

Participation in Grace: Kierkegaard's Corrective to Luther

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Daniel Watts** 

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Abstract

I offer an interpretation of the target of Søren Kierkegaard's corrective to Luther as not merely cultural Lutheranism but Luther's very conception of what it means to be receptive to grace. On this interpretation, while Kierkegaard affirms that salvation is by grace alone, and through faith alone, he thinks that Luther errs when he conceives of salvation as a process in relation to which the believer is merely passive. Instead, in Kierkegaard's view, receptivity to grace involves a distinctive, middle-voiced, form of human agency in which the believer learns to acknowledge her need for grace. With reference to Kierkegaard's discourses on patience, and their thematic proximity to the spirituality of the *Philokalia*, I illustrate this conception of active-passivity and show how it is compatible with an uncompromising Lutheran emphasis on human powerlessness. With reference also to his insistence of the irreducible importance of the participant's perspective, I further draw out from Kierkegaard an account of why the temptation may arise to erroneously interpret the core tenets of Luther's teaching, in the mode of a theory of soteriological passivity.

Keywords

Kierkegaard, grace, patience, humility, agency, Neptic, Luther, passivity

‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ (1 Cor. 4:7)

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard opposed tendencies within Danish Lutheranism that he saw as giving rise to a merely nominal form of Christianity: anaemic and self-indulgent, ‘the monstrous illusion of Christendom’. He found occasion in this regard to return to pre-Reformation

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traditions and themes, not least *memento mori* and *imitatio Christi*. His work nonetheless contains numerous appreciative references to Lutheran theology and to Luther himself.

These points are by now well-established. From them, critics sometimes adduce the following overall picture of Kierkegaard's relations to Luther. In his own local context, Kierkegaard saw it as part of his task to provide a corrective, in turn, to Luther's corrective to 'works-righteousness', given that the latter was by now being exploited as a 'fig leaf for the most unchristian shirking'.¹ Accordingly, Kierkegaard's work contains a critique of a certain configuration of cultural Lutheranism. Nonetheless, he agreed with the fundamentals of Luther's theology itself. On this picture, while he felt his own place and times required a change of emphasis and rhetorical strategy, in substance Kierkegaard was and remained a Lutheran thinker. As David Law puts it, his aim in this regard was to provide 'a corrective to contemporary Lutheranism's misuse of Luther's theology of grace'.²

Much in this picture is right. As we shall see, it is true that Kierkegaard endorsed the core tenets of Luther's teaching about salvation. That is, he affirmed that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone.³ In this article, however, my aim is to explore a point of substantive disagreement regarding the interpretation of these teachings. For, as we shall see, Kierkegaard also came to discern in Lutheran thought a fundamental confusion about the relationship between grace and works.

On the account I shall develop, the root of the confusion is Luther's failure, in Kierkegaard's eyes, to do justice to the human agency at work in receptivity to grace. It is this failure that leads Luther—erroneously, in Kierkegaard's view—to move from the core doctrines of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, to a theology of passivity according to which those who are saved are saved by God, through a process that in no way involves them as agents. In Kierkegaard's view, the core Lutheran teachings do not entail this theology of passivity since genuine receptivity to grace does involve

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), vol. 3, p. 70.

2. David Law, 'Cheap Grace and the Cost of Discipleship in Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination*', in Robert L. Perkins (ed.), *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself! International Kierkegaard Commentary* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), p. 115. Likewise: 'Kierkegaard has no quarrel with this [Luther's] doctrine ... What he is concerned about is the misuse of this doctrine by cunning human beings and the crafty ruses human beings employ to evade the Gospel or, worse still, to exploit it to justify their worldliness' (ibid., p. 114). See also e.g. A.L. Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); D. Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); S. Walsh, *Kierkegaard and Religion: Personality, Character, and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3. I focus in this article on Kierkegaard's thinking about these two of Luther's four *solae*. By adopting this focus, I do not at all mean to deny the importance for Kierkegaard of the uniqueness of scripture and of the revelation of *Christ alone* as the object of faith.

human agency, albeit in a special way. In short: as a way of being receptive to grace, *faith is itself a kind of work*.⁴

I hope to illuminate his dispute with Luther in two ways: firstly, by clarifying Kierkegaard's own view of the role of human agency in receptivity to grace; secondly, by assembling some resources in Kierkegaard to construct a diagnosis of Luther's alleged confusion, that is, an explanation of why the confusion naturally arises. In both respects, I will argue that Kierkegaard's thought has deep thematic affinities with an earlier tradition of Christian spirituality: namely the tradition of the *Philokalia* and of the so-called 'Neptic Fathers'. On the view that shall emerge, receptivity to grace requires a distinctive form of agency in which the believer participates in a transformative process that she did not initiate and over which she lacks overall control: namely, the process of learning to accept her need for God.

One might surmise that a Christian thinker who denies that humans are wholly passive in matters pertaining to their salvation must side with 'synergism' against 'monergism'. For the standard alternative to Luther's theology of passivity, in which God's agency is the only agency at work in salvation ('monergism'), is the theology of cooperation, in which salvation depends on divine and human agency working together ('synergism').⁵ However, it is not my aim in what follows to make a case for numbering Kierkegaard among the friends of synergism, so conceived. Instead, I hope to draw out the distinctiveness of what I shall call the Neptic-Kierkegaard view, which I shall present as offering a distinct alternative. As I shall argue, the viability of this alternative relies on the possibility of keeping distinct the idea of a process in which more than one agent participates from the idea of a process which depends on separate contributions from autonomous and efficacious powers.

From 'Grace Alone' to Soteriological Passivity

A telling entry in Kierkegaard's journals runs as follows:

[I]t is quite rightly taught that no one is saved by good works, but by grace—and consequently by faith. Fine. But am I myself unable to do anything with regard to becoming a believer? Here one must either immediately answer with an absolute No, and then we have a fatalistic understanding of election by grace, or one must make a little concession. The fact is that people are always suspicious of subjectivity, and when it was established that a person is saved by faith, people immediately became suspicious that too much had been conceded here. So they added,

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4. In his recent monograph on Kierkegaard's relations to Luther, David Coe focuses on Kierkegaard's express criticisms of Luther. Coe regards these criticisms as overblown, based on a superficial reading of a selection of Luther's sermons (*Kierkegaard and Luther*, London: Lexington, 2020). In Coe's view, Kierkegaard was a 'lifelong Lutheran' who had more in common with Luther theologically than his own more acerbic remarks about Luther would suggest. *Pace* Coe, I hope to make it plausible that, both explicitly and implicitly, Kierkegaard's thought diverges from Luther's on genuine matters of substance.
 5. For an historical and comparative synopsis of this controversy, see Daniel Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism: Is Salvation Cooperative or the Work of God Alone* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

