

Citation info

When citing this text, please refer to the original publication:

Compaijen, Rob and Pieter Vos. 2019. "Ethical reflection as evasion", in: *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, eds. A. Buben, E. Helms, and P. Stokes (New York: Routledge), pp. 220-238.

ETHICAL REFLECTION AS EVASION

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings are reflective creatures. Our capacity for reflection enables us to turn our attention towards our beliefs, feelings, intuitions, expectations, circumstances, and so forth, and allows us to (temporarily) detach ourselves from them. Not only is this capacity a structural feature of our existence, we also deem it important. While Socrates' remark that the unexamined life is not worth living (Plato 1997a: 38a5–6) might be too radical,¹ most of us feel that a life well-lived typically includes significant reflective activity. Ethics, as the systematic reflection on morality, is one area in human existence which clearly demonstrates our reflective capacities. Ethical reflection is generally considered to be of crucial importance. Through reflection we are able to examine the legitimacy of our moral beliefs: reflection might show us that our moral beliefs are (or are informed by) harmful prejudices. Reflection, that is, enables us to revise or improve our moral beliefs. Moreover, ethical reflection enables us to ease or perhaps even solve moral uncertainty. During our lives, most of us will (at least sometimes) feel uncertain about ethically salient choices. We ask questions such as 'how should I live?' or 'what should I, here and now, do?'. Ethical reflection, it seems, can help us to come up with plausible answers to such questions.

In light of these observations, it is fascinating that Kierkegaard is suspicious of ethical reflection as we have described it so far.² While he values our reflective capacities, he is, at the same time, wary of its tendency towards disengagement and procrastination. On Kierkegaard's view, ethical reflection can be—and, as a matter of fact, frequently *is*—a clever way of evading ethical action and life. This is a topic that is sometimes noted in the literature on Kierkegaard's thought, but has not been explored very systematically. The present contribution will attempt to make sense of Kierkegaard's idea that ethical reflection tends to involve evasion, and we do so by drawing primarily (though not exclusively) on his unpublished 1847 lectures 'The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication.' Although unfinished and generally lacking structure, these notes

and lectures provide us with several important ideas that help us make sense of Kierkegaard's views on this issue. They also shed light on what Kierkegaard believes ethics should be concerned with, as well as with the kinds of reflection in ethics that he does regard as valuable.

The outline of this paper is as follows. First we will clarify in which respects Kierkegaard believes ethical reflection is an evasion. Subsequently, we will explore how Kierkegaard characterizes the task that is central to ethics, and the kinds of reflection that he argues are appropriate to that task. In the conclusion we will make clear in which respects Kierkegaard's thoughts on these matters are important for contemporary moral philosophy, but we will also point out that they themselves can involve an evasion.

MISUNDERSTANDING ETHICS: KNOWLEDGE AND DISENGAGEMENT

Despite the value we generally acknowledge ethical reflection to have, there is something peculiar about it. As *ethical* reflection, it is essentially directed towards the domain of practice, dealing with action, choice, existence. As ethical *reflection*, however, it moves in the opposite direction, away from practical life. We take it that this 'ambivalent' nature of ethical reflection forms the background of Kierkegaard's suspicion of it. Elaborating this line of thought, David Gouwens argues that the problem with ethical reflection for Kierkegaard is more specifically the application of the kind of reflection that is appropriate in the sciences to ethical questions: 'The difficulty with Western philosophical thought, for Kierkegaard, is that the model of objective reflection, which is [...] quite within its rights in certain realms such as science, is inappropriately applied to the realm of subjectivity (particularly ethics and religion)' (1996: 32).

