Between Action and Suffering:
Kierkegaard on Ambiguous Guilt

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Abstract. I draw out from Kierkegaard's work a critical perspective on evaluative frameworks that rely on a sharp distinction between agents and patients. In this perspective, human lives are shaped by complex entanglements of actions and sufferings. By abstracting away from this complexity, the agent/ patient dichotomy occludes important ethical phenomena. I focus here on one such phenomenon: 'ambiguous guilt'. Ambiguous guilt arises from interdependencies between how individuals are passively formed, through what they suffer, and how they are actively formed as agents, through what they do. With reference both to the aesthetic perspective of tragic drama and also the religious idea of human sinfulness, I show how Kierkegaard's work makes a case for our need for evaluative frameworks that remain properly responsive to experiences of ambiguous guilt.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, tragedy, guilt, moral luck, agency, responsibility, complicity, sin.

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Among the deep structures of modern ethical thought is the division we make between those who act and those to whom things happen. More or less explicitly, we distinguish agents from patients. We do not typically apply this distinction to whole lives. Instead, we regard individuals as agents or as patients with respect to given situations and circumstances. You may be regarded as an agent with respect to whether you keep a promise or steal some pears, for instance; but instead as a patient with respect to whether you succumb to Parkinson's disease or – in this broad sense of 'patient' – with respect to where you happen to have been born and in which family.

It is true that we typically apply the agent/patient dichotomy in ways that admit degrees of responsibility. Considered as an agent, I may be held responsible for my actions to a greater or lesser degree. In a court of law, I may be acquitted or found guilty of murder or manslaughter depending on the degree to which I am deemed responsible for another's death. Nonetheless, we typically apply the agent/ patient distinction as a strict dichotomy, such that to treat a person

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in the one way is not in the same respect to treat them in the other.[1] That they carry sentences more lenient than murder in no wise gainsays that verdicts of manslaughter are addressed to agents rather than to patients. Conversely, to be sedated–or force-fed, or sectioned under mental health law–is, in certain respects, to be treated unambiguously as a patient.

The agent/ patient dichotomy reaches beyond our courts of law. Its pervasive role in our ethical life is what P. F. Strawson could rely on, for instance, when he distinguished quite generally between two types of attitude: 'reactive' and 'objective'. The reactive attitudes are the ones we adopt when we treat individuals as agents: attitudes such as resentment or gratitude, anger or forgiveness. The objective attitudes, by contrast, are those we adopt when, as Strawson put it, we treat an individual 'as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of senses, might be called treatment; as something… to be managed or handled or cured or trained' (Strawson, 1974, p. 9). Media outlets divide sharply along these lines in familiar ways, for example when reporting cases involving minors who have been charged with heinous crimes. Some are quick to evoke the reactive attitudes of outrage and blame. Others make a point of maintaining objective distance, representing the children in such cases as themselves victims of wider social forces, pitiable rather than culpable, occasions for social critique.

My aim in this essay is to help make it plausible that our reliance on the agent/ patient dichotomy may blind us to important ethical phenomena. Specifically, I propose to draw on Kierkegaard's work to help bring to light a phenomenon I shall call ambiguous guilt (his own rubric is: 'guilty/ not guilty'[2]). Attributions of ambiguous guilt are based on perceptions of wrongness in a person's life, where the relevant kind of wrongness resists being understood either as having been brought upon oneself or as merely suffered. Bearers of ambiguous guilt are intelligible neither as guilty agents **rather than** suffering patients, nor *vice versa*. Here, the agent/ patient dichotomy strikes a false note.

I shall begin by showing how the idea of ambiguous guilt enters into Kierkegaard's thoughts about the essence of tragedy (§1). I shall then consider why he thinks there is something consoling about tragic drama in its capacity to portray ambiguous guilt as such (§2). Finally, I shall consider how his work further supports a view in which religious categories are

[1] Exceptions to such applications of the agent/patient dichotomy in legal contexts include strict liability in tort law. As Bernard Williams has observed, strict liability is exceptional in the way it detaches responsibility from agency: 'in most spheres of our life regulated by ideas of responsibility, the governing rule relates response to cause: the aim is that the response should be applied to a person whose action was the cause of the harm' (Williams, 1993, p. 57).

[2] 'Guilty? / Not Guilty?' is the title of a section in *Stages on Life's Way* (subtitle: 'a story of suffering'). See *Kierkegaard's Writing* (*KW*) XI pp. 185-494. This text includes a characterisation of the religious person as one who lives before God 'under the qualification: guilty/not guilty' (*ibid*, p. 463).

also responsive to experiences of ambiguous guilt: specifically, the category of human sinfulness (§3). On the overall view that shall emerge, while it may be important in moral-juridical contexts for us sharply to distinguish agents from patients, we need to retain other contexts of assessment which allow us properly to recognize the ways in which human lives are shaped by complex entanglements of actions and sufferings.

§1 Ambiguous guilt as the essence of tragedy

The literary ensemble that makes up the first part of *Either/Or* includes the essay, 'Ancient Tragedy's Reflection in the Modern'.[3] Written in the voice of an ideal-typical aesthete, this essay takes up the question of whether and how the essence of ancient tragedy might also be inflected in modern expressions of this form of drama. For this essayist, the crux of the issue is whether and how modern tragedies can convey 'tragic guilt'.[4] The following dense passage articulates why he takes this to be the crux:

> [A] difference between ancient and modern tragedy that I regard as very important… [is] the different nature of tragic guilt. It is well known that Aristotle insists that the tragic hero have *hamartia* [error, missing the mark]. But just as the action in Greek tragedy is something intermediate between action and the suffering, so also is guilt, and therein lies the tragic collision. But the more the subjectivity is reflective, the more Pelagianly one sees the individual thrown solely upon himself, the more ethical guilt becomes. Between these two extremes lies the tragic. If the individual has no guilt whatever, the tragic interest is annulled, for in that case the tragic collision is enervated. On the other hand, if he has absolute guilt, he no longer interests us tragically. It is, therefore, surely a misunderstanding of the tragic when our age endeavors to have everything fateful transubstantiate itself into individuality and subjectivity. We want to know nothing about the hero's past; we load his whole life upon his shoulders as his own deed, make him accountable for everything, but in so doing we also transform his esthetic guilt into ethical guilt. (*KW* III.1: 144)

On this account, it is of the essence of tragic drama to portray a type of guilt that is 'something intermediate between action and the suffering'. Let me approach an interpretation of what this means by way of a comparison with two potential rivals.

