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Boundaries of an Idea

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Abstract: This essay examines the stakes and scope of my argument in *Religion of Existence*. I outline a broad arc for thinking about the post-existential legacy of authenticity, and respond to four scholarly essays taking up particular themes of my book. Here I discuss what it means to get an author right in a work framed as a study of a concept, consider questions of inclusion and hermeneutics, and reflect on existentialists use of "the moment" as a frame for ontological and ethical inquiry.

Keywords: Pietism; conversion; existentialism; asceticism; cruel optimism; sin; author function; the moment.

The Religion of Existence is a story about the intimacies of religion and philosophy in the modern West.¹ The contours of this story are defined by a commitment to consider the forms as well as the contents of reason, the patterned, norm-driven ways in which concepts work in tandem with what they mean or name. Over three core chapters devoted to new interpretations of the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the book examines the surprising interconnection between Pietistic norms of religious conversion and existential ideas of personal authenticity. I aimed to show how Christian practices of conversion, read in the light of existential thought, can be seen to have the problem of personal identity at their core. And by putting them in relief against Pietist ideas of conversion, I argued that philosophical accounts of subject formation in the existential tradition bear a normative structure, a patterned way of figuring the relation between acts and ends that is best described

as ascetic. In the first and fifth chapters of the work, I develop a theoretical framework to examine the asceticism of philosophy, one I have found particularly suited to tracing the impact of Protestant norms of conversion on twentieth-century approaches to the self that are centered around a critique of presence (from existentialism to deconstruction).

A central, if largely implicit, wager of the book is that understanding existentialism will help us understand something beyond existentialism. The arc traced by my argument makes it possible to understand a crucial chapter in the history of how choice has come to bear spiritual value. On the one hand, this may not seem like something requiring a history. After all, choice is supposed just to be good. It certainly seems better than the absence of choice, and more choices are usually better than fewer. If the existentialists spoke of choice only in this sense, as a matter of choosing between various options or possibilities, it would not be clear what they could offer to a history of choice. But what they mean by choice—by choosing to choose, as existentialists will

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*]

often gloss it—is perhaps closest to what today we would call consent. This has to do with the ability of individual persons to grasp the things they do, even the things they suffer or undergo, as unfolding in an involvement to which they have consented, to which the person can say, in some deep way, "yes." This "yes" has different features, structures, and implications for each of the thinkers I examine. I will not pause here to unpack their differences. What I will say, though, is that conceiving the self as both the subject and the object of this consent is a defining feature of existentialist thought. The self is made through this affirmation—work I propose we should see as ascetic—through the practice of consent that binds a person to the given conditions of their existence.

It is worth pointing out some of the divergent ways of thinking about the self that have grown out of this tradition. On the one hand we can see the imprint of this approach in performative and narrative approaches to identity, which have become prominent in recent decades in the search for non-essentializing ways of figuring identity, and which have allowed many scholars and writers to consider the self as constituted by both absence and relation, something made and re-made through the stories and performances a person enacts before, with, and by virtue of others. A more troubling twist on the ascetics of self-formation might be found in a picture like the one Lauren Berlant paints in her book *Cruel Optimism*.² Berlant explores the "fraying fantasies" of contemporary U.S. and European capitalist democracy, focusing on the affective consequences of a culture whose promise of a path to the good life "becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to 'have a life' that adjustment seems like an accomplishment" (CO 3). In dialogue with Berlant's traumatically inflected account of capitalism's affective present, in which "the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (CO 2), one might wonder what links and what separates what I called the energetic asceticism of authentic selfhood (RE 63-9) from the cruel optimism of capitalist self-betterment?³

² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. [Henceforth cited as CO]

³ One of the implications of my claim that ascetic practice,

I sketch this long arc here, which far outstrips the material focus of my book, to highlight the ways in which the story being worked out in *Religion of Existence* both is and is not about the three figures whose writings form the book's main archive. My book is about asceticism in philosophy, about religion in philosophy, about modernity and identity, about authenticity and conversion. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, I argue, can help us think about the relation between these terms. In fact, they have already shaped contemporary thinking about the relation between these terms, as well as about the kinds of questions these terms occasion in us.