'But no one can give himself faith, it is a gift of God for which I must pray'. Fine. But can I myself pray, or are we to go further and say, 'No, praying—i.e. praying for faith—is a gift of God that no one can give himself; it must be given to him'. And what then? Then, once again, the ability to pray rightly that I might receive the ability to pray rightly must also be given to me, etc. There are many, many complications—but at some point they must all be stopped by subjectivity. Making the criterion so great, so difficult can be praiseworthy as an expression for the majesty of God's infinity, but subjectivity cannot be excluded unless we want to have fatalism.⁶

Kierkegaard evidently did not want 'fatalism'. As is clear also from other remarks, he came to associate Luther himself with a certain confusion in this regard, conflating a certain conception of human passivity in matters pertaining to salvation with his laudable desire to give all the glory to God.⁷ However, it is also clear that Kierkegaard did not locate the source of this confusion in Luther's core teaching about salvation. On the contrary, 'it is *quite rightly* taught that no one is saved by good works, but by grace' (my emphasis). Indeed, reaffirmations of this teaching occur throughout his writings, often with explicit reference to Luther.⁸

In the passage cited above, Kierkegaard envisages a regress in which, at each new level, conditions for a person's receiving a divine gift are in turn regarded as divine gifts. He reasons that, at one level or another, this regress must ultimately come to a halt in something that can be attributed to the believer, as the believer's own doing—unless, that is, we really are to ascribe to the believer a condition of absolute passivity. When he refers in this context to 'a fatalistic understanding of election by grace', it seems clear that what he has in mind is therefore any view which renders the believer passive and inert in the process of salvation, the latter conceived as *solely* the work of God. Accordingly, we might summarize the view he wants to resist as follows:

(Soteriological Passivity)

Those who are saved are saved by God, through a process that merely happens to them, in no way involving them as agents.

This doctrine, Soteriological Passivity, constitutes part of a possible interpretation of Luther's core teachings. On this interpretation, *sola gratia* holds that salvation comes solely through the elective power of grace *and therefore* wholly independently of human agency.

6. N.J. Cappelørn et al. (ed. and trans.), *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), vol. 6, pp. 420–21. Hereafter, *KJN*.

7. For example: 'Luther is somewhat confused, i.e. confused in a dialectical sense' (*KJN*, vol. 4, p. 375). That Kierkegaard's worry here pertains to Luther's understanding of the nature of faith, and not merely to cultural Lutheranism, is confirmed by the self-admonition he draws as a consequence: to concentrate on 'the dialectical definition of faith' (*ibid.*). Elsewhere, Kierkegaard writes: 'The more I look at Luther the more I am convinced that he was a confused character' (*KJN*, vol. 5, p. 307).

8. For example: 'Lutheran doctrine is excellent, is the truth'. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 24.

Sola fide is then to be understood accordingly, so that whether a person genuinely has faith is fixed solely by whether the elective power of grace is at work upon them. On this view, the process of being saved can be understood by analogy with cases in which a person's physical life is saved by means of cardiopulmonary resuscitation, for example, or by cases in which a person is profoundly changed by means of a process of brainwashing that is forced upon them. This interpretation is the one Kierkegaard evidently wants to resist: he wants to affirm both the conjunction of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* and, on the other hand, an ineliminable role in a person's 'becoming a believer' for their own subjectivity and agency.

There are certainly many passages in Luther—and in other texts of the Reformation—that suggest adherence to Soteriological Passivity. In a recent article, Simeon Zahl comments: 'As Luther repeats over and over, what is needed is simply "that our works cease and that God alone works in us"'.⁹ As *prima facie* evidence of Luther's theology of passivity, Zahl cites the following striking passage from Luther's *Lectures on Galatians*:

Without any merit or work of our own, we must first be justified by Christian righteousness, which has nothing to do with the righteousness of the Law or with earthly and active righteousness. But this righteousness is heavenly and passive. We do not have it of ourselves; we receive it from heaven. We do not perform it; we accept it by faith ... Then do we do nothing and work nothing in order to obtain this righteousness? I reply: Nothing at all.¹⁰

Luther's insistence that, with respect to our salvation, we can simply do 'nothing at all' is closely tied to Luther's rejection of traditional conceptions of 'free-will'. As he declared in his conclusion to *The Bondage of the Will*:

For if we believe it to be true, that God fore-knows and fore-ordains all things; that He can be neither deceived nor hindered in His Prescience and Predestination; and that nothing can take place but according to His Will, (which reason herself is compelled to confess;) then, even according to the testimony of reason herself, there can be no "Free-will"—in man,—in angel,—or in any creature!¹¹

His uncompromising stance against any form of synergism, in which divine grace and human agency are independent but potentially cooperative powers, is likewise reflected in Luther's governing conception of Christian life. Oswald Bayer comments as follows on the idea of a *vita passiva*, as Luther's way of rejecting the Aristotelian choice between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*:

[W]hen Luther says that the Christian life is 'passive' (*vita passiva*) he means that God is the active subject and that the Christian is the object of God's action. The Christian life

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9. Simeon Zahl, 'Non-Competitive Agency and Luther's Experiential Argument Against Virtue', *Modern Theology* 35.2 (2019), p. 203.
 10. Christopher Brown, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works* (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), vol. 44, p. 73.
 11. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. H. Cole (London: Bensley, 1823), chap. 10, sect. 167.

therefore is passive in the sense that it suffers, it undergoes God's work and so passively receives it.¹²

It is true that Luther allows a sense in which the state of faith is itself active: that is, in the sense of being productive.¹³ Nonetheless, his insistence on the believer's strict passivity in relation to faith—the object of God's action—follows the interpretation of *sola gratia* in terms of Soteriological Passivity.¹⁴ Likewise, Calvin refers to the analogy—'which they spitefully throw at us'—between a person being acted upon by God and a stone being thrown, 'set in motion by an outside force, and borne along by no motion, sensation, or will of its own'.¹⁵ While Calvin wants to reject the analogy, the question remains whether this does not require a move away from any conception of human receptivity to grace as simply passive.¹⁶

In what follows, my aim will be to clarify how Kierkegaard thinks he can hold on to the core Lutheran teachings while rejecting Soteriological Passivity. We should be clear at the outset, however, that Kierkegaard plainly would not want to assert what Luther denies when the latter denies 'free-will'. Plausibly, what Luther denies, in his dispute with Erasmus, is indeed incompatible with *sola gratia*: namely, the view that humans enjoy the freedom to stand back from the question of whether to cooperate with God