[3] I use here Alastair Hannay's translation of the title of this essay (Kierkegaard (1992) [1843]). The Hongs offer the less pithy: 'The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama' (*KW* III.1 p. 137).

[4] I take it that Kierkegaard's own authorial voice is not to be conflated with those of the fictional authors which populate his pseudonymous literature. In the hermeneutic approach I favour, and adopt in this essay, Kierkegaard's fictional authors are designed to typify various points of view, where the latter are to be distinguished not primarily by reference to differences of opinion but rather by different normative orientations as embodied in concrete forms of human subjectivity.

Consider, first, any view in which the essence of ancient tragedy is to portray the suffering that arises from our inherent human vulnerability to that which lies beyond our control. So conceived, tragedies are, in Bernard Williams' terms, 'stark fictions', apt to expose the 'inexplicable necessity' of human suffering, 'a necessity which may indeed be ascribed to the activities of the gods, but if so, to gods who do not explain themselves or take any notice of the suffering that they bring about' (Williams, 1996, 51).[5] On this approach – call it Tragic Necessity – what belongs to ancient tragedy is its unflinching portrayal of human suffering at the hands of fate, natural necessity, misfortune, and, not least, the capricious gods.[6]

A second useful contrast is any view in which the essence of ancient tragedy is to portray practical agents who face ethical dilemmas arising from conflicts among competing ethical values or principles. A paradigm for this approach – call it Tragic Conflict – is the reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* that is often attributed to Hegel, in terms of the coming to consciousness of certain inherent tensions within the value-framework of Greek ethical life: roughly, the conflict between the values represented by Antigone herself and associated more generally with women, the home and family life, and, on the other hand, the values associated with Kreon and more generally with men, the city and politics.[7] In this reading, it is due to this determinate conflict of values that, whichever way she chooses with respect to the question of whether or not to honour her dead brother, Antigone cannot but do wrong.

Compared with the two approaches just outlined, Kierkegaard's essayist offers a perspective on ancient tragedy that incorporates elements of both but is reducible to neither. As in Tragic Necessity, he emphasizes the idea of a boundary between the arena of effectual human agency and, on the other hand, the sphere in which we find ourselves at the mercy of forces beyond our control. As in Tragic Conflict, moreover, he associates tragedy with protagonists who experience a sort of ethical 'collision'. However, he understands the tragic

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[5] With these references to his work, I do not mean to suggest that Williams exactly endorses the Tragic Necessity view. It is true that much of what he says, for example about Sophocles' plays as exemplary 'stark fictions', appears to point in this direction. However, Williams also expresses suspicion about any general account of the essence of tragedy: 'One of several disservices that Aristotle rendered to the understanding of Greek tragedy was that of generating the idea that there is some one specific effect that makes tragedy ethically significant.' (Williams, 1996, p. 50)

[6] It is tempting to associate Tragic Necessity with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Certainly, this view captures a way that Nietzsche's early thoughts on tragedy are sometimes presented (see e.g. Soll, 1988.) However, Tragic Necessity arguably oversimplifies even the early Nietzsche given, for example, his description of Sophocles' portrayal of Oedipus in terms of a 'divine dialectic' of activity and passivity (Nietzsche, 1999 [1872] p. 47). See also Han-Pile, 2006.

[7] According to Hegel, 'The original essence of tragedy consists … in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification … The consequence is that in its ethical life, and because of it, each [side] is nevertheless involved in guilt.' (Hegel, 1988 [1835], p. 1196). Interpretations of Hegel on tragedy that emphasise the idea of a two-sided conflict of right against right, in general and with special reference to *Antigone*, include Stern, 2001 and Williams, 2012. See also Nussbaum 1986 and 1989.

collision in a different way: neither merely in terms of the horrors arising from our inherent human fragility and vulnerability, nor yet as reducible to the dilemmas faced by practical agents due to determinate conflicts between competing values. At the heart of his alternative account is the idea of tragic guilt as 'something intermediate between action and the suffering'. How then are we to understand this?

In the passage cited above, the singular character of tragic guilt is defined through a contrast with 'ethical guilt', where the latter refers quite generally to guilt arising from culpable acts of wrongdoing. The contrast is twofold. Firstly, tragic guilt involves attributions of types of wrongness (*hamartia*) that are not unambiguously ethical in character.[8] This is reflected in the way such wrongness is apt to be described in terms other than the narrowly moral: in terms of one's having become tainted or polluted, for example, or having fallen short of the mark, or of one's life having become somehow out of joint or dissonant. Secondly, the bearers of tragic guilt are not, as such, unambiguously ethical agents: their fall into *hamartia* cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as having been brought upon themselves.

Kierkegaard's essayist means here to tread a fine line, however. His contrast between types of guilt, tragic (or 'aesthetic') and ethical, is qualified by the fact that he presents both, after all, as types of *guilt* (*skyld*).[9] To deny that tragic guilt is unambiguously ethical is not to deny that it involves attributions of wrongness and lost innocence; and to deny that the bearer of tragic guilt is unambiguously its agent is not to say that it in no way pertains to the agency of those who bear it. Here we return to the crucial phrase, 'something intermediate between action and the suffering'. In the view of Kierkegaard's essayist, any sharp dichotomy between actions and sufferings, agents and patients, can only cover over the range of human experience that it belongs to ancient tragedy to bring to light.

From this perspective, there is something one-sided in both of the views outlined above. Whereas Tragic Necessity places the emphasis on human passivity and suffering, under exposure to chance and necessity, Tragic Conflict makes central problems of choice and

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[8] With reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and specifically *hamartia*, Daniel Greenspan presents Kierkegaard as a forerunner of more recent critiques of moralizing interpretations (where the latter see the tragic hero's suffering as 'poetic justice' for his faults.) Summarizing Kierkegaard's critical perspective on moralizing interpretations, Greenspan writes: 'The ambiguity of Aristotle's innovative term, ἁμαρτία, is lost, becomes senseless, or rather is stripped of its original flexibility and reconstituted in the strictness of an ethics in which the subjects of reason, no matter what, are always themselves to blame. The *Poetics'* early modern readers interpreted it as such, from the Italians of the sixteenth century down to Lessing. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, represents an early break with this misrepresentation of tragic ἁμαρτία in both Aristotle and the poets. It would take modern scholarship decades to catch up with him.' (Greenspan, 2010, p. 65) The flexibility of ἁμαρτία in Aristotle and tragic drama is closely argued in Stinton, 1975 and see also Vernant 1988, p. 65ff.