What is an Author?

So what does it mean to get Kierkegaard right, in such a project? There is a difference between claiming that an ascetic structure operates consistently and widely enough across Kierkegaard's writings to be considered a fundamental feature of his thinking, and defending a view that Kierkegaard is (in the sense of "amounts to") an ascetic thinker. My book advances the former claim, not the latter. What I sought to explore is the idea of authenticity that Kierkegaard helps to shape. I have no investment in the question of what this idea means for someone who is committed to Kierkegaardianism to the point that if this system of thought (whose boundaries are drawn in the shade of a hypertrophic author-function) proves wanting in relation to a given problem or critique, the options are either to expand the boundaries of what counts as authorial Kierkegaard or to amend the system.

I can imagine a variety of projects in relation to which the kinds of hermeneutic keys favored by some Kierkegaard scholars (behind the idea of so-called correctives) would prove handy. As Antony Aumann points out, making Kierkegaardian Christianity work as a way of religious life would be exceptionally strenuous without moderating the ascetic demand to renegotiate one's relation to faith and God and self "at each instant," as some of Kierkegaard's writings recommend.⁴ I have no argument against someone

in order to count as ascetic, must not be seen as a means to some further end, is that if authenticity is ascetic in the sense I have described, it will not necessarily produce conditions we identify as freedom or the good.

⁴ Antony Aumann, "Kierkegaard and Asceticism," *Existenz* 13/1 (Spring 2018), 39-43. [Henceforth cited as AA]

wanting to pursue that line of interpretation for theological purposes. At the same time, I grant this project no hermeneutic advantage over a systematic reading that analyzes the normative structure of Kierkegaard's mostly published account of Christianity, treating the structure of the ideas themselves with greater weight than an author's comments (in Kierkegaard's case, usually unpublished) about how we ought to interpret them.

But what is mapped out by what I have just called "the structure of the ideas themselves"? This is the real issue. Aumann seems to think that because I am what he calls a "depth reader" of Kierkegaard (which I take to be a tentative compliment), reading "in and between the lines," I am committed to reading what Aumann claims is "as far and as deep as [I] should" (AA 40), namely taking seriously the possibility that Kierkegaard did not really mean for us to adopt the ascetic structure of Christianity as it appears to readers of his published writings, that the strenuousness and restlessness of Kierkegaardian existence is emphasized in an attempt to compensate for the laxity and indifference Kierkegaard saw in the spiritual life of his age.

My objection here is twofold. The first should be the least controversial: for a study that looks at the evolution of the concept of authenticity across the existential tradition, why would one take the ceaseless striving that dominates Kierkegaard's writing about "becoming a Christian" to be, as Aumann describes it, "an artificially inflated ideal that [Kierkegaard] puts forward in order to unsettle his readers" (AA 40)? The Kierkegaard known to later existentialists was much more heavily shaped by his published than by his unpublished writings, many of which were not yet translated at the height of existentialism. Moreover, even assuming they might have had a suspicion that Kierkegaard has intentionally distorted his account of restless, striving faith to suit the distortion of his contemporaries' spirituality, neither Heidegger nor Sartre is the kind of philosophical reader to be remotely interested in that sort of authorial intention over and against the philosophical work going on in the text itself. The criteria for distinguishing between surface and depth depend on the kind of reading that one is engaged in. As a historically-minded reading focused on the formation of norms and ideas, I cannot accept what I take to be Aumann's basic claim, that a critical and philosophically driven reading (what he calls "depth") requires a commitment to Kierkegaard *qua* author-function (what he calls "deep enough").

