



The Role of Conversion in *The Religion of Existence*

Ryan S. Kemp
Wheaton College
ryan.kemp@wheaton.edu

Abstract: There are two notions of conversion at play for the existentialists. One involves the kind of continual decision that Noreen Khawaja associates with authenticity: affirming an already present identity. The other involves a radical change in character: transforming from one sort of person to another. I argue that Khawaja pays insufficient attention to the second notion and that this may have implications for her development of the first.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Søren; Khawaja, Noreen; conversion; existentialism; virtue formation; authenticity.

It is not uncommon to feel that one's practical projects and commitments, even those that most intimately inform one's sense of self, are deeply and uncomfortably foreign. This feeling is in fact so common that it is difficult to talk about it in terms that do not seem hopelessly trite and even cliché. In my opinion, the best recent literary expression of this sense is found in the work of Karl Ove Knausgaard. In the second book of his six-volume memoir *My Struggle*, he explains what his struggle consists in. He writes:

Everyday life, with its duties and routines, was something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, nor something that was meaningful or that made me happy. This had nothing to do with a lack of desire to wash floors or change diapers but rather something more fundamental: the life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle, because of course I wanted it, but I failed, the longing for something else undermined all my efforts.¹

¹ As far as I know, this is the first time in the memoir that he explicitly references his struggle precisely as "my struggle." Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle*:

If Noreen Khawaja is right, there is something "existential" about both the problem and the solution that Knausgaard sketches.² In her beautifully written and carefully researched book, *The Religion of Existence*,³ she argues that the existentialists (particularly Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre) are concerned, perhaps even essentially so, to explain how a person takes ownership over one's life, how one lives authentically. An authentic person affirms and appropriates not just the particular givens of his facticity—for instance, his habit of washing the kitchen floor on Tuesdays—but the underlying fact that his most characteristic feature is a negative one: to will to be a self is to will to be what did not will itself.

Book 2, transl. Don Bartlett, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2013, p. 67.

² Existential in a more technical sense, as in: a central thesis of at least some of the philosophers generally considered to be in the existentialist canon.

³ Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016. [Henceforth cited as *RE*]

Khawaja identifies this formative act of affirmation as the *sine qua non* of existentialist thought, and she characterizes it as a conversion, albeit one that the authentic person re-inaugurates in every moment. These related notions of authenticity and conversion are themselves matters of debt: Khawaja's thesis is that the chief philosophical concerns of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre are inherited from Christian pietism. In this respect it is not altogether incorrect to say that existentialism is Christian and that Christianity is existential.

In what follows I raise some questions about one facet of Khawaja's rich and engaging story. My questions revolve around a certain ambiguity I see in the notion of conversion. There seem to be two ideas of it at play. One involves the kind of continual decision that Khawaja associates with authenticity. The other involves acquiring a more stable disposition to perform actions of a certain kind, for instance, ethical or religious ones. I suspect that Khawaja pays insufficient attention to the second notion and that this has implications for her development of the first (or, at the very least, for the attractiveness of thinkers, like Khawaja's existentialists, who only develop the first). My comments are limited to Khawaja's treatment of Kierkegaard, since it makes the problem especially clear.

The most surprising aspect of Khawaja's wide-ranging treatment of Kierkegaard is the almost complete absence of any discussion of his so-called spheres (or stages) of existence. While for some readers this will come as a great relief, this absence seems especially strange in the context of an account of conversion. If we look at another influential pietist account developed just a few decades before Kierkegaard's, namely the one developed by Immanuel Kant,⁴ we see conversion explored as an issue concerning how someone might adopt, or come to have, a new and radically distinct practical orientation, what Kant calls a person's supreme maxim. It seems natural to place Kierkegaard in conversation with this notion of conversion and see his account of the movement between existential spheres as his contribution. I draw attention to this issue not merely because it seems to be

⁴ Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793)," transl. George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, transl. and eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 39-216.

an important sense of conversion that is left unexplored in the book, but because it seems to have implications for the kind of conversion that Khawaja does address: the choice to affirm one's given identity.