[9] I take it that by 'aesthetic guilt', Kierkegaard's essayist means nothing other than *hamartia* as portrayed in the aesthetic form of tragic drama, i.e. what he also calls 'tragic guilt'.

practical reason in the face of determinate conflicts of value. In the alternative view of Kierkegaard's essayist – call it Tragic Ambiguity – what it belongs to ancient tragedy to explore is instead the ambiguous human experience between ethical guilt and mere victimhood. As he puts it, 'between these two extremes lies the tragic'.

Paradigmatic for Kierkegaard's essayist here is Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy. What he associates above all with these towering plays is the idea of one's becoming guilty *through familial bonds*. He writes:

> Tragic action always contains an element of suffering, and tragic suffering an element of action: the aesthetic lies in their relativity… The ever admired trilogy of Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Antigone*, hinges essentially on this genuine tragic interest. But hereditary guilt involves the contradiction of being guilt and yet not being guilt. The bond by which the individual becomes guilty is precisely [filial] piety, but the guilt that it thereby incurs has every possible aesthetic amphiboly. (*KW* III.1, p. 150)

In this reading, the tragic interest of the *Oedipus* plays turns on the way their protagonists come to find their very acts of fidelity and reverence put them in the wrong, where this leads to a radical form of ethical disorientation. Is Antigone merely a victim of her sullied family history and its ill-fatedness? Or, by how she acts out of her natural (albeit troublingly intimate) fidelity to her dishonoured brother, is she guilty of ethical failure? In the view of Kierkegaard's essayist, her tragic interest lies in our lack of a method to settle such questions. If, in a straightforwardly ethical spirit, we ask whether Antigone is guilty or innocent, we may find ourselves with good reason to answer 'neither', or 'both'. That she herself cannot settle the question–am I guilty or not? – is the crux of her tragic predicament.[10]

Kierkegaard's essayist describes this type of guilt (in a flourish of Hegelian dialectics) as a 'contradiction of being guilt and yet not being guilt'. The paradox is based on an ontological premise about, for example, Antigone's relationship to the fate through which her family comes to ruin. The premise is that this relationship is an interdependence of actions and sufferings. In attending to her dead brother, say, or in her break with Haemon, the actions Antigone takes are genuine deeds, genuinely hers. It is not as though these merely befall her.[11] On the other hand, her actions are inseparable from the filial bonds through which she comes to inherit the calamitous destiny of the Labdacids. If she finds herself guilty, this is therefore

[10] See especially *Antigone,* lines 920-928.

[11] For an illuminating discussion of the problematic sense in which Antigone exemplifies an ideal of moral autonomy, see McNeill, 2014.

not as an agent **rather than** a patient. In tragic guilt, the active, agential element cannot be separated from the passive, suffering element in the way required by unambiguous attributions of ethical guilt. The two are thoroughly intertwined.

This conception of ambiguous guilt might seem to anticipate themes in the more recent Anglophone debates about 'moral luck'. As introduced into these debates by Thomas Nagel, 'constitutive luck', for example, is the class of those factors that significantly shape who one is, but which lie outside one's control: one's genes, family traits, upbringing and so forth (Nagel, 1993). 'Constitutive moral luck' is then the paradox of one's being deemed praiseworthy or blameworthy for such features. The idea of tragic guilt in *Either / Or*, however, would not be well captured by the idea of constitutive moral (bad) luck. For this would be to miss the other side of tragic guilt, *viz*. the dependence of how the tragic hero suffers her fate on how she acts. On this account, and in contrast with the idea of sheer bad luck, the tragic hero is in some sense complicit in the way her life is shaped by factors beyond her control.[12]

Now, the notion of complicity may seem to take us back into the realm of straightforwardly ethical categories. After all, we sometimes use the concept of complicity in such a way that an individual can be deemed unambiguously guilty with respect to her collusion in some moral wrongdoing. To be clear then: the tragic protagonist is not supposed to be complicit in her fate if a person's actions can be complicit only when they causally contribute to some discrete moral wrong and/ or are performed under conditions of full agential control.[13] The relevant notion instead is that of one's being implicated *qua* agent in a process that is nonetheless radically beyond one's control. While the tragic hero suffers her fate, she does not *merely* suffer it: her own agency is engaged.

Kierkegaard's texts do not offer a detailed elaboration of this notion of agential implication.[14] In the remainder of this paper, however, my aim is to further explore why he thinks of ambiguous guilt as a falling outside of the sphere of ethical evaluation, under a certain

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[12] Compare Jean-Pierre Vernant who writes of the 'tension that the tragedians constantly maintain between the active and the passive, intention and constraint, the internal spontaneity of the hero and the destiny that is fixed in advance for him by the gods' (Vernant, 1988, p. 79)

[13] In contemporary discussions, complicity is often analyzed in terms of a relation between principal and secondary agents where, considered in themselves, the actions of a secondary agent may be morally innocent but nonetheless blameworthy with respect to the actions of a principal action. See e.g. Lepora & Goodin, 2013.

[14] One place we might look for such elaboration is the current work on implicit bias. However, often building on ideas of moral luck, major figures in this field continue to rely on a sharp division between guilt and innocence even when they admit cases of 'no-fault responsibility'. See e.g. Fricker, 2016. More amenable to the idea of a region 'between' action and suffering is the account of 'middle-voiced agency' developed by Béatrice Han-Pile in her recent work on Nietzsche (Han-Pile, 2020).

conception of the ethical, and as such that we need other contexts of assessment properly to bring it into view.