The impression one gets from his use of "deep" and "deep enough" is that these phrases describe degrees of difference within the same interpretive strategy. But I think they are distinct interpretive strategies and that they ought to not be confused. Aumann may be right that I emphasize "one side" of Kierkegaard's approach to becoming a Christian (AA 43); while I would never claim that the side I emphasize is the only side, nor that it reflects only resources Kierkegaard offers to his readers looking for what Aumann describes as a "less impractical" view of Christianity, I nonetheless think I am quite right to do so, given the aims of my study.

My second objection to Aumann's proposed interpretive strategy is related to the first, but emphasizes neither the general principle that the boundaries of an idea need not be defined by an author's self-interpretation, nor the acute relevance of that general principle in studies looking at the formation of ideas across traditions, but rather the acute relevance of that general principle in relationship to an oeuvre like Kierkegaard's. Kierkegaard is a writer whose relationship to his own authority is replete with irony, self-consciousness, and anxiety of influence, but also with the effects of a principled refusal to stand in the way of his readers' own creative appropriation of the works. This complexity is so well-known to his readers, that I do not think the categories of surface and depth, artifice and reality can be profitably used in attempting to get at the rational reconstruction or immanent critique that is usually the norm of philosophical interpretation. They are simply too rigid for so layered and reflexive an authorship. Of course this issue is hotly debated and it is impossible to do justice to it here, and I expect that Aumann would argue for a different way of thinking about the challenge of Kierkegaard's authorship than mine. I simply wanted to point out that another of the reasons to resist treating Kierkegaard's strenuousness as merely a corrective and not as a genuine principle in its own right comes from reckoning with the extraordinary measures and practices Kierkegaard used throughout his work in order not to put himself in the position of authority about what his writings mean. That this point itself seems to short-circuit—Kierkegaard as author authorizes his own treatment as non-authorized—is one of the many paradoxical loops of interpretive relation that Kierkegaard's work offers us resources to grapple with. I accept that this complexity allows for

many readings besides and perhaps in tension with the one my own book offers, but I would be skeptical of any reading of Kierkegaard that modified or re-characterized the broad cast of Kierkegaard's writing based on a few key notes (even when supported by some other textual evidence) that claim to represent what Kierkegaard really wanted his readers to understand.

The final thread of Aumann's criticism may be understood as a corollary of the issue just discussed. Does seeing the ascetic element of Kierkegaard's thought, in which labor is not for the sake of another end but itself bears spiritual value, commit me to a kind of soft Pelagianism? Does Kierkegaard not have more to say about grace than my account suggests? Aumann worries about the difference between my claim about spiritual value, or what I call the redemptive element of labor, and the principle of divine redemption reflected in concepts of grace, eternal salvation, and the Augustinian critique of the will that can be found throughout Kierkegaard's writings (AA 42). Aumann is concerned that my way of responding to the difference between redemptive labor and divine redemption (by offering critical re-readings of concepts like "eternity" and "rest") emphasizes only one side of Kierkegaard's overall views and hence cannot save me from the quasi-Pelagian view that even if labor cannot get a sinner to moral perfection and moral perfection cannot get her to heaven, it can do something for her on the spiritual level.

However, when I invoke spiritual value to describe what the practice of authenticity achieves, I do not mean that achieving this value should be understood as a micro-event on the same path that eventually leads to heaven. I mean spirit in the sense that Hegel used the concept of *Geist*, rather than in the sense of eternal salvation or beatitude. That is, the ascetic labor of authenticity finds its end not in the eternal reward or the ethical virtue, but in its being creative of mind, spirit, self. This notion of spirit is what I am tracing in studying the evolution of the idea of authenticity. So on this issue, I repeat my point: I am looking at how an ascetic pattern of normativity structuring existential approaches to self-making emerges in Kierkegaard's writings and makes its way into the works of Heidegger and Kierkegaard. My lens follows the structure of this idea rather than the ways in which Kierkegaard resolves the tensions of the Christian concepts he both inherits and reimagines.