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12. Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. J.G. Silcock and M.C. Mattes (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 22.
 13. Thus, in a famous passage of his 'Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans', Luther describes faith as 'living, creative, active' (J. Dillenberger (ed.), *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (New York: Anchor, 1961), p. 24). It is clear however that what is active in this conception is the *state* of faith, not the human being who may or may not find herself in this state.
 14. The passivity of the believer with respect to faith is also emphasized by Mary Haemig when she summarizes 'the Reformation breakthrough' as 'the realisation that God considers human righteous for the sake of Christ, not on the basis of any human merit or worthiness, and that faith (trust) in this promise, a faith itself given by the Holy Spirit, is all that is needed for salvation' (M.J. Haemig (ed.), *The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 6). See also Frank Ruda's summary of Lutheran soteriology: 'I have no power against God's will. Freedom and belief result from an event of grace. Franz Rosenzweig rightly stated that Luther's believer "has neither belief nor unbelief, but both ... happen to him"' (*Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), p. 17).
 15. J.T. McNeill (ed.), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2nd edn (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 334.
 16. For his part, Calvin appears to make just such a move when, rejecting the analogy with the stone, he goes on to quote Augustine: 'Yes, you act and you are acted upon ... The Spirit of God who acts upon you is the helper of those who act' (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 334). Calvin astutely comments: 'when he directly adds that from the word "help" it can be inferred that we also do something, we must not so understand it as if something were to be attributed to each of us separately' (*ibid.*, pp. 334–35). I shall argue below that Kierkegaard's view is compatible with Calvin's warning not to treat human participation in grace on the model of a separate contribution.

and the power to choose one way or the other. For it is difficult to see how it could be coherent to say that a person's salvation is 'by grace alone' and also contingent on the right exercise of their own independent power of freedom of choice. For his part—and despite his reputation as a champion of 'criterionless' choices—Kierkegaard could hardly be more emphatic in his rejection of *liberum arbitrium*:

To maintain that freedom begins as *liberum arbitrium* (which is found nowhere, cf. Leibniz) that can choose good just as well as evil inevitably makes every explanation impossible. To speak of good and evil as the objects of freedom finitizes both freedom and the concepts of good and evil.¹⁷

If not the liberty of rational indifference, what kind of role for human agency does Kierkegaard think is compatible with the core Lutheran teachings? In taking up this question, we can take a lead from the following passage in *For Self-Examination*:

The Apostle James must be drawn forward a little, not for works against faith—no, no, that was not the Apostle's meaning either—but for faith, in order, if possible to cause the need for grace to be felt deeply in humble inwardness, and, if possible to prevent grace, faith and grace as the only redemption and salvation, from being taken totally in vain.¹⁸

Bringing to the fore the Apostle James is evidently bound up with Kierkegaard's aim to provide a corrective, in turn, to Luther's Pauline corrective to works-righteousness.¹⁹ (Notoriously, Luther once denigrated the Epistle of James as an 'epistle full of straw'.²⁰) However, Kierkegaard is careful to clarify that the aim here is not to set works against

17. Reidar Thompte (ed. and trans.), *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 112. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard writes: 'A perfectly disinterested will (equilibrium) is a nothing, a chimera' (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 236). On Kierkegaard's thoroughgoing rejection of *liberum arbitrium*, and its Lutheran connections, see C.Q. Hinkson, 'Kierkegaard's Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in His Thought' (PhD diss, University of Chicago, 1993).

18. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, p. 24.

19. Notably, however, the extent to which Luther's animus against works-righteousness is genuinely Pauline is itself questionable. See esp. E.P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters and Thought*, 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 2016).

20. Martin Luther, 'Preface to the New Testament', in John Dillenberger (ed.), *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 19. Kierkegaard comments as follows: 'Luther's teachings are after all not a return to the original Christianity, but a modification of Christianity. He emphasizes Paul one-sidedly and makes less use of the gospels. And he himself best refutes his Bible theory—he who rejects the Epistle of James. Why? Because it is not part of the canon? No, he does not deny that. But on dogmatic grounds. Thus he [Luther] himself has a higher point of departure than the Bible'. *KJN*, vol. 6, p. 391. For a brief discussion, see L.C. Barrett, 'Kierkegaard's Appropriation and Critique of Luther and Lutheranism', in J. Stewart (ed.), *A Companion to Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015), p. 183. See also R. Bauckham, 'Kierkegaard and the Epistle of James', in P. Martens and C. Stephen Evans (eds.), *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016).

faith, and then to emphasize works rather than faith, but instead to show how faith is itself constituted by a kind of work. Here he characterizes the kind of work which is ‘for faith’ as learning to feel deeply one’s need for grace, ‘in humble inwardness’.

It is important for my approach in this article that the work that is ‘for faith’—that is, the work of humbly acknowledging one’s need for grace—is not identical to faith. I take it that, for Kierkegaard, Christian faith manifests humble inwardness in a particular way: a way that involves, *inter alia*, putting one’s trust in Christ’s atoning work.²¹ However, this type of inwardness can also manifest itself in other ways: in ‘hoping against hope’, for example, or in self-giving love. My focus in what follows is on how Kierkegaard conceives of ‘humble inwardness’ itself, and the way it involves human agency, not as specifically manifest in Christian faith (or hope, or love). My first aim is to illuminate how Kierkegaard conceives of receptivity to grace, as such, as itself a kind of work.

Agency and Patience

It is customary for expositors of the writings that Kierkegaard attributed to his fictional author, Johannes Climacus, to make passing reference to the latter’s historical namesake. Samuel Bergman is more expansive than most:

Johannes Climacus, a monk who headed a monastery on Mount Sinai in approximately 579–649 ... was famous throughout the Middle Ages for his research on ascetic mysticism, which he describes in his book *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. ‘Ladder’ in Greek is *climacus*, and thus the name Johannes Climacus took hold. The book had a strong influence on what at the time was called ‘the spirituality of Sinai’, a certain direction in Christian mysticism that flourished again later in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The central idea was that prayer is the supreme expression of the solitary mystical life. Through concentration in prayer, a person rids himself of images and thoughts that flood his spirit, and through uninterrupted, unceasing prayer he struggles against distraction to achieve concentration in thought. Several passages in his writings were also included in the famous collection titled *Philokalia*, which is one of the most important and unique documents of Eastern Christianity.²²

The full title of the collection to which Bergman refers is *The Philokalia of the Neptic Fathers*. This title reflects its central theme of watchfulness (*nepsis*), as a spiritual practice that aims to cultivate a state of stillness (*hesychia*) and receptivity to God.

I believe that Kierkegaard’s writings, not least those he called ‘upbuilding’, have deep roots in ‘the spirituality of Sinai’.²³ My interest here is not in questions of historical

21. Compare John 6:28-29: ‘Then they said to him, “What must we be do, to be doing the works of God?”. Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent”’.

22. Samuel Bergman, *Dialogical Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber*, trans. A. Gerstein (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 103.

23. For a detailed study of Orthodox influences on Kierkegaard, see A. Magnusson, *Kierkegaard and Eastern Orthodox Thought: A Comparative Philosophical Analysis* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2019).

influence, however, but in the significance of Neptic themes for Kierkegaard's understanding of receptivity to grace.