§2 Ambiguous guilt and the consolations of the aesthetic

In *Either/ Or*, the idea of ambiguous guilt arises in the context of an argument regarding the historical development of tragic drama. Kierkegaard's essayist wants to show how interdependencies of action and suffering play out in different ways in ancient and modern tragedies, respectively.[15] In ancient tragedies, he argues, the element of suffering and fate is dominant; in modern tragedies, the balance tips more toward subjectivity and action. The bottom line, however, is that any tragedy worthy of the name must serve to make manifest phenomena of this type: experiences of ethical disorientation, in the form of ambiguous guilt, arising from interdependencies of action and suffering.

It soon becomes clear that this argument also has a critical edge. It is animated by a perceived threat of aesthetic stultification: specifically, the worry that modern audiences are increasingly desensitized to tragedy. Kierkegaard's essayist supposes that, under the sway of the Enlightenment ideal of the reflectively self-determining agent, fully autonomous and self-sufficient, modern audiences tend to operate with a sharp dichotomy between actions and sufferings. For this reason, he fears, modern audiences are liable to miss the phenomenon of ambiguous guilt: to miss it entirely, or to misinterpret it by trying in a given dramatic context to settle the question one way or the other: is the protagonist agent or victim?

This is evidently the worry behind such passages as the one cited above which highlights the danger of an audience 'Pelagianly' seeing the individual protagonist 'thrown solely upon himself' and which ends on this note of lament: 'We want to know nothing about the hero's past; we load his whole life upon his shoulders as his own deed, make him accountable for everything, but in so doing we also transform his esthetic guilt into ethical guilt.' (*KW* III.1, p. 144) [16] The essayist goes on to muse that the tendency to try to treat the tragic hero on the model of the self-determining agent may 'have its basis in the working of the

[15] Kierkegaard here inherits a task central to discussions of tragedy after Lessing. Joshua Billings describes as follows this task, as it emerged for German intellectuals from the 1770s onwards: 'Despite Lessing's advocacy, Shakespeare still seems unclassifiable in the classical dramatic categories. The challenge for the younger generation will be to formulate Shakespeare's difference from the ancients while still seeing him as a part of a continuous tradition of tragedy—or, perhaps better, of the tragic… Can ancient and modern tragedies be compared? Is the tragic possible in modernity?' (Billings, 2014, pp. 43-44)

[16] The allusion is of course to Pelagius (c. AD 354 – 418), in opposition to whose doctrine of human freedom Augustine developed his interpretations of original sin.

whole age toward the comic' (*Ibid*). He means to highlight a comically incongruent aspect of our modern ethical stance and self-image, given that our lives remain in so many ways fragile and dependent, at the mercy of forces beyond our control. In this perspective, we are comically deluded when we carry on as though we were sovereign authors of our own life-stories, perhaps even congratulating ourselves on having long outgrown childish notions of fate or hereditary guilt.[17]

In the view of Kierkegaard's essayist, it is a deleterious consequence of our modern tendency to view the protagonists of tragic drama as self-determining agents that we are liable to miss out on the distinctive **value** of this aesthetic form. For he articulates a view in which the value of tragic drama is closely bound up with its capacity to portray ambiguous guilt. In this view, tragic drama is apt to provide us with a kind of relief from strictly ethical forms of appraisal, *i.e.* from the stance in which we apply the agent/ patient distinction for the purposes of moral evaluation. If we will but let it, great tragic drama can provide relief from this perspective by opening up a different context of assessment:

> Intrinsically, the tragic is infinitely gentle; esthetically it is to human life what divine grace and compassion are... The ethical is rigorous and hard. Therefore, if a criminal before the judge wants to excuse himself by saying that his mother had a propensity for stealing, especially during the time she was pregnant with him, the judge obtains the health officer's opinion of his mental condition and decides that he is dealing with a thief and not with the thief's mother. (*KW* III.1, p. 145)

In a court of law, if I have committed a crime and am not deemed mentally ill, the judge will apply to me the model of the autonomous agent: I will – to some degree, but at any rate strictly, unambiguously – be held culpable. This is the sense in which 'the ethical is rigorous and hard'. In contrast, the 'infinitely gentle' aspect of tragic drama is its capacity to reveal such ethical contexts of assessment to rely in general on a simplifying abstraction from the complex entanglements of action and suffering that shape human lives.

How, then, is the perspective of tragic drama supposed to be consoling? Is it somehow supposed to be morally **exculpatory**? Surely not. Consider, for example, a passage from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, apropos Shakespeare's *Richard III*. What makes Shakespeare's protagonist such a monster?

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[17] For illuminating discussion of this theme of the modern tendency toward the comic, with illustrative reference to the films of Werner Herzog, see Eagan and Thornton, 2020.

> Evidently the fact that he could not bear the pity he had been subjected to since childhood. His monologue in the first act of *Richard III* is worth more than all the moral systems which have no inkling of the terrors of existence or of the explanation of them. 'I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty / To strut before a wanton ambling nymph; / I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world, scarce half made up, / And that so lamely and unfashionable / That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.' Such natures as that of Gloucester one cannot save by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics in fact only makes sport of them… (*KW* VI, p. 105)

It would not be plausible to say that, in the perspective afforded by Shakespeare's play, Gloucester's heinous crimes are somehow excused or even rendered less monstrous. That he has become radically alienated from the social world and that he therefore cannot be saved by *Sittlichkeit*, communal ethical life–none of this is supposed to exonerate him. Here, we return to the point that, in the account of Kierkegaard's essayist in *Either/ Or*, tragic guilt is not assimilable to moral bad luck. For, it involves instead an inseparable relationship between how the protagonist is passively formed, through what befalls him, and how he actively constitutes himself as an agent, through what he does.