Ascetic Community

Just as I imagine I am settling things, a converse worry appears: To the extent that my book accounts for something beyond the three philosophers at its center, it is also liable to questions that arise from reminders such as Sara Shady's, that existentialists such as Karl Jaspers and Martin Buber may not be represented by this particular way of accounting for the relation between asceticism and philosophy.⁵ Shady's point, importantly, is not that Buber and Jaspers are less engaged or inflected by Pietist traditions of conversion than are Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre, but rather that the Pietist background appears in the thinking of Jaspers and Buber in the context of the social, ethical articulations of neighborly love, rather than in the ascetics of personal authenticity. That being said, Shady does not draw the line between ethics and ascetics in quite this way. She suggests that what one might be tempted to name, or what I have just called, the ethical register of Jaspers' notion of communication or of Buber's principle of the I-Thou, also reflects (or as she puts it, "is consistent with") the structure of ascetic normativity as I have outlined it (SS 47). The relation of ends to acts in neighborly love is a theme with a long and contentious history. How much of this command to love is about the neighbor, about the lovability of this particular person under these particular circumstances, and how much about the duty to love? The transcendent triangulation that allows one to identify a particular being as "neighbor," which for some is an exemplary moral vision, is for others an occasion for moral outrage.

I am convinced that work such as Shady proposes in her essay, work that explores the links between asceticism and existentialism in a wider frame and that looks at concepts and norms that are not as broadly centered in the work of personal cultivation as existential authenticity, is a worthy direction for future research. One of the questions I would ask Shady or anyone seeking to take this up: What is an ascetic notion of community? What is the difference between an ethical notion of community (aimed at the good) and an ascetic one (aimed at producing itself)? And perhaps most critically: If we take the interpersonal, communicative relation structuring both Jaspers' and

⁵ Sara L. H. Shady, "The Religion of Co-Existence: Buber and Jaspers on the Mutuality of Authenticity," *Existenz* 13/1 (Spring 2018), 44-49. [Henceforth cited as SS]

Buber's thought to be about realizing the good, in ways that I do not think ascetic normativity reliably is, could we entertain a further hypothesis, namely that thinking about the good itself bears out an ascetic dimension at its outermost frame?

A separate but important detail about the inclusion of Buber in a pietistic genealogy of existentialism would be to determine the role that Buber's interest in Hasidism may have played in what Shady identifies as his ascetic formulations of mutuality. Buber may offer a unique vantage point to think about how Christian and Jewish piety and reform movements intersect in the intellectual traditions of modern Europe. Shady does not delve into the issue of Hasidism, but it seems to me to be an essential question for any proposed inclusion of Buber into the story I have put forward. Regardless of that, I welcome Shady's proposed expansion of my argument and am grateful for the opportunity to consider how the ascetic pattern I located in existential authenticity may be used in exploring the work of philosophers who emphasize relation and communication as a locus for authentic existential practice.

Freedom and Fault

Dawn Eschenauer Chow's essay takes a focused approach to my reading of Kierkegaard, highlighting my interpretation of sin and laying out an objection to that interpretation.⁶ While her essay considers my early discussion of alienation at some length, the crux of our difference arises from her interpretation of what I call "responsibility," as reflected in the following passage, which I consider as the book's most sophisticated theorization of sin in Kierkegaard:

Without the notion of sin...the individual is charged with nothing; he has nothing – no matter, no surface area, no domain – over which to be responsible. It is this nothing that anxiety discloses, burrowing tacit unease into all the finite plans and projects of everyday life, which presuppose an agent but cannot serve as the explanatory basis for agency. Sin's offensiveness is also its achievement: *it creates responsibility out of nothing*. Or putting it more precisely, 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]