In 'The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication' Kierkegaard confirms this analysis with the following bold claim: 'The whole modern science of ethics is, ethically understood, an evasion' (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 393). Kierkegaard's critique of ethical reflection as being evasive seems to be strongly related to the idea that ethics, in modernity, is typically regarded as a science. We find further confirmation of this idea in other notes, where he refers to the modern tendency of 'physics supplanting ethics' and the distinctly 'modern statistical approach to morality' (JP1, 408/SKS 18, 281). In 'The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication,' Kierkegaard does not explain how he understands the notion of 'science.' (He uses '*videnskab*,' a term that is cognate with the German '*Wissenschaft*' and has broader application than the English 'science,' which usually refers to the natural (and sometimes the) social sciences.) It seems plausible that he is thinking of specifically two features. First, science can be understood as a sophisticated and systematic attempt to acquire knowledge. Second, to be able to do that adequately, it should detach itself to a greater or lesser degree from the particular standpoint and the lived experience of the scientist(s). It is important to see that the degree of detachment that is deemed fitting differs among the various sciences: most people will argue that, for example, the radical objectivity of the standpoint of theoretical physics is inappropriate for social psychology. Nevertheless, each of the

sciences aspires to adopt a standpoint that is as objective as seems adequate to acquire knowledge in its respective field of study.

Kierkegaard's claim that ethical reflection can be a clever way of evading ethical action and life thus seems to involve two important ideas. First, ethical reflection can be an evasion when it is taken to be a process in which the reflective agent radically *detaches* herself from (what we could call) her 'existential situation.' Second, it can be an evasion when it is directed towards *acquiring knowledge* that will enable the agent to answer the questions of what one should do or how one should live. Yet, what, exactly, does Kierkegaard mean when he suggests that, in modernity, ethics is concerned with aspiring towards a disengaged standpoint as well as with acquiring knowledge?

Kierkegaard writes that modernity deeply misunderstands the ethical (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 392), and the misunderstanding seems intimately related to both of the features that we have mentioned. There is, first, the misunderstanding that the ethical should be approached in a spirit of disengagement. Johannes Climacus makes this clear in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Ethical questions, he writes, are 'concerned questions' (CUP 1, 193/SKS 7, 177). Attempting to answer questions like 'what should I do?' or 'how should I live?' should therefore not involve adopting a detached viewpoint in which that concern has vaporized. Or, to be exact: the answers that will appear adequate and satisfying from a detached standpoint cannot be meaningfully related to the existential situation of the agent who asks such questions. Expressing this insight, he writes: 'All decision, all essential decision, is rooted in subjectivity. At no point does an observer [...] have an infinite need for a decision, and at no point does he see it' (CUP 1, 33/SKS 7, 39).

Second, for Kierkegaard, modernity's misunderstanding of the ethical is even more obvious in light of its idea that ethics should be concerned with acquiring knowledge. He argues that, while science is concerned with the transition from ignorance to knowledge, ethical thought (when understood correctly) is concerned with the transition from knowledge to realization (JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394). What that means is something we will explore in the next section. Modern thought—in arguing, according to Kierkegaard, that the primary task of ethics is to acquire knowledge—presupposes that human beings *lack* the knowledge they need to be able to live ethically. Kierkegaard challenges this presupposition and argues that human beings already possess the ethical (CUP 1, 144/SKS 7, 134; JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394). The idea that we already possess the ethical can be unpacked in different ways, but one crucial element is the idea that we already possess all ethical *knowledge*: in some (further to be explored) sense, we already know what to do and how to live.

Does Kierkegaard provide us with some kind of background theory for the idea that we already possess the ethical in this sense? The idea itself should remind us of Socrates, who famously claimed that we already possess all knowledge, although we have forgotten most of it. He invoked the idea that the soul, before being united with the body, gathered all knowledge in the world of Ideas. Kierkegaard does not endorse this 'theory,' but in 'The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication' we do find two indications that might help us understand what he means. The first

is his claim that, with regard to ethics, God is our only teacher (JP1, 272, 273/SKS 27, 395, 396). Kierkegaard observes that, just as Prometheus provides human beings with knowledge of good and evil, God has provided us with the ethical. The second is that we can only make sense of our experience of ethical obligation when we believe that we already possess the ethical. ‘The ethical presupposes that every person knows what the ethical is, and why? Because the ethical demands that every man shall realize it at every moment, but then he surely has to know it’ (JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394).³ Kierkegaard’s reasoning, which seems to boil down to ‘ought implies knowing,’ can therefore be interpreted as an allusion to the Kantian phrase ‘*Du kannst, denn du sollst*,’ ‘ought implies can.’ Just like Kant argued that our experience of being bound to the moral law teaches us that we are capable of acting in accordance with the moral law, Kierkegaard seems to argue that this experience teaches us that we already possess all the knowledge that is required for living ethically.