How then can the perspective afforded by tragic drama be consoling if this is not by being exculpatory? Certainly, there seems nothing much consoling, neither for protagonists nor audiences, in the bleak narrative content of great tragedies such as *Antigone* or *Richard III*. What Kierkegaard's essayist nonetheless sees as consoling for the audience, I submit, is the very way in which this form of drama is capable of giving expression to ambiguous guilt *as such*: that is, in all its ambiguity. With reference to Sophocles, he writes:

> [W]hen Antigone, in defiance of the king's injunction, decides to bury her brother, we see in this not so much a free act as a fateful necessity, which visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children. There is indeed enough freedom in it to enable us to love Antigone for her sisterly love, but in the inevitability of fate there is also a higher refrain, as it were, that encompasses not only Oedipus's life but also his family. (*KW* III.1, p. 156)

This suggests a view in which it belongs to the art of tragic drama simultaneously to elicit from the audience two contrasting types of attitude. Deploying Strawson's terms, we might describe this as the superimposition of 'objective' onto 'reactive' attitudes. As the drama unfolds, audiences first respond to the tragic hero's deeds *qua* deeds, as it may be in admiration or in recoil. However, such reactive attitudes are then overlaid by the objective stance in which the audience is invited (sorrowfully) to contemplate the hero as ill-fated. (In ancient tragedy,

and by contrast with the modern, Kierkegaard's essayist sees this invitation to the objective stance as typically reinforced by the chorus.[18]) Plausibly, this dramatic effect relies on the portrayal of the hero as caught up in processes over which they lack overall control–but in which they nonetheless participate.[19] Thus, Sophocles portrays Antigone's decisions as participating in the process that is 'as it were, the afterpains, Oedipus's tragic fate spreading out into each branch of his family' (*Ibidem*).

This suggests, in turn, the following interpretation of the description in which tragic drama represents a region 'between' action and suffering. Rather than applying the agent/patient distinction as a strict dichotomy, we may in general treat the two disjuncts instead as models. On this approach, cases will vary according to whether they warrant the one model or the other, relative to a context of assessment. If I am caught stealing, it may be warranted in a context of legal sanction to apply to me the model of the responsible agent. If I am mentally ill, this may in the same context of assessment warrant instead the model of the suffering patient. For Kierkegaard's essayist, however, the possibility of deep entanglements between action and suffering means that there must be some situations, in some contexts of assessment, in which neither model is warranted. Or, rather, these situations warrant neither model to the exclusion of the other but may, by the same token, permit the simultaneous use of both – as in the overlaying of objective over reactive attitudes just described. Such mixed representations belong not in the sphere of the ethical – the context of moral evaluation and *Sittlichkeit*–but in the sphere of the aesthetic, specifically in works of tragic drama.

Lest we complain that the tragic perspective is no longer available to us, since we no longer believe in fate, Kierkegaard's essayist offers his own version of the Antigone story.[20]

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[18] As Kierkegaard's essayist puts it: 'whether the chorus comes closer to epic substantiality or to the lyrical élan, it nevertheless seems to provide "the more," so to speak, that will not merge in the individuality' (*KW* III.1, p. 143). He goes on to specify this 'more', over and above the intentions and actions of individuals, with 'the essential fateful factor' in Greek tragedy (*Ibidem*).

[19] With reference to the passage just cited, Julian Young complains that Kierkegaard is mistaken to infer that we must think of Antigone in some sense as free for us to love her for her sisterly affection (Young, 2013, p. 143). To demonstrate the fallacy, Young offers: you don't have to attribute freedom to a sunset to love it. This criticism surely misses the point. The relevant type of reaction to Antigone's sisterly affection is not the type we show to inanimate objects or still-life scenes but the type we show to those we regard as agents, participants in an unfolding drama. This general type of reaction is also exemplified for example when Kreon's intransigence elicits our resentment.

[20] His appeal to the transhistorical validity of the tragic perspective puts Kierkegaard's essayist in opposition to historicist accounts according to which, as Vernant put it, 'the rise, flowering and decline of tragedy – all within the space of less than a hundred years – mark a particular historical moment of strictly limited duration' (Vernant, 1988, p. 79). For his part, however, Vernant also sometimes writes as though ancient tragedy discloses something inherent in the human condition: 'Tragedy expresses this weakness inherent in action, this internal inadequacy of the agent, by showing the gods working behind men's backs from beginning to end of the drama, to bring everything to its conclusion. Even when, by exercising choice, he makes a decision, the hero almost always does the opposite of what he thinks he is doing' (*Ibid*, p. 83).

This modernized Antigone discovers the appalling truth of her father's life but, for all she knows, she is the only one in the know. We are to imagine her jealously guarding these secrets, out of love for her father and for the sake his honour, but in such a way as to close off her own chances of fulfillment, not least through the self-disclosure of marriage. Thus, her anxious guarding of the family secrets renders this modern Antigone ethically disoriented, ambiguously guilty with respect to ethical norms of transparency and self-disclosure. Kierkegaard's essayist wants to show that, no less than Sophocles' original version, his modernized Antigone exemplifies ambiguous guilt.[21]

In the overall account, then, tragic drama is consoling not by being exculpatory but by relativizing the very standpoint of ethical evaluation to the extent that the latter relies on a sharp agent/patient distinction. Its 'gentleness' consists not in giving us excuses but in opening up a perspective on *hamartia* which fosters attitudes of sorrowful contemplation over and above ethical appraisal and moral censure. Such drama thereby can therefore serve to explore important dimensions of what it means to be human: dimensions that would be occluded if the only perspective available to us were the one in which questions of guilt always have unambiguous answers.

In my view, these points illustrate what is missed by those readings of Kierkegaard in which his only real interest in the aesthetic is as a surpassed stage in ideal stories of self-improvement, to be left behind as soon as possible for higher things. That is, part of what goes missing in such readings is the aspect of Kierkegaard's work in which the aesthetic is *vindicated,* as its own delimited sphere and salutary counterweight to the ethical. In this aspect, his work has an interest in protecting the aesthetic sphere against encroachment from the ethical, parallel (albeit ultimately subdominant) to its interest in the religious.

Finally, however, let me try also to bring out some of the specifically religious dimensions in Kierkegaard's thinking about ambiguous guilt.

§3 Ambiguous guilt and the consolations of the religious

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[21] Among plausible candidates for a modern literary case study in ambiguous guilt is Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Julian Moynahan comments: 'Pip is Dickens's most complicated hero, demonstrating at once the traits of criminal and gull, of victimiser and victim…. He is, in short, a hero sinned against and sinning: sinned against because in the first place the dream was thrust upon the helpless child by powerful and corrupt figures from the adult world; a sinner because in accepting for himself a goal in life based upon unbridled individualism and indifference to others, he takes up a career which Great Expectations repeatedly, through a variety of artistic means, portrays as essentially criminal.' (Moynahan, 1960, p. 77).