A returning motif of his discourses are Kierkegaard's variations on the phrase, 'the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet (*hēsychiou*) spirit' (1 Pet. 3:4). It is especially with patience, and with patiently waiting on God, that these discourses associate 'the quiet incorruptibility of the inner being'.²⁴ In a text entitled, 'To Preserve One's Soul in Patience', Kierkegaard develops an image of the watchman of the soul. Alert at every moment, this watchman guards against despair:

Let us regard it as an angel of deliverance who stands there with his flaming sword, and every time the soul is about to rush out to the outermost boundary of despair it must pass by him ... [L]ike a mighty warrior who stands at his post on the outermost boundary of the kingdom, always engaged in that terrible border dispute. When people in the interior of the country have an intimation of the terror and the women and children rush out—he stands there, he soberly turns them back and says: Take courage; I am standing here, I never doze off; go home again, prepare your souls in patience and quiet alertness.²⁵

In this image, patience is watchful in a dual way. Negatively, it watches out for threats to a person's 'quiet integrity'.²⁶ Kierkegaard goes on to identify three such threats: dissolute absorption in the world; anxious self-doubt; and the self-enclosure in which one takes oneself to be cut off from the good. More positively, patience gathers the soul together, as it were, in the 'quiet alertness' of concentrated waiting on God.

In accordance with Kierkegaard's aim to bring more to the fore the Apostle James, this theme of the patience in which Christians are to 'establish your hearts', against despair and in constant watchfulness, is Jamesian.²⁷ It is also thoroughly Neptic. Indeed, Kierkegaard's 'Preserving One's Soul in Patience' is apt to be read as a mediation on the Neptic saying that 'patience is the house of the soul, for in it the soul is safeguarded'.²⁸ Another passage in the *Philokalia* refers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit as 'conferred on those who, free from anxiety, wait on God and devote themselves to the Holy Scriptures with the patience that makes it possible to view all things, whether from above or from below, with an equal mind'.²⁹ Likewise, commenting on the passage in Luke on which Kierkegaard bases his discourse, 'To Gain One's Soul in Patience', St Gregory of Sinai writes:

With regard to patience the Lord says, 'You will gain possession of your souls through your patient endurance' (Luke 21:19). He did not say 'through your fasting' or 'through your vigils'. I refer to the patience bestowed by God, which is the queen of virtues, the foundation

24. Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 302.

25. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 201.

26. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 211.

27. See Jas 5:7-11.

28. St Nikodimos (comp.), *The Philokalia*, trans. G.E.H. Palmer et al. (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), vol. 3, p. 45.

29. St. Peter of Damaskos, 'Conscious Awareness in the Heart', in *Philokalia*, p. 269.

of courageous actions. It is patience that is peace amid strife, serenity amid distress, and a steadfast base for those who acquire it.³⁰

Notably, the Neptic conception of patience as a virtue stands in contrast to any idea of this virtue merely as the ability to tolerate delayed gratification. To see the contrast, consider a case in which a person tolerates delayed gratification by trying to forget about a desired outcome until it transpires. By contrast, Christian patience, in the Neptic-Kierkegaard view, requires a state of heightened attentiveness to what is possible by God's grace, withstanding all trials and distractions. So conceived, patience is ever-watchful, requiring what the Neptic authors call 'the guarding of the heart', through which the Christian seeks an attitude of stillness, receptivity, quietude.

Gregory refers to patience both as a virtue and as bestowed by God. Virtues are usually attributed to their agents; bestowals are usually passively received.³¹ Is patience then to be ascribed to the exemplary Christian *qua* active agent or *qua* passive recipient? Kierkegaard's discourses on patience articulate a view in which this question relies on a false dichotomy:

A person does not first gain his soul and then have the need for patience to preserve it, but he gains it in no other way than by preserving it, and therefore patience is the first and patience is the last, precisely because patience is just as active [*handlende*] as it is passive [*lidende*] and just as passive as it is active.³²

Kierkegaard's idea is that the active-passivity of inner quietude is both the starting-point and the goal of the process of 'gaining one's soul'. How then are we to understand the interplay between activity and passivity in this process?

When he describes it as 'just as active as it is passive and just as passive as it is active', I take it that Kierkegaard does not mean to describe patience merely as a composite of active and passive elements. Any stretch of human comportment may plausibly be said to incorporate active and passive parts: for instance, making a drink by putting on the kettle, waiting for it to boil, then pouring. Quite generally, when executing intentional courses of action, finite agents need to bear with factors outside of their direct control, for example the time it takes for the kettle to boil. By contrast, the distinctive

30. St. Gregory of Sinai, 'On Commandments and Doctrines', in *Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 229.

31. This, at least, is a natural contrast to make with respect to what Aquinas called 'the cardinal virtues'. For his part, Thomas of course wanted to make room for a distinctively theological kind of virtue which, being infused by grace, falls outside 'our natural place for acting'—as Robert Sokolowski has put it: see *The God of Faith and Reason*, 2nd edn (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 72. For an overview of the tradition of the theological virtues in the West, see D. Batho, *Faith, Hope, and Love as Virtues in the Theological Tradition*, <https://powerlessness.essex.ac.uk/faith-hope-and-love-green-paper> © The Ethics of Powerlessness Project, 2016.

32. Kierkegaard, 'To Preserve One's Soul in Patience', in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 187.

comportment Kierkegaard has in mind appears to involve a relationship of mutual interdependence in which the extent to which a person is active is *determined* by the extent to which she is passive and vice versa.

Closer to what he has in mind, I suggest, is the phenomenon of attentive listening. One who attentively listens to another may be said to be at work in her listening, and in just that sense ‘active’, to the extent that she makes herself fully receptive to the other’s speech: for example, by shutting out distractions and allowing her expectations to be defeated by what is said or by how it is said. Conversely, she may be said to be receptive to the other’s speech to the extent that she is fully engaged in her listening such that she is not merely passively hearing noises. Attentive listening, we might say, is ‘just as active as it is passive and just as passive as it is active’: where this tight interrelationship is grounded in the way the very activity in question consists in cultivating a heightened condition of receptivity.

Is Kierkegaard, then, supposing that the virtue of patience needs first to be mastered by a person in order for saving grace to begin its work in her life? If so, is this not plainly incompatible with *sola gratia*, by rendering salvation contingent on the efficacy of two independent agencies, divine and human? I submit that Kierkegaard need not and does not suppose that mastering the virtue of patience is preparatory to receptivity to grace. Nor does he suppose that the human agency at work in the process of ‘gaining’ and ‘preserving’ oneself in patience is efficacious independently of the power of grace. On the contrary, he agrees with Luther that there can be no question of a person’s attaining inner quietude and receptivity to God independently, that is, independently of grace.³³ His disagreement, rather, is with the view that, in such receptivity, the believer is inert and passive, merely ‘the object of God’s action’.