What does Kierkegaard mean when he says that we already possess all ethical knowledge? We can unpack this idea as follows: either we actually know everything there is to know with regard to what to do and how to live, or we possess it but somehow do not have immediate access to all of it. Kierkegaard does not make clear which of these views he ascribes to, but it seems plausible to suppose that he believes the latter. After all, the idea that we *actually* know all ethical knowledge seems very unlikely in light of the fact that we can be genuinely uncertain about what we should do or choose. Moreover, that Kierkegaard holds the latter view is also suggested by his indebtedness to Socrates—an indebtedness which, of course, is particularly clear with regard to the ethical. On a Socratic view, human beings already possess all knowledge, but since they have forgotten most of it they need to be brought to remembrance about it. In like manner, Kierkegaard seems to hold that, although we already possess the ethical, we need to come to know ourselves in order to actually come to know what to do and how to live (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 393). (We will explore the role of self-knowledge in these matters below.)

One might argue, however, that moral pluralism—which we understand here as the diversity of moral beliefs among individuals and groups—undermines the idea that we already possess all ethical knowledge. This is a route sometimes taken by Kierkegaard scholars. Objecting that Kierkegaard’s critique of ethical reflection betrays ‘a stunning blindness to the possibilities of genuine disagreement’ (Stokes 2013: 379), Patrick Stokes makes clear that he assumes Kierkegaard to believe that we all possess the exact same ethical knowledge. This is also suggested by Mark Tietjen who argues that, for Kierkegaard, the idea that we already possess the ethical implies that each of us possesses ‘innate, universal ethical knowledge’ (2013: 54). Yet, Kierkegaard nowhere suggests that this is what he has in mind. Rather, he seems to argue that each of us in a sense already knows what to do and how to live, whether this knowledge matches the knowledge of others or not.

However, moral pluralism in the sense explicated above can give rise to fundamental doubt: how could we ever reach certainty about what to do and how to live when these questions are

answered in so many different ways? Kierkegaard is aware of this line of thought and phrases it as follows: 'If someone were to say: There are quite different concepts of the ethical in different countries and in different ages. How is this doubt halted?' (JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394). Kierkegaard responds to this worry by acknowledging that, from a scientific or scholarly point of view, the doubt cannot be halted because we will never be able to complete our survey of all the different moral beliefs in the world. He writes that this issue 'can result in scholarly folios and still not stop' (JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394). The uncertainty whether my answers to ethical questions are the *right* answers therefore cannot be halted from a scientific or scholarly point of view. However, Kierkegaard makes it very clear that, from the point of view of the ethical, the uncertainty can be taken away: 'the ethical seizes the doubter with ethical consistency and says, what concern is it of yours? You shall do the ethical at every moment, and you are ethically responsible for every moment you waste' (JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394). According to this remarkable line of thought, the diversity of moral beliefs in the world is completely irrelevant from an ethical point of view, since we already possess the ethical within ourselves: we already know what to do and how to live.

We are now in the position to understand what Kierkegaard means when he writes that '[t]he whole modern science of ethics is, ethically understood, an evasion' (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 393). This becomes most clear in light of his conception of what the task of ethics should be. For Kierkegaard, since we already possess all the ethical knowledge we require, ethics should be concerned only with 'realization'—that is, with choosing, acting, becoming, existing. When ethics, on the other hand, is conceived as a scientific endeavour, ethical reflection is an evasion because—by seeking to acquire ethical knowledge and (in so doing) aspiring to adopt a standpoint that is disconnected from the existential situation of the agent—it makes us inattentive to the task of actually *living* ethically. Ethical reflection, understood along these lines, makes us neglect the concrete ethical tasks, responsibilities, and choices that we face and that we in a sense already know how to respond to.