Chow believes I have misunderstood Kierkegaard's discussion of sin because my account "implies that it is not the sinner's own fault, whereas Kierkegaard takes sin necessarily to be the sinner's own fault" (EC 50). The body of her essay proceeds from this claim and, after performing an attempt to defend the view she attributes to me (that sin is not the sinner's fault) by invoking a possible fictive interpretation of sin (an interpretation I myself do not endorse or propose) she concludes that my approach to sin falls short of capturing what she calls the "freely-chosen" aspect of sin for Kierkegaard. In between the dismissed fictive interpretation and the conclusion, Chow engages at some length with my own discussion of sin's self-presupposing character as a way of accounting for the paradoxical situation of the sinner. The paradox consists in the fact that, in Kierkegaardian anthropology, sin appears to be both a feature and a bug. Chow seems to accept that my emphasis on the circular temporality of Kierkegaard's notion of self-presupposition would account for the problem that she raises (EC 53). But she then goes on to raise a subsidiary issue. If the way to solve the tension between sin as fault (bug) and sin as alienation (feature) is to accept that sin only becomes sin when one understands oneself as a sinner, then Chow worries that too much emphasis may be being placed on the role of consciousness in Kierkegaard's notion of sin.

Chow's argument is phrased much more tentatively here than in her opening and concluding discussion, something I find puzzling given that this is the passage on which her critique of my argument is supposed to establish itself most directly. Her objection now appears to lie with the issue not of whether my invocation of sin as self-presupposing grapples with the paradoxical issue of sin's emergence, but with the issue of whether this interpretation covers all the ways in which Kierkegaard talks about sin across his authorship. Chow cites a passage from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in which Johannes Climacus claims that the rigorously Christian view requires a child to be a sinner without consciousness of sin; she contrasts this passage with one from *Sickness unto Death* in which Anti-Climacus reflects a view of sin as requiring sin-consciousness (EC 54).

The response I offered to Aumann above with regard to not confusing boundaries of the idea with the boundaries of the author also applies here. One additional and quite significant objection I have concerning this discussion is Chow's attempt to look for a single theory of sin encompassing the spread between

⁶ Dawn Eschenauer Chow, "Sin as Alienation: On Khawaja's Interpretation of Kierkegaard," *Existenz* 13/1 (Spring 2018), 50-55. [Henceforth cited as EC]

these two texts, written by pseudonymous authors named to stand in contrast to one another, and which Kierkegaard famously noted as reflecting opposite ends of a spectrum for approaching Christianity on which Kierkegaard himself might fall somewhere in the middle. I am not convinced that such a project will yield much in the way of a coherent account of sin. Moreover, regardless of the ultimate prospects of that attempt, I certainly do not think an interpretation of sin based largely in one text should be measured for coherence against the claims about sin made in the other. Chow does not argue for her hermeneutics here, merely asserts them, as though the coherence of the theory depends on the coherence of Kierkegaard's authorship. I have already discussed my views on this subject. What I can add here is this: While I accept that Kierkegaard's writings can be found to bear out many ways of thinking about sin, my theory helps to illuminate distinctive features and constitutive tensions in Kierkegaard's authorship, and also offers what I take to be the most compelling way to understand how Kierkegaardian discussions of sin fed into existential and post-existential theories of temporality in ways that have rarely been recognized (a primary feature of my theory of sin, which Chow does not address).

The crux of my issue with Chow's argument is in her claim that my reading of sin as alienation (feature) implies or requires me to reject the view that sin is the sinner's fault (bug). In the passage of my book that I quoted above, I clearly repeat that the sinner is responsible for her sin. I am not sure how Chow accommodates my claim about responsibility with her impression that I take sin to be something for which the sinner is not at fault. What is the difference between saying that I am responsible for something that has been done and saying that it is my fault? Chow does not explain why she interprets me to have denied the sinner's fault in asserting responsibility. What I can gather from her account is that she seems to think that since I describe responsibility as something generated from nothing, and as covering a givenness of which I am not the author, I must also be saying that the deed is not my fault. But precisely the opposite is the case; in this passage about the emergence of sin, I was describing the paradoxical situation (as sin's emergence inevitably must be) in which I am held responsible—yes, at fault—for something I did not myself create, in the sense of being its author. In other words, I think Chow cannot square my notion of responsibility (which I would be prepared to gloss as fault) with my notion

that responsibility concerns something of which I am not the author (which apparently Chow is not prepared to conceive in conjunction with fault). I shall now try to explain briefly where I think her interpretation goes astray.