Consider a homely analogy. A parent encourages a child into the joys of reading. At first, the child is all-too-quickly waylaid: by screens, playmates, self-doubts, impressions of reading as dull and so forth. With the parent’s help, the child learns to find a quiet place with a book. At first, the moments of stillness are short-lived. But in time the child finds herself losing herself in a book. As her receptivity to the joys of reading grows, so also her ability to shut out distractions. The overall process in which she becomes able to lose herself in the joys of reading is not under her control, but all going well she participates in this process more and more.

For Kierkegaard, the process of ‘gaining one’s soul in patience’ is likewise one which the believer does not initiate but in which she nonetheless learns to participate. How in general are we to understand this form of agent-participation? In recent work, Béatrice Han-Pile has developed an account of what she calls ‘middle-voiced agency’. With reference to grammatical features of Ancient Greek, now lost to modern Indo-European languages, Han-Pile writes:

33. Kierkegaard’s understanding of the primacy of God’s love comes out in the following prayer: ‘You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You have only loved us first but a single time, rather than that without ceasing You have loved us first many things and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward You—You are the first—You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at the same second turn my soul toward You in prayer, You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are the first and thus forever’. Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (eds.), *Devotional Classics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 107.

[T]he use of the active presupposes that the grammatical subject should be understood as a separate agent whose function is to initiate a process. By contrast, in the middle voice the diathesis is internal: ‘in the middle, the verb indicates a process of which the subject is the locus (...). He accomplishes something which accomplishes itself in him’ (Benvéniste: 172) ... The process does not unfold in the agent like water is poured into a glass, or like illness grows inside us. The doer participates in the unfolding in such a way that s/he can be described both as passive and active. S/he is affected by the process and affects it in return. Correlatively, what matters primarily to understand a middle-voiced doing is the perspective of the process itself. ... [F]rom this perspective the right question is not: ‘is this a doing or a happening?’, as in contemporary theories of agency, but rather something like: ‘what is the process unfolding in the doer, and what is her engagement with it?’ (call this the ‘middle-voiced question’).³⁴

Han-Pile’s conception of middle-voiced agency helps to make sense of Kierkegaard’s idea of a process of ‘gaining one’s soul in patience’. The Christian does not stand to this process as its external, initiating agent. Rather, she learns ever more actively to participate in the process into which she finds herself powerfully drawn, the process of becoming receptive to grace.

Why does Kierkegaard see patience as playing such a decisive role in this process? Why does he portray this form of middle-voiced agency as ‘first and last’? One reason is that he sees patient attentiveness as the appropriate attitude for those who recognize their own powerlessness and need for God. So conceived, patience is fundamentally a way of coming to terms with our human powerlessness and vulnerability—the ‘humble inwardness’ which keeps the believer receptive to grace, through faith, hope, and love.³⁵ Consider these among the lines that Kierkegaard attributed to the one he chose to call ‘Climacus’:

Now, to act [*at handle*] might appear to be just the opposite of to suffer [*at lide*], and to that degree it might seem strange to say that the essential expression of existential pathos (which is acting) is suffering. But this is only apparently so, and once more the religious sphere’s recognizable characteristic—that the positive is distinguished by the negative—shows itself: ... that to act religiously is marked by suffering.³⁶

In Climacus’ view, as C. Stephen Evans remarks, ‘[t]he religious life is marked by a painful recognition of one’s finitude and acceptance of dependency, but the achievement of this recognition in a “pathos” ... is nevertheless an active achievement’.³⁷ This paradox—in which the religious person’s ‘self-activity’ (in Climacus’ term) expresses itself most fully through the pathos of felt vulnerability and powerlessness—is evidently

34. Béatrice Han-Pile, ‘“The doing is everything”: A Middle-voiced Reading of Agency in Nietzsche’, *Inquiry* 63.1 (2020), p. 55.

35. Notably, the Neptic Fathers conceive of watchfulness (*nepsis*) as ‘a way embracing every virtue’ and, in particular, ‘the ground of faith, hope and love’ (*Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 224; vol. 4, p. 301). This suggests a distinctively Neptic view of the unity of the theological virtues: namely, as manifestations of watchful receptivity.

36. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 432.

37. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 130.

central to Kierkegaard's vision of religious life quite generally. The paradox is encapsulated by the title of another of his upbuilding discourses: 'A Human Being's Highest Perfection is to Need God'.³⁸

This vision of religious life stands opposed to any conception of faith as a doxastic state that befalls the elect. However, it should also be clear that the Neptic-Kierkegaard view is not only compatible with, but relies upon, an uncompromising view of our human powerlessness.³⁹ Bearing also in mind his alignment with Luther and Leibniz against *liberum arbitrium*, we therefore have strong reasons to reject portrayals of Kierkegaard's views as 'Arminian'.⁴⁰ With Luther—and *contra* Arminius as well as Erasmus and Pelagius—Kierkegaard holds that humans are utterly powerless, independently of grace, even to recognize aright their need for God. If Kierkegaard offers a *via media*—between, say, Luther and Erasmus—this is therefore not by way of conceding that humans have the independent power to recognize their need for God and then to choose accordingly to accept the offer of divine grace.

Admittedly, we may still find it difficult to see how there could be logical space for a further alternative here. For how can Kierkegaard escape the following dilemma? *Either* salvation involves just *one* agency—namely, God's—in which case Soteriological Passivity follows. *Or* there are in each case (at least) *two* agencies involved—namely, God's and the believer's—in which case we must give up the 'alone' in Luther's 'by grace alone'. In my view, however, the Neptic-Kierkegaard view offers a way to grasp the second horn of this dilemma, but to deny in this context that a duality of involved agents implies a doubleness of autonomous powers.⁴¹ According to this approach,

38. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, pp. 297–326.

39. Arguably, this makes Kierkegaard's corrective to Luther's theology of passivity quite different from more recent lines of critique which advance optimistic accounts of human efficacy on the basis of a 'non-competitive' model of the interactions between divine and human agency. See, for example, Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1988). For a good critical discussion, see Zahl, 'Non-Competitive Agency'.

40. The interpretation of Kierkegaard as an Arminian has been propounded by Timothy Jackson, 'Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will', in A. Hannay and G.D. Mario (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See also C. Stephen Evans, 'Salvation, Sin and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard', in Clark Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God and the Will of Man: The Case for Arminianism* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989); Christopher D. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism, and Holiness* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 182; J. Mulder, 'Must All Be Saved? A Kierkegaardian Response to Theological Universalism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59.1 (2006), p. 9.