Numerous texts in Kierkegaard's authorship give witness to these evasive movements. For example, a substantial part of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is devoted to Climacus' argument that subjectivity and (thereby) the ethical are lost when viewed from a detached standpoint, '*sub specie aeterni*' as he describes it (cf. CUP 1, 305/SKS 7, 277–8). Arguing that the movement of detachment is essentially different from what the ethical demands, he writes: 'The demand of abstraction upon him is that he become disinterested in order to obtain something to know; the requirement of the ethical upon him is to be infinitely interested in existing' (CUP 1, 316/SKS 7, 288). Note also how Climacus relates the issue of detachment to the issue of acquiring knowledge. With regard to the latter, consider for example the following, paradigmatic passage:

How many an individual has not asked, ‘What is truth?’ and at bottom hoped that it would be a long time before truth would come so close to him that in the same instant it would determine what it was his duty to do at that moment. When the Pharisee, ‘in order to justify himself’ asked, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ he presumably thought that this might develop into a very protracted inquiry, so that it would perhaps take a long time and then perhaps end with the admission that it was impossible to define the concept ‘neighbor’ with absolute accuracy—for this very reason he asked the question, to find an escape, to waste time, and to justify himself (WL 96–7/SKS 9, 101).⁴

Another clear example is in *For Self-Examination*, where Kierkegaard regards the academic study of Scripture as an evasion (FSE 32/SKS 13, 59–60). Scripture, Kierkegaard argues, summons us to read it as a mirror: one has to read it so as to understand what it means for one’s life and to discern the things that one is commanded to do. A clever way to refrain from doing that is to focus on the parts of Scripture that one does not (yet) understand, and to demand more time and books: only when one has understood Scripture completely, one is willing to act in accordance with it.

At this point, the reader might feel irritated. ‘Surely, doing the right thing requires us to ask such questions as, for example, “who is my neighbour?” and “what is Scripture demanding exactly?”’ If Kierkegaard dismisses such questions as evasive, he is oversimplifying!’ Although the topic of this article has not received much systematic attention in the literature about Kierkegaard, the authors who display sensitivity to this aspect of his thought tend to express this sentiment. Consider the following two examples. Referring to doubts about the right course of action in applying the ideal of neighbour-love, John Lippitt writes: ‘Such considerations suggest that not every reflection on what my duty implies in a particular case (or every request for more information) can be dismissed with the haste Kierkegaard sometimes betrays in the face of such questions’ (2013: 5). A particularly clear example is Patrick Stokes’ critique of Kierkegaard, which, in similar vein, objects that reflective questions are legitimate and inevitable:

In *Christian Discourses* he insists that there should never be a question about what my duty *is* but simply about whether I have done my duty [CD 205/SKS 10, 214], and that asking such questions about the content of duty is therefore simply an evasion of the demand to *do* my duty. In *For Self-Examination* we are told that it is an evasion to continue to try to understand the content of Scripture completely, rather than seeking to carry out those of its demands one *has* understood, however imperfectly [FSE 32/SKS 13, 59–60]. Yet ‘what is my duty here?’ and ‘what precisely does Scripture require of those who believe in its moral authority?’ seem to be perfectly philosophically (and theologically and philologically) respectable questions – even ones that might be essential to practical reason. Kierkegaard seems to betray both an over-confidence in

the clarity of scripture and a stunning blindness to the possibilities of genuine moral disagreement. (Stokes 2013: 378–9)

Lippitt's and Stokes' critiques seem to suggest that Kierkegaard is completely dismissive of reflection in ethics. And perhaps our analysis so far has suggested the same. However, we do not think that Kierkegaard is critical of every kind of reflection with regard to the ethical. Rather, we follow Gouwens in his illuminating analysis of Kierkegaard's views on (and critique of) reflection. Gouwens argues that the reason Kierkegaard dismisses certain kinds of ethical (and religious) reflection is related to their 'direction' (1996: 31). That is, Kierkegaard distinguishes between 'subjective' and 'objective reflection,' and the latter implies 'a direction of thought away from the self' (Gouwens 1996: 33). This is clear with regard to the two aspects of Kierkegaard's critique of ethical reflection that we have highlighted: both the tendency towards disengagement, and the attempt to acquire additional knowledge direct ethical reflection away from the agent and his or her existential situation. If Kierkegaard acknowledges the importance of another kind of ethical reflection, it will have to have a direction towards the agent's self.