In a wider view of his work than the essay on tragedy in *Either/Or*, it is clear that Kierkegaard had a particular interest in the possibility of giving expression to ambiguous guilt. Evidence for this includes an entry in one of his notebooks which falls under the heading 'Vocalizations for *On the Concept of Anxiety*'. The heading is itself intriguing. In his biography, Joakim Garff comments:

> The most horrifying part [sc. of its subject matter] was not included in *The Concept of Anxiety.* Rather, it cowered shamefully in the last of the nine little, colourful school notebooks used for drafts, and the white label affixed to its shiny black paper cover cryptically states "Vocalizations for On the Concept of Anxiety." In the Semitic languages, a vocalization is the addition of vowels to the consonants, which makes the letters pronounceable and gives the word meaning. So with his "Vocalizations" Kierkegaard wishes to clarify the meaning of *The Concept of Anxiety*, perhaps to reveal a text behind the text. Thus as a sort of motto he wrote on the outside of the booklet with a coarse pencil, "loquere ut videam te," which translates roughly as "speak, that I may see you". (Garff, 2000, p. 348)

For Garff, the image of vocalizations, and the accompanying Latin motto, betray a struggle to give voice to whatever repressed experiences may lie behind Kierkegaard's personal interest in the topics of anxiety and hereditary sin.

While Garff is no doubt right that they have an autobiographical dimension, it is nonetheless striking just how varied are the items to be found among Kierkegaard's 'vocalizations'. Under the subheading, 'Examples of the Consequences of the Relations of Generations', he cites various figures from folklore, including Robert le diable, who discovered himself to have been the progeny of his mother's tryst with the devil, and Høgne, who discovered himself to have been conceived through his mother's intercourse with a troll.[22] The list also includes Beatrice Censi and Shelley's treatment of her tragic history of sexual abuse and patricide; a case in which a girl follows her sisters into prostitution; and a scenario in which the discovery of a dark secret about his father profoundly disturbs the life of a son. Also, these: 'the addiction of drunkard parents passed on to the child / addiction to thievery / unnatural vices / melancholia / madness that makes its appearance at a certain age.' (cited in Garff, *Idem.*)

Many of Kierkegaard's examples involve relationships to parents or siblings. This rule is not without exception, however. In several places, he envisages a scenario in which a girl

[22] Garff's insinuation that the examples in Kierkegaard's 'vocalizations' are hidden away in a notebook is rather belied by the fact that many of these appear in published work: for example, the case of Robert le diable and Høgne also feature in the essay on tragedy in *Either/ Or*: see *KW* III.1, p. 155.

falls into ambiguous guilt through seduction by an older man.[23] The structure of this example suggests others (perhaps 'Stockholm Syndrome', for instance). Moreover, in the broadly Hegelian terms of the essay on tragedy in *Either/Or*, the family – as a determining factor in making a person who he or she is – is subsumed under the broader category of 'substantial determinants'. In addition to the family, this encompasses the state, various kinds of social institutions as well as, in the world of Greek tragedy, fate. Extrapolating from Kierkegaard's examples, we might cite being acculturated into a racist society, for instance, as one sort of 'substantial determinant' which may shape individual agents and foster conditions of ambiguous guilt.

Thus, while some of his examples are no doubt quixotic and cryptically autobiographical, there is a strong case that, as Kierkegaard sees it, ambiguous guilt is all too familiar and pervasive in human experience. From this perspective, his 'vocalizations' can be read more sympathetically than in Garff's talk of shameful cowering: namely, as phenomenological touchstones for his reflections on anxiety and the doctrine of hereditary sin. In fact, the importance of religious categories in his thinking about ambiguous guilt is already indicated in the essay on tragedy in *Either/ Or*. In the course of his discussion of the sorrowful repose of tragic drama, Kierkegaard's essayist also introduces, in passing, the idea of a distinctively religious take on ambiguous guilt. He writes:

> But although the esthetic provides this repose before sin's profound discrepancy is asserted, the religious does not provide it until this discrepancy is seen in all its frightfulness. At the very moment the sinner almost swoons under the universal sin that he has taken upon himself because he felt simply that the more guilty he became the greater would be the prospect of being saved, at that same dreadful moment he has the consoling thought that it is universal sinfulness that has asserted itself also in him. But this comfort is a religious comfort… (*KW* III.1, p. 146).

Thus, alongside the consolations of the aesthetic, the essayist also envisages a distinctively religious form of relief from the hard taskmaster of ethics. This is the perspective in which we are *all* ambiguously guilty, before God and just by being human, all and equally in need of grace.

What distinguishes these two kinds of consolation, aesthetic and religious? At one level, they console in the same way: *i.e.* through their capacity to relativize the narrowly ethical

[23] See, for example, *KW* VIII pp. 66-67; 238 fn. 26. Plausibly, this is also the significance of the reference, in the vocalizations notebook, to the legend of Merlin and Nimue (where, in one version, the young Nimue is both attracted and repulsed by Merlin as one who through sorcery could take her unwillingly).

standpoint and acknowledge ethically ambiguous dimensions of our lives. However, Kierkegaard evidently sees the religious consolation as having its own distinct character and irreducible existential force. In the passage just cited, the religious interpretation of ambiguous guilt is briefly indicated as 'sin's profound discrepancy' and as 'universal human sinfulness' asserting itself in the individual. How, then, does Kierkegaard mean to differentiate this religious take on ambiguous guilt from what he finds in tragic drama?

A comprehensive discussion of this issue would need to take in a large body of work, not least *The Concept of Anxiety*. I shall not try to provide such a discussion here. Instead, I want to bring to bear some evidence that stands in closer textual proximity to the essay on tragedy in *Either/ Or*: namely, the little homily with which that singular book ends, as its last word ('Ultimatum'). Within the fictional economy of *Either/Or*, this sermon is ingeniously framed as offering a perspective which cannot be reduced to either the ethical or the aesthetic. (In the fiction, the sermon is the work of a certain Jutland minister, the friend of the Judge who typifies the ethical sphere and who passes the sermon on to his other friend, the aesthete of Part One, for the latter's edification.)