41. I shall not further take up the question of how exactly Kierkegaard should be placed with respect to the traditional theological debates between monergists and synergists and related contrasts between 'prevenient', 'operative' and 'cooperative' grace. See e.g. Neil Ormerod, 'Operative and Cooperative Grace and the Question of Justification by Faith: A Contemporary Transposition', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 80.3 (2015), pp. 248–58. Suffice it to say that Kierkegaard's approach should make us alert to the possible interference in such debates of false dichotomies between intentional doings and mere happenings and between self-determining agents and mere patients.

human agency is involved in salvation not as an autonomous and efficacious power—as though grace were not by itself powerful enough—but as, precisely, middle-voiced receptivity to grace. We might summarize the view in this way: salvation comes by the power of grace alone, but it belongs to the power of grace to draw agents, as agents, into participation in a process of transformation.⁴²

No doubt, a fully developed case for the viability of this *via media* would provide an account of how in general there can be genuine exercises of (middle-voiced) agency that are *not* also autonomous and efficacious actions. I shall not try to offer such an account here. However, it is notable in this connection that, in his discourses on patience, Kierkegaard strongly emphasizes the idea of a way of responding to experienced powerlessness that is neither merely passive nor a matter of wresting control. Thus, with reference to its New Testament setting, in Christ's apocalyptic prophesy of the fall of Jerusalem, Kierkegaard juxtaposes the phrase, 'to gain your soul in patience', with such admonitions as, 'seize your soul!' or, 'save your soul!' (or we might add, 'pull yourself together!'). Whereas those latter prescriptions seem to presuppose an arena of efficacious agency, Kierkegaard emphasizes the imagery (in Luke 21) of utter inhospitality to such agency:

The elements disintegrate, the sky is rolled up like a garment, the abyss of annihilation opens its throat and roars for its prey, the shriek of despair sounds from every direction, even inanimate nature groans in anxiety—yet the believer does not press forward battling in order to find rescue, but while nothing has continuance, while even the mountain, tottering, abandons the site where it has stood without moving for thousands of years, he remains quiet and gains his soul in patience, while people are about to die of fright and the expectation of things to come.⁴³

In the face even of utter powerlessness and vulnerability, patience stands in contrast both with mere passivity and with assertive action. In its 'quiet but unflinching activity', patience contrasts with the exposed passivity of those who, in the apocalyptic image, are 'about to die of fright'; but it also stands in contrast to any activity in the face of powerlessness which might count as trying to 'press forward battling'. Again, in Kierkegaard's view, these differences are grounded in the way that patience involves learning to accept one's powerlessness and vulnerability before God, where 'the first requirement' for the one who would 'gain his soul' is to have 'the patience to understand that he does not possess himself'.⁴⁴

How is the Neptic-Kierkegaard conception of participation in grace, as a middle-voiced form of agency, likely to be received from a more strictly Lutheran standpoint? A likely worry concerns anxiety and assurance. It is held to be an attractive feature of

42. This interpretation stands in contrast to Kemp and Iacovetti's account of Kierkegaard's 'Grace model', according to which conversion is merely 'something that happens to a person', such as, for example, being brainwashed (Ryan S. Kemp and Christopher Iacovetti, *Reason and Conversion in Kierkegaard and the German Idealists* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 3). See my review in *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30.1 (2022), pp. 193-97.

43. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 170.

44. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 169.

Luther's standpoint that, within it, the believer is freed from all anxiety regarding her salvation: insofar as she sees herself as a merely passive receiver of grace, through the gift of faith, she need not worry about cultivating and sustaining patience, or any other Christian virtue. That is, she need not worry *with respect to salvation*, which is assured independently of her own agency. Lutherans may then go on to distinguish the process of sanctification from the status of one's being justified before God. Accordingly, while cultivating inner quietude may be part of the process of sanctification—the process of living out the Christian life—such efforts are in no way required for the status of justification to be conferred since the latter is nothing but a gratuitous gift: the imputed righteousness of Christ. Liberated from anxious navel-gazing and asceticism, and in full assurance of faith, the Lutheran believer is free to live out a life of love and gratitude.

Against this, Kierkegaard seems to want to underscore the Pauline exhortation to 'work out your salvation in fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you*'.⁴⁵ I think we should acknowledge in this connection that it is moot whether Kierkegaard's governing conception of Christian life, as a continual process of becoming, can accommodate a robust distinction between justification, *qua* settled status, and sanctification, *qua* ongoing process.⁴⁶ However, we may also note the following. Firstly, on the interpretation of *sola gratia* in line with Soteriological Passivity, the problem of anxious lack of assurance may resurface in a different way. That is, from the perspective of the self-understanding in which one is purely passive with respect to the process of salvation, a person may come to anxiously obsess over whether they are numbered among the elect.⁴⁷ As the history of Luther's legacy has proven, reformed traditions can cultivate their own varieties of asceticism and navel-gazing.

Secondly, Kierkegaard is closer in this regard to Luther than it may at first appear. For him, no less than for Luther, achieving the right kind of receptivity cannot be a

45. Phil. 2:12-13, my emphasis.

46. This is not to deny that Kierkegaard endorses a Lutheran view of the objective side of Christian salvation, i.e. of Christ's substitutionary atonement. On the contrary: 'For what is the "Atoner" but a substitute who puts himself entirely in your place and mine; and what is the consolation of the atonement but this, that the substitute, making satisfaction, puts himself entirely in your and in my place! So when punitive justice here in the world or hereafter in the judgment seeks the place where I the sinner stand with all my guilt, with my many sins—it does not find me; I no longer stand in that place, I have left it; another stands there in my place, another who puts himself entirely in my place; I stand by the side of this other person, by the side of him, my Atoner, who entirely put himself in my place' (Kierkegaard, *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, trans. S. Walsh (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011 [1849]), p. 99). For discussion, see Walsh, *Kierkegaard and Religion*, p. 172. For an argument that Kierkegaard affirms the justification/sanctification distinction see also L.C. Barrett, *Kierkegaard* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 66.

47. I have witnessed this phenomenon in some circles of Reformed Christianity. It is notable in this connection that, in *The Sickness unto Death*, 'the fatalist, the determinist' is associated with an inability to pray: 'The fatalist's worship of God is therefore at most an interjection, and really it is muteness, mute submission, he is unable to pray'. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 71.

precondition for one's being drawn by the power of grace. Likewise, he evidently agrees that the believer's attention is properly focused on their need for grace, not on their own ability to receive it (I shall return to this point in 'Participants and Spectators' below). We should also keep in mind that what it means in his view for a person's agency to be at work in waiting on God includes guarding oneself against certain forms of anxiety: anxieties of self-doubt and feeling cut off from the good.⁴⁸ Moreover, Kierkegaard evidently follows Luther in seeing 'good works', in the sense of particular acts of love and devotion, not as a matter of anxiously striving to make oneself worthy but rather as an expression of gratitude.⁴⁹

I think we can therefore summarize a first dimension of Kierkegaard's Neptic corrective to Luther in the following way. Salvation—by grace, through faith—involves a process that requires the believer's participation as she learns, ever more deeply, to accept her need for God. The believer does not initiate this process and her participation in it does not consist in her making the right choices from an external standpoint of indifference. *Pace* Luther, it is not true however that this process leaves the believer simply passive, as though a mere bystander to the saving faith which grows within her. The religious life may indeed be a *vita passiva*: but only in the sense of the heightened passivity of 'humble inwardness': stillness, watchfulness, active patience.