EXISTENTIAL ETHICS: EDUCATION, DOUBLE REFLECTION, AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The analysis in the previous section raises two important questions. First, what *is* the proper task of ethics? As we have seen, ethics should not be understood as having the task of acquiring ('external') knowledge in a disengaged way but, instead, ethics is concerned with 'realization': with enabling people to live ethically. But what does that mean? Second, does Kierkegaard dismiss every kind of ethical reflection, or is there a kind of ethical reflection that he does allow for?

Ethics as learning to use one's potential competence

In his notes on communication, Kierkegaard importantly argues that the ethical should not be communicated as science or scholarship (which is the confusion of the modern age) but as an art. How is the idea of ethics as an art to be understood? The basic elements of such 'art' can be clarified with reference to an example that Kierkegaard himself uses: the educational process of a country boy becoming a soldier. The corporal who has the task of turning the country lad into a soldier 'does not explain to the soldier what it is to drill, etc.; he communicates it to him as an art, he *teaches* him to use militarily the abilities and the *potential competence* he already has' (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 392; emphasis ours). This example indicates that the proper ethical task is to teach and to learn to use one's potential competence. This includes at least three basic elements.

First, it means that the ethical has the character of *competence* or capability (*Dygtighed*), even more specifically, *oughtness-capability* (*Skullen-Kunne*) (JP1, 307/SKS 27, 434), in the sense that one becomes able to do what one ought to do. The ethical is an unconditional 'to be obliged' and therefore not dependent on particular conditions and differences between people. Since the ethical

is related to the universally human, every human being is already ‘in possession of the capacity to be able to do it if only he wanted to,’ as Kierkegaard states elsewhere in his notebooks (KJN6, 74/SKS 22, 78). The ethical is a competence or capability in the sense of *knowing how to use* what one already possesses. The proper ethical task is to develop this capability, not to acquire ethical knowledge.

Second, the ethical competence one already possesses is *potential*, i.e. it is not something which is already completely given in the sense that no further efforts are needed. Rather, it is possible that it will remain only potential. Just as the country lad is not yet a soldier, the human being by nature is not yet an ‘ethical’ being. This is why Kierkegaard states that the ethical consists in *realizing* what one already knows. The ethical task is to actualize what is potentially available.

Third, this is to be accomplished by a particular kind of education, which can be qualified as *training* and *formation*. Continuing the metaphor of the army, Kierkegaard explains what this means: ‘Science probably can be pounded into a person, but the ethical has to be pounded out of him—just as the corporal, precisely because he sees the soldier in the farm boy, might say: I certainly will have to pound the soldier out of him; on the other hand, with respect to the manual of field tactics (what an army is, what sentry duty is, etc.) the corporal might say: Well, that will have to be pounded into him’ (JP1, 269–70/SKS 27, 392). The ethical potential of the human being is in need of formation in order to become ‘truly human’ (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 393). Elsewhere in ‘The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication’ Kierkegaard speaks of upbringing (*Opdragelse*), by which one becomes what one essentially is regarded to be (JP1, 279/SKS 27, 402). Understood in this way, ethics is basically concerned with moral formation of what is potentially given. The aim is ‘luring the ethical out of the individual, because it is *in* the individual. The corporal begins essentially by regarding the farm boy as a soldier, because he is this *κατα δυναμιν* [*kata dynamin*, ‘in potential’]’ (JP1, 269/SKS 27, 392).