Chow repeatedly reminds us of Kierkegaard's insistence that the sinner does not inherit sinfulness, that sin is a feature of freedom and not of necessity. I am well aware of this aspect of Kierkegaard's view and it forms a central focus of my analysis. So if Chow sees my argument linking sin to alienation as standing in tension with this claim about sin being a feature of freedom, I think this can only be because she stops short of recognizing the paradox of freedom. The sin that I commit is my fault; the sinfulness which emerges through the sin I commit is my fault; hence sin is a feature of freedom. But whence comes freedom? Am I free not to sin? Am I free not to be free to sin? This is where the issue of alienation or what Anti-Climacus calls derivate existence comes into the picture. This is the limit to Chow's emphasis that sin is freely chosen. Is freedom also freely chosen? In such a way that one could have chosen otherwise? I do not think the structure of freedom (or fault) operates in this way in Kierkegaard's thought.

Kierkegaard's psychological concepts are marked by the irreducible tension between freedom and givenness. Chow supposes that in talking about sin's relation to givenness or alienation (something I have been calling "feature" and Chow calls "necessity"—although I think the logical language of necessity is qualitatively different from the existential language of givenness), I am diminishing sin's relation to freedom (my "bug" and Chow's "accident"). But given that she finds Kierkegaard's response to this apparent paradox to lie in the language of "fault" (*EC* 52), it is not clear why she does not find my response to this paradox in the language of "responsibility." Kierkegaardian freedom is indeed paradoxical; it is responsibility for one's very alienation. Sin, too, is paradoxical; it comes into the world as fault for something of which one is not the author. This non-authored something is not the-thing-I-did-in-sinning; it is what Heidegger might have described as the factual link between doing-this-sinning-thing and sin's coming into the world. To put all of this another way, saying that sinfulness is a feature of freedom is not the same as saying, as Chow's formulation tends to suggest, that sinfulness is the object of a free choice (as Chow's essay tends to put it). In order to explain why we can talk of the freedom of

sin without the givenness of alienation, Chow would have to explain not only how sin is freely chosen, but how is it that one is free not to sin. I think the self-presupposing nature of sin-consciousness precludes this case. Once we understand ourselves as sinners in such a way that the question of this freedom arises, we are in sin; sin has come into the world.

The Shapes of Conversion

This curious approach to the temporality of conversion is also behind some of Ryan Kemp's questions about my reading of Kierkegaard.⁷ I see two not entirely related concerns shaping his essay. First is his claim that I "may be too quick to attribute existential success to characters that Kierkegaard is keen to criticize" (RK 58). Kemp is particularly concerned that I describe the work of a character like *Repetition's* Young Man,⁸ an aesthete who can barely make it to the ethical moment of owning up to his own guilt, as capable of representing the typical scene of decision that I outline and propose as Kierkegaard's ascetic approach to identity. Here Kemp is pointing to the distinction, meaningful for Kierkegaard, between a figure such as the Young Man or even Judge Wilhelm and a religious individual who has gone through all the spiritual movements that the Young Man fails to achieve. I think Kemp's idea is that the framing concept of ascetic appropriation, of a self formed through penitential choice, shows continuity between aesthetic, ethical, and religious modes of life where Kierkegaard himself might have made stronger distinctions.