Participants and Spectators

My aim so far has been to show how Kierkegaard's view of the distinctive agency at work in receptivity to grace amounts to a substantive corrective to Luther. To the extent that this corrective has force, we therefore have reason not to conflate the conjunction of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* with Soteriological Passivity. However, a further question may then arise. Given that the core Lutheran teachings about salvation do not mandate Luther's theology of passivity, why are the two so often equated, not least by Luther himself? If we suppose that this equation is a confusion, how are we to explain the source of its attraction?

With further reference to the Neptic authors, my aim in this final section is to illuminate a second dimension to Kierkegaard's corrective to Luther. I want to show how Kierkegaard's work can help to account for Soteriological Passivity as an illusion that is liable to arise when a shift is made from the first-person perspective of participation in the life of faith to the third-person standpoint of theoretical contemplation on it. This amounts to a sort of error theory: that is, an explanation of why it may be natural, albeit erroneous, to read into statements of the all-sufficiency of grace a theory which renders the believer passive and inert.

48. Plausibly, Kierkegaard nonetheless holds that, when joined with faith, anxiety can become productive and beneficial. See the closing chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety* entitled, 'Anxiety as Saving through Faith'.

49. Thus, according to Kierkegaard's summary description of Christian life, 'infinite humiliation and grace, and then a striving born of gratitude—this is Christianity'. H.V. and E.H. Hong (ed. and trans.), *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 434, my emphasis.

Consider, first, a passage in the *Philokalia* from a text attributed to St Peter of Damascus, under the heading, ‘How to Acquire True Faith’. Addressing God, Peter enumerates some of ‘the many blessings that in Thy grace Thou hast bestowed’ but then pulls himself up short:

Yet who am I that I should dare to speak to Thee of these things, Thou searcher of hearts? I speak of them in order to make known to myself and to my enemies that I take refuge in Thee, the harbor of my salvation. For I know by Thy grace that ‘Thou art my God’ (Ps. 31:14). I do not dare to say many things, but only wish to set before Thee an intellect that is inactive, deaf and dumb. It is not myself, but Thy grace that accomplishes all things: for, knowing that I am always full of evil, I do not attribute such things to my own goodness; and because of this I fall down as a servant before Thee ...⁵⁰

This passage beautifully expresses the self-effacing character of receptivity to grace, from the participant’s perspective. It may occur to us to notice, however, how many times this passage features the first-person singular. From our third-person vantage point as readers, looking in on this confession before God, Peter himself is very present in his text, straining every sinew as it were to maintain himself in active receptivity to grace (and to model such receptivity for his readers).

Peter says, ‘It is not myself, but Thy grace that accomplishes all things’. We might be tempted by the following rejoinder: ‘But this very stance—at least that much surely is your accomplishment, Peter!’. One issue here is the point we have discussed in ‘Agency and Patience’ above: whether this rejoinder questionably runs together the idea of an accomplishment attributable to an efficacious agent with the idea of middle-voiced participation in a process that lies outside of the agent’s control. But a further issue is the sense in which the rejoinder inhabits the spectator’s perspective as opposed to the participant’s perspective. The point is: for Peter to agree with the rejoinder would surely be for him to jettison his self-effacing stance. This reveals a sense in which it is internal to self-effacing agency to resist adopting a third-personal perspective on itself *qua* mode of agency.

These points suggest a diagnostic view in which the theology of passivity can take the form of a kind of illusion, arising from the believer’s resistance to a self-undermining stance toward her own receptivity to grace. If and when there occurs a shift to the spectator’s perspective, Soteriological Passivity looks like the only right thing to say. Plausibly, this illusion is what Kierkegaard has in mind when, in the passage cited in ‘From “Grace Alone” to Soteriological Passivity’ above, he refers to certain views which ‘can be praiseworthy as an expression for the majesty of God’s infinity’ but which must be resisted if we are to avoid fatalism.

On this account, then, a kind of theological illusion may arise in the following way.⁵¹ Part of what it means to strain to keep oneself in an attitude of receptivity to God is not to focus on oneself and one’s own activity. Verbal expressions of such receptivity are therefore likely to involve an exclusive emphasis on God’s activity rather than one’s own, as in

50. *Philokalia*, vol. 3, p. 237.

51. I am grateful to David Batho for suggesting the formulations in this paragraph.

the case of Peter. Taken independently of the context of strained attention, and viewed from the perspective of the disinterested spectator, such expressions are liable to get construed as statements of metaphysical fact. Such utterances as Peter's are liable to be transformed from self-effacing expressions of the participant's stance into theoretical statements of Soteriological Passivity.⁵²

This account relies on a division between two perspectives: the third-person perspective of the disinterested spectator versus the first-person stance of the engaged participant. For his part, Kierkegaard's insistence on the irreducible importance of the participant's stance is reflected in many of the major themes in his work, not least: the theses that 'truth is subjectivity' and that 'only the truth that upbuilds is the truth for you'; the claim that in matters of ethics and religion the 'how' has priority over the 'what'; and the portrayal of 'the present age' as hollow, hyper-reflective, spectatorial.⁵³ In various ways, Kierkegaard sought to combat the forgetfulness of what it means to be human that he associated with the 'objective tendency' of European modernity: that is, the tendency for the participant's stance to be vacated for the standpoint of the disinterested spectator.

Notably, his insistence on the irreducible importance of the participant's stance specifies a further way in which Kierkegaard's work has a distinctly Neptic dimension. Indeed, what helps to bring together the diverse and manifold texts which make up the *Philokalia* is their lack of attention to doctrine and strong focus on what their authors variously call 'the spiritual way', 'the way of the gospel', the 'true and holy way of life', 'the way of truth', 'the Christ-like way of life' and so forth.⁵⁴ (It is worth recalling in this connection that before the very first 'Christians' were so-called, they were called followers of 'the Way'.⁵⁵) These descriptions stand over against any approach to Christianity as a system of doctrine. Implicit throughout the *Philokalia*, this contrast sometimes becomes thematic:

52. On the view we have developed in 'Agency and Patience' above, this temptation can and should be resisted, on the grounds that it misses the role of middle-voiced participation in grace. However, we may further note in this connection that middle-voiced agency may be especially easy for us to miss, given the exclusive active/passive dichotomy of modern languages. See Han-Pile, 'The doing is everything'.