Self-knowledge and double reflection

The second question is whether the ideas that we already know the ethical and that ethical reflection is an evasion imply the complete exclusion of any kind of reflection. We will defend the claim that Kierkegaard does not object to ethical reflection as such, only to a particular kind of ethical reflection, which he labels as ‘scientific,’ as we have seen. Since according to Kierkegaard ethics is not a science but an art, the kind of reflection that is adequate to such an understanding of ethics may be warranted. We will call this ‘existential ethical reflection.’

In his notes and lectures on communication an alternative reflection is indeed suggested, for instance when Kierkegaard states: ‘relatively little knowledge is needed to be truly human— but all the more self-knowledge’ (JP1, 279/SKS 27, 402). These phrases indicate that not all knowledge and reflection is excluded from the ethical. Not only is a little ethical knowledge needed, just as the soldier must know something of the army and its sentry duty from the manual of field tactics, but also and decisively a different kind of reflection is needed: self-knowledge.

Since self-knowledge should be distinguished from the kind of knowledge that is important in the scientific understanding of ethics, Kierkegaard comes to the paradoxical statement that '[i]nsofar as the ethical could be said to have a knowledge in itself, it is 'self-knowledge,' but this is improperly regarded as a knowledge' (JP1, 289/SKS 27, 417). The ethical is knowledge in the sense of 'self-knowledge,' but is not knowledge in the sense of 'information.' What is decisive is not information about ethical concepts and theories, but becoming aware of what I must do in my existential situation. Kierkegaard qualifies this as 'primitivity,' knowing 'what it means to be a human being' (JP1, 268/SKS 27, 391). When a boy gathers information about the army and studies the manual of field tactics this does not yet make him a soldier. What is needed is to *exist* as a soldier. Only then—as 'self-knowledge'—does his knowledge about the army make sense.

Similarly, from the perspective of the *ethicist* ethical knowledge is not wholly abandoned, but even a further reflection is needed to cure what Gouwens calls 'the disease of reflection' (1996: 27–54) in ethics. In this disease of reflection, 'seeking to live ethically' becomes reduced to the study of 'ethics.' In this way it is no longer understood as a quest for the good, a striving, but an objective enterprise, as we have seen. Rather than being engaged in the question 'how then shall I live?' one becomes absorbed in an ethical 'ideal' or 'issue.' This can be described as the failure to live in the concepts one reflects on (Gouwens 1996: 33–4). The remedy is to bring 'reflection back from inhuman abstraction and forgetfulness to the concrete concerns of existence' (Gouwens 1996: 43). The concern is not only with the ethical object of thought, but also with how the ethicist relates to the object of thought. Kierkegaard calls such ethicist an 'existing ethicist' (*Existerende Ethiker*). The existing ethicist is still an ethicist, but an ethicist working in the way of the corporal, a maieutic who 'pounds' the ethical 'out' not only of the other but also of himself. This requires a particular reflection. The existing ethicist 'remains conscious of himself and in reflection returns into himself to be that which he teaches, and he presupposes—that every human being is the same *κατα δυναμιν* [*kata dynamin*, 'in potential']' (JP 1, 269/SKS 27, 392). Here reflection is not in a disengaged way directed to an object (ethics as a science) but one's own life is reflected into ethics. The task is to live within the concepts one reflects on. Following this line of thought, we could say that the ethical questions 'what is duty?' or 'what is the good life?' become transformed into 'what should *I* do?' and 'how should *I* live?'

It is not without meaning that Kierkegaard calls 'living within what one thinks' 'double-reflection.' In this sense the ethical seems to require even *more* reflection than the modern ethics he attacks. In his notes on communication Kierkegaard describes double-reflection in the following cryptic way: 'the first is the reflection in which the communication is made, and second is that in which it is recaptured' (JP1, 274/SKS 27, 397). Elsewhere in his works we find more extensive descriptions, for instance: 'When a thought has gained its proper expression in the world, which is attained through the first reflection, there comes the second reflection, which bears upon the intrinsic relation of the communication to the communicator and renders the existing

communicator's own relation to the idea' (CUP 1, 76/SKS 7, 77). Taking these two descriptions together the first reflection is the sphere in which an idea is communicated. This presupposes that the communicator links himself to both the communicated thought and its form. In the second reflection the communicator reflects on the first reflection, which makes it possible to attain an attitude towards the communicated truth (Kaftanski 2014). This kind of reflection prevents the ethicist from evasion because in the second reflection the question becomes how he or she is related to what is communicated.