I would not deny the importance of such distinctions to Kierkegaard. Where I differ from Kemp is in applying the term "authenticity" primarily to what Kierkegaard saw as the highest or most developed form of existence, that of religious life. Kemp wonders whether "there can still be a non-religious form of authenticity" (RK 58). If we agree to describe the structure of self-choice, as described in my chapter on Kierkegaard, as "authenticity," my response to Kemp is the following: What authenticity indexes is not one

particular form of life over others but the normative pattern of struggle, decision, and relation that I argue structures Kierkegaard's model of the self as it appears across the so-called spheres of existence. To ask if a kind of authenticity can operate at a sphere other than the religious one is to turn authenticity from a description of the way one relates to oneself and one's projects (the formal aspect Kemp notes of later existentialists) into a substantive commitment (or, at the minimum, something dependent on substantive commitment).

I agree with Kemp that Kierkegaard makes important distinctions between self-relation with this religious commitment and self-relation without it. Nonetheless, my aim was to show how the structure of self-relation that later existentialists will call authenticity, without reference to faith, is one that appeared in Kierkegaard's thinking across what might be described as the spheres of existence. The key point was not to show the exceptionality of the religious but to see that religious life was also a matter of this appropriative self-relation. This is because later existentialists were far more likely to be interested in the aesthetic and ethical visions than in the more straightforwardly religious writings, such as the discourse I discuss at length, "We Are Closer to Salvation Now – Than When We Became Believers."⁹ In other words, in the perspective opened up by a genealogy of authenticity, especially one aiming to highlight the interplay between religious and philosophical registers in the existential tradition, it was more important to see the formal connections between Kierkegaard's spheres than to emphasize why Kierkegaard valued the appropriative, penitential self-choice of religious existence differently from the appropriative, penitential self-choice of an ethical mode of life.

The second set of Kemp's questions is about whether the picture I have sketched is one that can accommodate the continuity or development of the self over time. Can the criterion of ceaseless striving, which I hold to be central of ascetic authenticity, allow for one to get better over time? Can one improve in the project and practice of becoming oneself? Sartre, for one, was highly suspicious of claims about virtue formation and

⁷ Ryan S. Kemp, "The Role of Conversion in The Religion of Existence," *Existenz* 13/1 (Spring 2018), 56-58. [Henceforth cited as RK]

⁸ 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.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, "We Are Closer to Salvation Now – Than When We Became Believers," in *Christian Discourses. The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, Vol. 17 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1997, pp. 214-21.

his discussions of the matter he called "progress" offer mostly meager and equivocal clues about its prospects. Heidegger made next to no comment on such matters, framing the methodological work of *Daseinsanalytik* from within the situational unit of the German *je* ("in each case"). Kierkegaard, likewise, emphasized the power of the moment as a fundamental unit of decision (*i ethvert Øieblik*). At the same time, in Kierkegaard's case in particular, the idea of rest that Aumann points to as underserved in my reading might be invoked to moderate this concern. Perhaps the margins of rest in Kierkegaard's authorship might be sources to think about the kind of improvement Kemp has in mind.

Despite this last qualification, I do think the existentialists of my study are largely stuck with this problem, to the precise extent that their beloved category of "the moment," is fundamental. The moment is a liberating category, in some respects, disclosing the traps of bad-faith attachment, highlighting the

open-endedness of all finite projects and the risk they involve. There is something distinctively modernist about the concept of the moment as a frame for ontological inquiry – a synchronic slice of presence and absence, allowing the distractions and concentrations of the present to appear in wide-angle, but making no claims about where we are coming from or where we are going from here. It has something in common with what Bergson called the "cinematographical method" for thinking about being, change, and time.¹⁰ The perspectival pluralism of a single individual, made up by the moments of worldmaking that iterate like a film reel and overlap like a Faulknerian drama but do not completely map onto one another and cannot be relied upon to add up to a durable or coherent tale.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, transl. Arthur Mitchell, New York, NY: Random House 1944, pp. 331 ff.