Early on in his sermon, the preacher emphasizes that what he has to say will be lost on anyone who is unfamiliar with a certain sort of experience. He introduces the sort of experience he has in mind as a feeling of being unable to take refuge in the 'cosy conclusion' that, since we humans are frail creatures, even God surely cannot expect too much of us, so long as 'one does what one can':

> Was it such an easy matter for you, my listener, to determine how much that is: what one can? Were you never in such danger that you almost desperately exerted yourself and yet so infinitely wished to be able to do more, and perhaps someone else looked at you with a skeptical and imploring look, whether it was not possible that you could do more? Or were you never anxious about yourself, so anxious that it seemed to you as if there were no sin so black, no selfishness so loathsome, that it could not infiltrate you and like a foreign power gain control of you? Did you not sense this anxiety? For if you did not sense it, then do not open your mouth to answer, for then you cannot reply to what is being asked; but if you did sense it, then, my listener, I ask you: Did you find rest in those words, "One does what one can"? (*KW* III.2, p. 345)

This passage invokes two sorts of scenario. The first involves a situation of crisis. We might for instance envisage an aid-worker in a war zone, or in the midst of a public health crisis, working flat-out, but still turning away people in desperate need. In retrospect, the aid-worker **might** console herself with the thought, "well, I did all I could!". But she might instead

find herself restlessly anxious, haunted by the question, "**could** I have done more?" The second scenario involves a prospective sense of ethical frailty, a feeling of vulnerability to 'breaking bad'. We might think here of the recovering addict who knows all too well how close she is at every moment to relapse. From the perspective of such experience, sin is always crouching at the door.

While these two sorts of case are in some ways quite different, they share a feature we might describe as *ethical self-doubt*. (Notably, the Judge in *Either/ Or* makes quite the contrary impression, *i.e.* one of ethical self-satisfaction.) However, the relevant kind of self-doubt is evidently not supposed to be the kind that involves comparing oneself unfavourably to fellow humans. It is not a feeling of inadequacy in the light of others' ethical prowess. On the contrary, the preacher immediately goes on to sketch a third sort of scenario in which ethical self-doubt is intensified through experiences of the all-too-human frailties of those others whom one is otherwise most inclined to admire.

This point sheds light on how Kierkegaard sees sinfulness in relation to tragic guilt. Both categories respond to human vulnerability to *hamartia* through our relationships to that which lies beyond our control.[24] Both therefore stand in contrast to strictly ethical categories. They differ, however, in this. In tragedy, what is at issue is our vulnerability to *hamartia* in ways that differentiate us from our fellows, e.g. *qua* daughter of Oedipus or *qua* son of Gertrude–or *qua* son of Michael Pederson Kierkegaard.[25] In the religious understanding of sin, what is at issue is our falling short *qua* human. This difference is reflected in contrasting interpretations of ambiguous guilt. Construed as tragic, ambiguous guilt takes shape against some standard of an exemplary human life: some ethical standard against which Antigone's life, for example, could only be deemed to fall short. Construed as sinfulness, by contrast, ambiguous guilt puts us all in the same boat: in the words of the Apostle, 'For all have sinned (*Hēmarton*), and fallen short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23).

In closing, let me consider three natural objections to the preacher who gets the last word in *Either/ Or*. The first is that the kind of self-doubt he envisages is either simply unwarranted or serves to reveal nothing more than a person's individual shortcomings. The

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[24] Notably, 'sin' and its cognates are used to translate *hamartia* and its cognates in standard English translations of the New Testament. For a case for continuity between classical Greek and Christian uses, see Roberts, 2014. (With reference to the NRSV, Roberts observes that 'of the 269 occurrences of *hamartia* and its cognates in the NT, all but two (Acts 25:8 and 1 Peter 2:20) are translated as "sin"' (p. 356 fn 26).

[25] In a Kierkegaardian view, the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is in fact especially complicated. According to the essay on this play in *Stages on Life's Way*, *Hamlet* is in the end dramatically incoherent in virtue of the way that it hovers between the aesthetic perspective of the tragic and the religious perspective of human sinfulness. See *KW* XI, p. 453.

second objection is that, while ethical self-doubt may be an issue for some, there is surely nothing very consoling in such religious doctrines as that we are all sinners, all in the wrong before God, all deserving His righteous punishment. The third objection stems from a worry from roughly the opposite direction: are religious appeals to human sinfulness really just a way of trying to let ourselves off the ethical hook?

Consider, then, the following line of response to our example of the embattled aid-worker, haunted by self-doubt. Either she really has done all that could reasonably have been asked of her, in which case her self-doubt is unwarranted; or she could reasonably have been expected to have done more, in which case her self-doubt serves only to disclose her own specific shortcomings, nothing about her ethical standing *qua* human.

In Kierkegaard's terms, we might describe this objection as reasserting the ethical against the religious. It may seem to gain traction from the principle: *ought implies can*. If the aid-worker could not reasonably have been asked to have done more, there is no reason for her to feel she should have done more. (Likewise, in this way of thinking, if the addict could not reasonably be expected not to relapse, she need not blame herself when she does.) Notably, however, this sort of appeal to *ought implies can* relies on what has been called its 'duties-restricting' reading: if I cannot ϕ then it is not the case that I ought to ϕ.[26] However, the principle can just as well be deployed *modus tollens*, i. e. on a 'capacity-expanding' reading: if I ought to ϕ, then I can ϕ. The possibility of this reading helps to explain why the anxiety of self-doubt gets its grip. Our aid-worker's anxiety is that perhaps she **should** have done more so that she therefore cannot rest secure in the supposition that she did all she could.

It is also salutary in this connection that Kierkegaard's preacher does not pretend to have a knock-down argument against the assertion of the stance in which, so long as 'one does what one can', with respect to what we ought to do, we are ethically in the clear. Rather, he appeals directly to experiences of anxious self-doubt in which this stance feels hollow and unsustainable. If his listeners profess to have no familiarity with such anxiety, this preacher has nothing further to say.

What counsel does he offer for those who own such anxiety? Our second line of objection will help to bring this out. The objection might be put in this way: Kierkegaard underestimates the difference between the ideas of the tragic and of sinfulness. For, granted that the Greek tragedies explore ethically ambiguous dimensions of human life, this sharply contrasts with the Judeo-Christian doctrine of sin as transgression against God, wilful, defiant,

[26] Martin, 2009, pp. 109ff.

culpable. Though it may be accompanied by consoling doctrines of grace and salvation, there can surely be no solace in the religious idea of sinfulness itself.