53. I have written elsewhere on these themes: see Daniel Watts, 'Kierkegaard and the Search for Self-Knowledge', *European Journal of Philosophy* 21.4 (2013), pp. 525–49; 'The Problem of Kierkegaard's Socrates', *Res Philosophica* 94.4 (2017), pp. 555–79; 'Kierkegaard on Truth: One or Many?', *Mind* 127.505 (2018), pp. 197–223; 'Kierkegaard and the Limits of Thought', *Hegel Bulletin* 39.1 (2018), pp. 82–105.

54. In his *Ascetic Discourse*, St Nilos the Ascetic (the earliest writer to refer explicitly to the Jesus Prayer) nicely summarizes the Neptic view of 'the true and holy way of life' as follows: 'The apostles received this way of life from Christ and made it their own, renouncing the world in response to His call, disregarding fatherland, relatives and possessions. At once they adopted a harsh and strenuous way of life, facing every kind of adversity, afflicted, tormented, harassed, naked, lacking even necessities; and finally they met death boldly, imitating their Teacher faithfully in all things. Thus through their actions they left behind a true image of the highest way of life.' *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 284.

55. Acts 9:1-2.

There is no profit in studying doctrines unless the life of one's soul is acceptable and conforms to God's will.⁵⁶

The law of freedom teaches the whole truth. Many read about it in a theoretical way, but few really understand it, and these only in the degree to which they practice the commandments.⁵⁷

He who, like the blind man, casts away his garment and draws near to the Lord, becomes His disciple and a preacher of true doctrine (cf. Mk 10:50).⁵⁸

These remarks help to interpret the thesis propounded by Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus that 'Christianity is not a doctrine' but instead an 'existence-communication'.⁵⁹ The thesis need not be understood as denigrating sound doctrine but rather as insisting that, in religious life, such doctrine is truly *received*—in Climacus' preferred term, 'appropriated'—only by those who follow the pattern of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who threw away his cloak, about all he had for comfort in the world, to get to Jesus to beseech him for mercy.

In a similar vein, the little homily which comes as the last word ('Ultimatum') of *Either/Or* turns on a contrast between two types of 'acknowledgment'. This sermon seeks to draw out what can be 'upbuilding', even uplifting, in the thought that 'before God we are always in the wrong'. The preacher wants to show how this thought can help, for example, to mitigate any impression of ethical inferiority one may have in comparison with human others. Given this aim, it may come as something of a surprise when the preacher declares: 'There is nothing upbuilding in acknowledging that God is always in the right, and consequently there is nothing upbuilding in any thought that necessarily follows from it.'⁶⁰ As the context makes clear, however, something quite specific is intended here by 'acknowledging' (*erkjende*). What the preacher means to deny is that there is any spiritual profit in one's merely concluding that humans must always be 'in the wrong' before God, given that God is God and we are not. Learning to accept our limitations, in the way the preacher thinks will help us, is not just assenting to the proposition that we are not divine.

The preacher of *Either/Or* also describes a different type of acknowledging, however. While a person might feel compelled, by the implications of their beliefs, to cognitively assent to their need for God, 'to apply that to yourself, to incorporate this acknowledgment in your whole being [*til at optage denne Erkjendelse i Dit hele Væsen*]'—this you cannot actually be forced to do'.⁶¹ This existentially deeper acknowledgment is one

56. Mark the Hermit, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 148.

57. Anthony the Great, *Philokalia*, ed. C. Cavarnos (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies), vol. 1, p. 54.

58. Mark the Hermit, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 146.

59. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. A. Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 318.

60. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. E.H. Hong and H.V. Hong, vol. II (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 350.

61. *Ibid.*

the preacher goes on to describe as grounded in love and in loving devotion to God. In this view, it is only as incorporated into the orientation of the whole person, drawn out in love, that thoughts of human sinfulness and divine grace can find their proper place in Christian life.

Thus, regarding what it means truly to acknowledge our need for God, it is characteristic both of the *Philokalia* and of Kierkegaard's writings to highlight the *suis generis* character of the participant's stance, as opposed to any merely theoretical understanding. Accordingly, a second dimension of Kierkegaard's Neptic corrective to Luther can be presented as a critique of the shift in perspective introduced by Soteriological Passivity as a piece of speculative theology, i.e. the shift towards a 'sideways-on' view of religious life while at the same time trying to capture its self-effacing character. Witness the following lines from Luther:

God has surely promised His grace to the humbled, that is, to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends, absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and works of Another—God alone. As long as he is persuaded that he can make even the smallest contribution to his salvation, he remains self-confident and does not utterly despair of himself, and so is not humbled before God.⁶²

There is plausibly much in these lines that Kierkegaard could endorse *as a fitting avowal*: that is, as apt to express the self-effacing stance of the one who, in her 'whole being', comports herself in an attitude of humility, owning her unqualified need for grace. Compared for example with Peter's first-person avowal of his need for God, however, a contrasting perspective prevails in Luther's third-person discourse about what, for any given man, a man must realize in order to be suitably humbled. Luther might even be taken to be saying that proper receptivity to grace requires *endorsing the theory of Soteriological Passivity*, where such a reading might be encouraged by abstract talk of the 'will, council, pleasure, and works of Another—God alone'. In a Kierkegaardian perspective, however, this is just where the confusion arises: while it is true that a self-effacing stance is proper to the attitude of receptivity of grace, what is not true is that this stance is equivalent to endorsing a certain theory of salvation.

On this further line of critique, then, while there may be contexts in which it is legitimate and helpful, the shift to a theoretical perspective needs to be properly recognized as such: that is, as a shift away from the participant's stance. Focusing on one's own agency is out of place within the self-effacing first-person stance of the participant in religious life; but confusion arises when, in a theoretical perspective, the 'self-activity' that is involved in properly acknowledging one's need is repressed or erased.

In Kierkegaard's wider view, moreover, what really needs to be preserved, against the threats of 'the objective tendency' and the secularizing misuse of the theology of grace in Christendom, is the participant's stance itself. In at least this respect, his corrective to Luther is perhaps best viewed as an internal critique, for a general attitude of suspicion

62. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Robertson (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957), p. 100.

about speculative theology is of course deeply Lutheran. Never one to let a good idea die the death of a thousand qualifications, Luther once wrote: ‘It is by living—no, not living, but dying and being damned that we become theologians, not by understanding, reading, and speculating’.⁶³ In the end, Kierkegaard’s corrective to Luther is strongly continuous with the sensibility that may mark these thinkers’ true affinity: *contra* dry, speculative theology, *pro* the life of passionate participation in grace.⁶⁴


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63. *Luthers Werke* (Weimar), 5.163.28, quoted by Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), pp. 23–24. ‘In the final analysis’, Kierkegaard wrote in a similar spirit, ‘there is no theory’ (*KJN*, vol. 6, p. 401).
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