septembre 1939-Mars 1940*, Paris: Gallimard 1995, p. 296, as translated in RE 176.

Sin as Self-Presupposing

Khawaja accounts for those passages in which Kierkegaard insists that sin is our fault in quite a different way. Her interpretive strategy relies on a key premise: that sin presupposes sin-consciousness. On a more ordinary religious understanding of sin, one's sin comes first, and the choice to acknowledge oneself as a sinner, and to interpret one's past choices as sin, comes later (if at all). By contrast, Khawaja argues that "the experiential basis of an individual's own 'sin-consciousness' is sin's only point of departure....For all human beings...it is with the subjective consciousness of sin...that the history of sin begins" (RE 205). Thus the sinner "was not in sin until he is in sin" (RE 206). It is not that one simply has been sinning all along, and can either recognize or fail to recognize this truth. Instead, someone who recognizes himself as a sinner is a sinner and has been one all along, but someone who does not recognize himself as a sinner is not a sinner. And thus, somewhat paradoxically, sin presupposes sin-consciousness. This position makes sense in light of Khawaja's interpretation of sin as alienation-as-something-for-which-I-am-responsible. On that definition, alienation that is not understood as something for which I am responsible is thereby not sin. Only when we interpret alienation as sin does it in fact become sin.

To say that sin presupposes sin-consciousness allows us to solve our interpretive problem. For Kierkegaard, sin must be the sinner's own fault, in the sense that it is the result of the sinner's own free choice. My objection was that Khawaja's interpretation seems to turn sin into something that is not the result of the sinner's own free choice. But if sin does not become sin until one becomes conscious of it as sin, then no one ever becomes a sinner except by a free choice: namely, the free choice to understand oneself as a sinner. Thus, when Kierkegaard's *Vigilius Haufniensis* asserts that no one becomes a sinner except by a "qualitative leap" (CA 37), Khawaja identifies that qualitative leap, not with a morally bad choice through which one becomes morally guilty, but instead with a choice to understand oneself differently:

In the idea of a hereditary sin...*The Concept of Anxiety's* author sees an outward representation of the fact that sin is not a condition built gradually out of other more basic attitudes and actions but rather represents a fundamental shift of understanding on the part of the individual. [RE 82]

On Khawaja's reading, Kierkegaard's repeated point that sin must be the result of the sinner's own free choice, or it is not sin at all, becomes the point that "identification of oneself as a sinner...is based in a free, subjective act, or it does not take place at all" (RE 135). Sin is a result of the individual's free choice because sin only comes into existence in the individual's life insofar as she has freely chosen to understand herself as a sinner.

However, the view that sin presupposes sin-consciousness does not seem well-supported by what Kierkegaard says about sin. Khawaja bases her view that sin presupposes sin-consciousness on the following passage from *The Concept of Anxiety*:

Sin presupposes itself...sin comes into the world in such a way that by the fact that it is, it is presupposed. Thus sin comes into the world as the sudden, i.e., by a leap; but this leap also posits the quality [of sinfulness], and since the quality is posited, the leap in that very moment is turned into [a sin] and is presupposed by the quality [of sinfulness] and the quality by the leap. To the understanding, this is an offense; ergo it is a myth. As a compensation, the understanding invents its own myth, which denies the leap and explains the circle as a straight line, and now everything proceeds quite naturally. The understanding talks fantastically about man's state prior to the fall, and in the course of the small talk, the projected innocence is changed little by little into sinfulness, and so there it is.⁹

On Khawaja's reading of this passage, sin "presupposes itself" in the sense that to be conscious of one's sin presupposes that one is in sin already, but to be in sin also presupposes sin-consciousness. Thus "once a given individual has adopted the framework of sin within his own self-understanding...sin aggravates that individual's understanding by appearing circular and self-presupposing" (RE 204). Given the peculiar temporality of sin—because one was not in sin until one is in sin—sin is oddly circular and resistant to explanation of the ordinary, temporally linear sort.

Khawaja's reading of this passage is not the most plausible reading, however, since the passage describes a circular relationship between sin and sinfulness, not between sin and sin-consciousness. It seems far more natural to take this passage to be describing a different paradox about sin. That paradox is this: for a choice to be sin, it must be done consciously, and not, for

⁹ CA 32, as quoted in RE 204. Additions in brackets are Khawaja's.

example, out of mere ignorance. But if one is capable of consciously, freely choosing to sin, it seems as if one must already be sinful, or else why would one freely choose to do what is wrong? But the only way one could become sinful is by freely choosing to sin, for if "sinfulness has come in by something other than sin, the concept would be canceled" — that is, it would not be sinfulness, but something else (CA 32). And so we do not seem to be able to understand how sin is possible: sin seems to presuppose sinfulness and sinfulness seems to presuppose sin. And if this is the correct reading of the passage, it gives no support to the view that sin presupposes sin-consciousness.

Furthermore, there are numerous places in Kierkegaard's authorship that seem to indicate that we are all sinners whether we know it or not, and hence that sin does not presuppose sin-consciousness. For example, Climacus argues in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* against a sentimental view of childhood by arguing, "The rigorously Christian conception of the child as sinner cannot provide the period of childhood with any advantage, because the child has no consciousness of sin and therefore is a sinner without the consciousness of sin."¹⁰ This certainly seems to indicate that one can be a sinner without sin-consciousness.