That reflection is intensified rather than diminished becomes also clear in how thinking functions in Kierkegaard's understanding of the subjective existing thinker. Characteristic of such a subjective thinker is that he is 'an existing person, and yet he is a thinking person. He does not abstract from existence and from the contradiction, but is in them, and yet he is supposed to think. In all his thinking, then, he has to include the thought that he himself is an existing person' (CUP 1, 351/SKS 7, 321). This makes ethical reflection more demanding. As Climacus remarks, whereas one is soon finished with humanity in general and with faith viewed abstractly, one 'will find it inexhaustible when his faith is to be declined in the manifold *casibus* [cases] of life' (CUP 1, 351/SKS 7, 321). Applied to the question to what extent ethical reflection is part of ethics understood as an art we could say that such reflection becomes more difficult. 'Instead of having the task of understanding the concrete abstractly, as abstract thinking has, the subjective thinker has the opposite task of understanding the abstract concretely' (CUP 1, 352/SKS 7, 322). This suggests that abstract and systematic ethical thinking—say: thinking about the good, ethical principles, duty etc.—is not abandoned but that something decisive is added: what the abstract means in one's own concrete existence, i.e. in the manifold cases of life.

CONCLUSION

The kind of ethical reflection Kierkegaard positively aims for is reflection which is essentially related to one's own 'existential situation.' Ethics does not consist in leaving the subjective behind in order to seek objective ethical truths. There is always something at stake in ethical reflection. In the Kierkegaardian sense the question is: 'what concern is it of yours?' (JP1, 271/SKS 27, 394). How am I involved in asking the ethical question at stake?

We can probably extend this analysis to ethical reflection as it nowadays takes place in all kinds of contexts. Although ethics can be practiced as an abstract, theoretical endeavour, this is not its ultimate goal. If we would understand ethics in this way it is indeed an evasion from the real questions of life. Rather, in asking questions like 'do we have an obligation to assisting people who regard their life as "fulfilled" in committing suicide?' or 'is genetic engineering of stem cells allowed?' there is something at stake. The questions are asked because of a certain urgency, for instance because people actually regard their life as fulfilled and ask for such assistance, or because the option to cure a genetic disease by way of genetic engineering is medically possible and felt as

morally desirable. Ethical reflection with regard to thought experiments such as the trolley problem⁵, on the other hand, typically lack urgency because the scenario is not related to our existential situation. (We usually do not find ourselves next to a fat man on a railroad bridge, deliberating whether it would be best to throw him off so as to prevent the killing of five people working down the railroad track). Reflecting on such issues is not genuine ethics. It has only a limited worth (which does not mean it is completely worthless). However, Kierkegaard reminds us time and again that devoting oneself to such questions may become an evasion if we limit ourselves to such issues. What matters in ethics is not such questions or developing (the correct) theory, but helping to understand the real questions of moral life. In genuine ethical reflection there is always something at stake. Ethical reflection is existential in nature. The task is to think the abstract in the concrete.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard's emphasis on self-knowledge and self-reflection runs the risk of becoming evasive as well. This becomes clear in, for example, the second lecture of 'The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication' where he distinguishes the reflection of the primitive person from the reflection of the person who lacks such primitivity. The primitive person is concerned about the question 'what it is to be a human being' (JP1, 304/SKS 27, 431). Yet, it seems that in focusing on this question the ethical reflection can remain abstract. 'A man in whom there is not much primitivity will come to consider the question of which girl he should marry. He will reflect: There is a choice, and the question is—which girl? The more primitive person perhaps will so immerse himself in the question of what reality there is in marrying that he never gets married' (JP1, 305/SKS 27, 431–2). It seems that according to Kierkegaard the question should not be which girl I should marry but rather whether I should marry or not. However, in our view the latter question may be as abstract as the former. A concrete question would be what does it mean to marry this particular girl who I already love? Similarly, according to Kierkegaard, with regard to getting a professional position the more primitive person would 'so immerse himself in the question of whether this mode of existence is essential for man that he never gets a position' (JP1, 305/SKS 27, 432). Contrary to what one would expect given his intention to think the abstract concrete, Kierkegaard phrases this question as a general question 'for man' about 'this mode of existence.' However, is not the question about my particular calling, whether I should remain a religious author or become a pastor for instance, much more concrete than asking what is 'essential'? Concrete responsibility is not just about the question whether one is existing in what one thinks, but also about what the particular situation in which I am involved requires from me to do. Or to phrase it in other words, thinking the abstract concretely means not only to relate one's thinking permanently to one's own existence, but also to take the particularity of the *casibus* of life into consideration as *my* concern. The examples Kierkegaard provides of how existential ethics may work, tend to evade from concrete responsibility given with the real contradictions in life. In *Works of Love*, for instance, the nature of neighbour-love is spelled out. All emphasis is on the interiority of the *how*, not on