Consider the example of the young man from Kierkegaard's early work *Repetition*.⁵ Khawaja makes much of this character as someone who exemplifies an attitude of alienation: the young man finds himself unaccountably in love. While, like Khawaja, I think that the young man's problem can be put in terms of alienation, I do not think we can fully understand it in terms of a general observation that he has fallen in love. What is so disconcerting for the young man is that he has experienced a radical change in the quality of his love. He has transitioned from having an aesthetic interest in the beloved to having an ethical interest in love. He says of himself:

How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality?...Guilt – what does it mean?...How did it happen that I became guilty? [KR 200]

This suggests that the most disconcerting aspect of the whole affair is not the experience of love per se, but the experience of being guilty. This is new ground for an aesthete! The young man's longing for what he calls a "repetition" is a longing to return to a place of innocence, in other words, to reverse his conversion.

Khawaja claims that the move the young man needs to make is one of appropriation. He needs to own his guilt. Khawaja also argues that Judge William (the ethical persona who authors Part II of *Either/Or*) is already aware of this, and she quotes the following passage as evidence for it. The Judge writes:

The divine in [a person] lies in this, that he himself, if he so chooses, can give this history continuity, because it gains that, not when it is a summary of what has taken place or what has happened to me, but only when it is my personal deed in such a way that even that which has happened to me is transformed and transferred from necessity to freedom.⁶

⁵ 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. [Henceforth cited as KR]

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.

While this passage rehearses the basic move that Khawaja will go on to associate with existential conversion—a moment of resolve when a person takes responsibility for past deeds—she is less explicit about the basic differences between the way in which the Judge conceives of this act of resolution and the way a person of religious faith might do it. This question of the differences between the two perspectives becomes an especially important question when we acknowledge, as Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* invite us to do, that faith is something that is given, not chosen. So while it may be possible for someone to adopt the right attitude about his or her life, the ability to see that this attitude is the right one may not be possible without a radical change in perspective.

In contexts where religious vision is excluded (as it is for someone like Judge William) Khawaja appears to say that there can still be a non-religious form of authenticity. Since Kierkegaard would surely have been uncomfortable with the idea of, for want of a better word, an authentic aesthete, it seems to me that Khawaja may be too quick to attribute existential success to characters that Kierkegaard is keen to criticize. If authenticity really is the existential gold standard for Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, then we need a way of understanding how the religious life—Kierkegaard's gold standard—is more authentic than its aesthetic and ethical counterparts. For Kierkegaard, authenticity does not seem to be a merely formal relationship between a person's will and the facts of one's life; it is also a matter of the content of one's life. It appears to me that Khawaja misunderstands Kierkegaard with respect to this point. Or perhaps this is a place where the father of existentialism is less existential than his German and French descendants, thinkers—like Heidegger and Sartre—who emphasize

mere formality.

Lastly, and relatedly, Khawaja's analysis of authenticity makes it particularly difficult to see how existentialist accounts of agency can account for certain basic features of human moral psychology. Here I am especially interested in virtue formation. I have already noted how for at least one figure in the existentialist tradition there seems to be room for appreciating how a person might gain proficiency in performing authentic actions. If this really is Kierkegaard's view, it strikes me as being all the better. An account of agency that fails to appreciate that human action is inextricably and considerably influenced by preexisting character traits seems hopelessly naïve. Khawaja's analysis of the existentialists leaves me wondering whether their accounts of agency are naïve in precisely this way. Can the existentialists be existential in the sense that Khawaja emphasizes while acknowledging an aspect of the self that continues and develops over time, making it increasingly likely that a person will act authentically? Though this is a concern that is most appropriately directed at the existentialists, Khawaja's analysis of the tradition spotlights the problem. For this reason I would ask Khawaja both to say something about whether she thinks this issue is a genuine problem and, further, whether the existentialists are intrinsically saddled with it.

Nonetheless, I would like to conclude by emphasizing how impressed I am with this book as an example of judicious and engaging scholarship. It is the outcome of intelligence, care, imagination, and love of the sort that brought many of us to the study of philosophy and religion, and certainly to the study of the existentialists. For this reason, *The Religion of Existence* is a must read for scholars and mere admirers of the existentialists alike.