This objection raises doctrinal issues – touching on the relationships among original sin, specific sin and hereditary sinfulness – on which I shall not venture to pronounce. However, it is striking how Kierkegaard's preacher associates a kind of consolation with the very experience of coming to see oneself as sinful. Indeed, the overall theme of his sermon is the solace and 'upbuilding' to be found in the thought that 'before God we are always in the wrong'. Now, one might naturally wonder why this thought would not only aggravate the anxiety of ethical self-doubt. But the preacher insists that, on the contrary, the thought is apt not only to calm this anxiety but even to replace it with a kind of elation:

> Then an end is put to doubt, for the movement of doubt consisted precisely in this: that at one moment he was supposed to be in the right, the next moment in the wrong, to a degree in the right, to a degree in the wrong… Thus every time doubt wants to trouble [a person] about the particular, tell him that he is suffering too much or is being tested beyond his powers, he forgets the finite in the infinite… because this thought, that he is always in the wrong, is the wings upon which he soars over the finite. This is the longing with which he seeks God; this is the love in which he finds God. (*Ibid,* p. 352)

Consider again our two paradigms of ethical self-doubt: the one who anxiously wonders whether she has done enough and the one who anxiously anticipates her imminent relapse. Both might own a feeling of being tested beyond their ethical powers. But the preacher's thought is this: such anxious self-doubt can get its grip on us only when we take ourselves to be relatively powerful ethical agents, such that it is up to us to get things right. The doubts then well up: whether I have done all I could, whether I will succumb, whether in general I am up to the task, ethically. What can calm these doubts, the preacher wants us to see, is the thought that, before God, we are **never** up to scratch. Against the bar of infinite goodness and wisdom, all our finite strivings can only show up on a par, equally paltry. Paradoxically, the thought of our inadequacy before God can in this way be experienced as liberating, even the wings upon which a person might 'soar over the finite'.

The third objection arises at just this point. The worry is that, in the end, the religious perspective seeks an excuse for giving up on ourselves ethically. Does not the preacher's cure for anxious self-doubt boil down to a kind of lethargic fatalism? Is it not that since, before God, 'all our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Is 64:6), we might as well give up trying to achieve

anything in the actual world? In fact, he immediately intervenes to forestall just this sort of worry when he continues as follows:

> In relation to God we are always in the wrong. But is not this thought anesthetizing… does it not vitiate the power of the will and the strength of the intention? Not at all!… [S]hould not the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong be inspiring, for what else does it express but that God's love is always greater than our love? Does not this thought make [a person] happy to act, for when he doubts he has no energy to act; does it not make his spirit glow, for when he reckons finitely, the fire of the spirit is extinguished? (*Ibid*, p. 353)

To see the reasoning behind these rhetorical questions, consider again the case of the recovering addict, desperate to stay clean but anxiously anticipating a relapse. With specific reference to addiction, *The Concept of Anxiety* includes an astute little phenomenological sketch of just such anxiety as follows:

> The occasion comes [sc. the temptation to relapse]; anxiety has already discovered it. Every thought trembles. Anxiety sucks out the strength of repentance and shakes its head. It is as though wrath had already conquered. Already he has a presentiment of the prostration of freedom that is reserved for the next moment. The moment comes; wrath conquers. (*KW* VIII, p. 116)

In short: by making it all the more salient, anxiously obsessing over the possibility of relapse becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. By contrast, the preacher thinks the perspective he associates with soaring over the finite can in fact spur us on ethically, by lifting our gaze away from our relative successes and failures. Paradoxically, he thinks, recognizing our general inadequacy before God can in this way be invigorating and empowering. (Notably, the preacher's counsel here closely approximates the methodology of twelve step programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which seek to build up from a ground-level acknowledgement of the addict's powerlessness over an addiction.[27])

The more positive side to the preacher's counsel in this connection is the motivating power of love. He insists that the thought of being always in the wrong, before God, will be of no help to a person whatsoever if he merely assents to its truth. For it to be any help, this thought must instead be an expression of loving devotion. The preacher can therefore perfectly well agree that there is no solace to be found in cold or begrudging assent to a doctrine of human sinfulness – or, for that matter, of divine goodness. As embodied in the comportment

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[27] For a full discussion, see Batho 2017.

of loving devotion, however, he maintains that the thought of oneself as sinful is so far from being enervating that it can become the very inspiration for action.

Still, we might press the question: why is seeing oneself as sinful supposed to help make one 'happy to act'? Even when joined with loving devotion, would not seeing oneself in this way lead instead to a wish either to draw back in shame or perhaps to lose oneself in impassive contemplation of the divine? I do not think Kierkegaard's preacher means to claim that sin-consciousness and love are jointly sufficient for the *vita activa,* under any particular conception of the latter. His idea, rather, is of a specific form of liberation: from paralyses of self-doubt arising from experiences of ambiguous guilt. He envisages a condition in which a person's mode of self-assessment is so to speak no longer given over to deontic score-keeping: that is, the religious person is no longer dominated by the question of whether, and to what degree, she is (or may become) guilty of particular wrongs.

As in the case of the tragic, the thought of one's being always in the wrong before God is plainly not supposed to be exculpatory. Nonetheless, it is notable that the approach of Kierkegaard's preacher is guided by an underlying contrast between guilt, understood in a narrowly ethical way, and sinfulness, understood in a distinctly religious way. Seeing oneself as always in the wrong before God, on this account, means learning to live with the ambiguity of ambiguous guilt. In Kierkegaard's terms, the religious person exists before God, 'under the qualification: guilty/not-guilty' (*KW* XI, p. 463).

None of this of course is supposed to prove the objective validity of the religious. For all that the preacher shows, the perspective he depicts as a soaring over the finite may be but a consoling illusion. What Kierkegaard's work does provide – so I hope to have shown – is a case for the reality of ambiguous guilt. By the same token, this is a case for supposing we need to find **some** way to live with this reality. Moreover, as we have seen, the critical edge of Kierkegaard's view is sharpened by his sceptical stance toward modern ideals of rational self-determination. The last word here can therefore go to his aesthete:

> It [sc. our modern age] is conceited enough to disdain the tears of tragedy, but it is also conceited enough to want to do without mercy. And what, after all, is human life, the human race, when these two things are taken away? Either the sadness of the tragic or the profound sorrow and profound joy of religion. (*KW* III.1, p. 146)

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