the *what*. This becomes clear in the way he explains mercifulness as a deed of love. That mercifulness is a deed of love does not mean that it consists particularly of *doing* those things that relieves people from their needs. Mercifulness is rather to be understood as an inner quality of love; ‘then generosity will follow of itself and come to itself accordingly as the individual is capable of it’ (WL, 315/SKS 9, 312–13). The focus on neighbour-love as an inner quality can also detract us from actually doing what is needed in a concrete situation, namely helping this particular other in this particular situation. According to Kierkegaard, ‘*being able* to be merciful certainly is a far greater perfection than to have money and then *to be able* to give’ (WL, 317/SKS 9, 314). Nevertheless, shouldn’t we say that in some situations it still matters more to give *actually* than to be *able* to be merciful? Concrete ethical responsibility can be evaded by limiting oneself to reflections on the *how* of the ethical obligation. The *what* may be an equally or even more urgent part of the ethical task to think the abstract in the concrete.

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NOTES

¹ Compare Iris Murdoch's famous remark that 'an unexamined life can be virtuous' (Murdoch 1970: 1).

² It is important to note that, while Kierkegaard is attentive to the capacity and phenomenon we describe in terms of 'reflection', he himself uses the notion of 'reflection' in different senses throughout his authorship. See, for example, Robert C. Roberts' (1984) and Patrick Stokes' (2010, 35–40) work on this topic.

³ See also Kierkegaard's remark: 'for if I am supposed to get to know something first of all, then this 'shall' is not foremost, not absolute' (JP1, 285/SKS 27, 409).

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses a similar line of thought in *The Cost of Discipleship* ('*Nachfolge*'), where he claims that '[a]ll along the line we are trying to evade the obligation of single-minded, literal obedience' (Bonhoeffer 2015, 37). He gives the following example of our reflective tendency to evasion in Christianity: 'If a father sends his child to bed, the boy knows at once what he has to do. But suppose he has picked up a smattering of pseudo-theology. In that case he would argue more or less like this: "Father tells me to go to bed, but he really means that I am tired, and he does not want me to be tired. I can overcome my tiredness just as well if I go out and play. Therefore though father tells me to go to bed, he really means: "Go out and play."'" (Bonhoeffer 2015, 37).

⁵ The trolley problem is an influential thought experiment introduced by Philippa Foot (1979, originally 1967) in ethical theory. In its original version, it asks us to imagine a scenario where we are standing next to a lever close to a railroad. A runaway trolley is speeding our way. We notice that a little further down the railroad tracks five people are tied up; but also that there is a sidetrack wick we can divert the trolley to by pulling the lever. However, on the sidetrack there is one person tied to the railroad tracks. The question the thought experiment wants us to reflect on, is: should we pull the lever?