Admittedly, Kierkegaard does at times seem to suggest that sin requires sin-consciousness in such a way as might initially seem to support Khawaja's reading. In *Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus muses,

how in the world can an essential sin-consciousness be found in a life that is so immersed in triviality and silly aping of "the others" that it can hardly be called sin, a life that is too spiritless to be called sin. [SUD 101]

Here, Anti-Climacus seems to equate the spiritless person's lack of sin-consciousness with a lack of sin. And this makes a great deal of sense: Anti-Climacus defines sin as disobedience to God (SUD 80-1), and to be disobedient, one must be conscious of a command and of the fact that one's actions are not in line with that command. One who fails to follow a rule because she is unaware of it would not thereby be disobedient. But as Kierkegaard so often points out, many people never even get to the point of self-consciously doing anything, because they live thoughtless, spiritless, unreflective

lives. And so on a particularly strict sense of the word, such people are not sinners because they are not conscious, and disobedience requires consciousness.

But having outlined the argument for saying that spiritless people lack sin, Anti-Climacus then goes on to say:

This does not dispose of the matter, however, for the dialectic of sin simply ensnares in another way. How does it happen that a person's life becomes so spiritless that Christianity seemingly cannot be brought to bear upon it at all...? Is it something that happens to a person? No, it is his own fault. [SUD 101-2]

The spiritless person is to blame for his own spiritlessness: it traces back to his own will, however barely self-conscious that will is. And thus that very spiritlessness is itself a form of disobedience against God, and thus is sin. For Kierkegaard, even the spiritless person is a sinner, even if he never becomes conscious of himself as one. And so it does not seem right to say, as Khawaja does, that sin presupposes sin-consciousness, or that "it is with the subjective consciousness of sin... that the history of sin begins."

The strongest and most intensified form of sin does seem to require sin-consciousness, because the strongest and most intense form of sin involves deliberately defying God in full self-conscious awareness of what one is doing. And compared to such spirited, demonic defiance, mere spiritlessness barely looks like sin at all; it is "sin" in a comparatively watered-down sense of the word. But that does not mean it genuinely is not sin at all; Kierkegaard's remarks elsewhere make that clear. Furthermore, even sin in the stronger, intensified sense presupposes sin-consciousness for a different reason than the one Khawaja suggests: it presupposes sin-consciousness because that is what is required for maximal defiance against God, not because one's past actions do not become sin until one has come to understand oneself as a sinner.

Thus Kierkegaard does not seem to equate one's becoming a sinner with one's becoming conscious of oneself as a sinner. And if we reject that equation, I do not see any way to harmonize Khawaja's proposed conception of sin with Kierkegaard's insistence that sin is something one freely chooses. Without the claim that sin presupposes sin-consciousness and therefore comes into existence only with sin-consciousness, the fact that sin-consciousness is the result of one's free choice no longer gives us a way of saying that sin is therefore also the result of one's free choice. And without that, I can

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments Vol. 1*, Vol. 12.1 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992, p. 592.

see no way to make sense of Kierkegaard's repeated assertions that sin is one's own fault in a way compatible with Khawaja's account of sin.

Sin as Alienation

Despite my objection to Khawaja's reading of Kierkegaard here, there is something clearly right about her reading of sin as alienation. It really does seem right to say that alienation, in the sense highlighted by Khawaja, constitutes despair in the Kierkegaardian sense, and as such also constitutes sin in the Kierkegaardian sense.

In the version of the concept of alienation that Khawaja focuses on, what one is alienated from are the grounds of one's own existence (and therefore also from one's own existence, since it rests on those grounds). And to be alienated from the grounds of one's existence and therefore from one's own existence is indeed precisely what Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus defines as despair. Anti-Climacus defines the human self as "a derived, established relation...that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (*SUD* 13-4). Since the human self is "derived," it cannot relate to itself without thereby relating to "another," specifically to "the power that established it" — that is, God (*SUD* 14). Given this description of what it is to be human, despair is a "misrelation" to oneself and to God, or in other words, a state of alienation from oneself and from God. Given that alienation is despair as Kierkegaard defines it, and sin is just despair "before God," Khawaja is certainly right to identify alienation as sin.

The difference between Khawaja's view and mine is that I think the reason alienation is sin is that it is blameworthy: it is morally bad and disobedient to God, and it is one's own fault. The various forms of despair catalogued in *SUD* include denying one's own freedom and one's nature as spirit (*SUD* 33-5, 37-42), absorbing oneself in fantasy or in abstract theorizing that bears

no relation to one's concrete existence (*SUD* 30-2), hating oneself for some weakness or fault (*SUD* 60-7), seeking somehow to create oneself *ex nihilo* (*SUD* 68-9), and raging in active defiance against one's creator (*SUD* 72-4). These are all, at least in Kierkegaard's eyes, blameworthy responses to one's human situation. By contrast, Khawaja does not take sin to entail blameworthiness, and so on her reading, it is not by virtue of being blameworthy that alienation constitutes sin. Instead, Khawaja takes alienation to be sin largely as a matter of definition: alienation-as-something-for-which-we-are-responsible just is what Khawaja takes the term "sin" to mean for Kierkegaard.

However, despite my doubts about this particular aspect of Khawaja's interpretation of Kierkegaard, her reading is a fruitful and illuminating one, in part because of the way it focuses the reader's attention on issues of alienation and givenness which are present throughout Kierkegaard's thought but which are easy to overlook if one reads Kierkegaard (as I do) through a more standard moral-religious lens. On Khawaja's reading, Kierkegaard presents us with a complaint: that we have simply been thrown into the world, without anyone's asking how we felt about it. But rather than bemoaning my absolute dependence on conditions external to and indifferent to my will, Khawaja's Kierkegaard argues that I can instead choose to relate to the givenness of my existence as a gift for which I am infinitely indebted. The appropriate response to such a debt is to work at repaying it at every moment. Seen in this way, my alienation becomes the basis of a life-long task, and thus a source of positive meaning; it ceases to be something that undermines me. This way of seeing Kierkegaard's account of sin and faith from the perspective of alienation results in a proposal which is appealing in its own right, and which illuminates often-neglected aspects of Kierkegaard's thought.