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Death, Love Duty: A Therapeutic Triptych - written by Mouna Krupardini

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Death, Love, Duty: A Therapeutic Triptych
by Mouna Krupardini

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Piyush Kuthethoor

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2017

A Disclaimer (Letter to the Board)

To the Board,

I would like to thank you for taking the time to go through Mouna Krupardini's project, a genuine attempt to develop a guide for moral conduct based on a duty to love that emerges in the face of death. Her work is grounded in ideas from Kierkegaard, Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy and Feminist Care Ethics. It deals with the inevitable moral problems of being an individual with a limited temporal existence that dreads to face death, thereby succumbing to actions of despair. As we become honest with ourselves, we start to realize that the cure for the sickness of existence is in taking upon love of the other as a duty, and the healing process is a continuous striving and duty to exist and bring the other into in the space of love that encompasses all self/ other. Because the first two out of the three schools of thought were prior areas of interest for me, Mouna reached out to me, looking for a platform to test this piece of experimental philosophy (I was grateful to have been introduced by her to the third). Since I had planned to do my philosophy senior project on Kierkegaard; and couldn't get myself to say anything that he hadn't said already or would have liked me to say through a thesis; I asked her to send me her work, so that I could merely present and defend it to the board. This is a disclaimer- I do not take any credit for the ideas here. I have merely transcribed her writings into this word document. For this reason, I do not wish to be graded on this Senior Project, but will take it pass/fail. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Piyush Kuthethoor

Death, Love, Duty: A Therapeutic Triptych

by

Mouna Krupardini

This project is dedicated to all sentient beings, truly pure in mind and heart- may they be freed from their suffering by gaining the wisdom to come to terms with death, realizing the highest passion in love, and serving the cause of freeing all sentient beings.

Acknowledgments

मातृ देवोऽभवः । पितृ देवोऽभवः । आचार्य देवोऽभवः । अतिथि देवोऽभवः ॥

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

*Matru Devobhava. Pitru Devobhava. Acharya Devobhava. Atithi Devobhava.
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti.*

Matru Devo Bhava - Mother is God.

I would like to thank the woman who went through the toil of bearing me, nourishing me and teaching me the ways of the world- my entire physical, emotional and mental existence is indebted to my mother. I also am forever grateful for the presence of the divine Mother in my life, because everything I am, do or know is caused by the fertile space of action She provides, manifesting in my life as a good home, good schools, Bard College, Central European University and endless forays into foreign lands and wilderness.

Pitru Devo Bhava - Father is God

I would like to thank my father, who has showed great concern in times of need, restraint in times of discord, and appreciation and faith in times of dejection and despair. No one has modeled better the willpower to overcome great adversity, and the cheerfulness with which to take on life. I am also awed by the greatness that is Shiva, contemplating whose image has inspired great will and contentment in me.

Acharya Devo Bhava - The Teacher is God

I would like to thank all my teachers; who am I but a little machine, recycling and repurposing the valuable lessons you have taught me. I am utterly grateful to my adviser, Daniel Berthold, for introducing me to philosophy, being a playful skeptic, and tagging along with my experiments yet always keeping it real. I thank David Weberman, for introducing me to continental philosophy and Kierkegaard, and teaching me about the stories we humans write about our surplus suffering. Jay Elliot, Maria Kronfeldner and Garry Hagberg - I sincerely thank each of them for making me see how the task of studying philosophy was relevant and pressing

to moral endeavor in our times - discussing the value and purpose of things with them has inspired the vision of this project. I thank Chiori Miyagawa for teaching me to be brave while playing with words. I thank Helena Gibbs for teaching me to see connection and nuance, and making me plunge into the depths of my psyche. I thank Tatjana Myoko and Dominique Townsend for opening the world of the Dharma to me. I am honored to have learnt from my grandfather, Govinda Rao, how to take fate into my own hands. I am grateful for the words of Sadhguru and Ravi Shankar, who from time to time showed me the way back to the mind and the heart. Finally, I thank the brilliance which is Soren Kierkegaard, whose works have been an anchor to my thoughts, whose words have tickled my intellect, and whose different personalities have helped me embrace every side to my existence.

Atithi Devo Bhava - The Guest is God

I thank every person who has walked into my life- all strangers at first, some who have managed to leave behind an impression, and others who have stayed on. I thank Ojas, Saba, Chris, Bhavya, Puja, Tony, Olesya and Errol for stimulating and insightful conversations in the classrooms and coffee shops of Budapest, a fleeting but intellectually rich moment in my life. I thank Rajdeep and Vikramaditya, who have always given me new ways of seeing the same old things. I thank Aishwarya for showing me how life is celebrated, Ayesha for showing me how to lighten life with humor, and Liz for showing me how to love courageously- the style here is but a reflection of your presence in my life. Finally, I thank Kritika Yegnashankaran for agreeing to be on my board despite not having known me- the enthusiasm and support she has shown this project is heartwarming.

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti - Peace! Peace! Peace! Upon the three worlds (Body, Speech and Mind)

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A Brief Introduction

This project sets out on an ambitious quest for a superior way of life- one that is honest, a source of consolation, and resolutely moral- in the face of the inevitable angst of surviving, satisfying, and seeking that shapes human existence. On what principle, if any, should we govern our conduct in the world? Answering the ethical question has bothered philosophers and religious thinkers from time immemorial, yet ordinary individuals have seldom waited for the resolution of philosophical debates or the consensus of theological interpretations to go on with their lives. Many follow the rules set out by the social traditions they find themselves in, whether religious, humanist, materialist or otherwise; some develop their own values, desires and goals, creating and paving personal paths to attain them; and a few go out into the world themselves to sieve through various ways and find the ones most agreeable and reasonable. My path has been like the third- from the phantasmagoria of Hindu mythology crowding my childhood in India, to the lecture halls and libraries of philosophy departments in California, different guides for moral conduct were tried and tested with self-experimental curiosity, in search of the one(s) I could agreeably live by. Many questions about both the objects and nature of my inquiry arose from this search- What if everyone lived like this? What would it take? Can everyone understand or experience this? And on what basis was I finding something agreeable- Its logic? How it made me feel? What it resulted in?

On this journey, I met a few individuals whose thinking and impeccable daily conduct left strong impressions that seeped into my ideas and actions. Presented here are writings by three such individuals, a journey through their ideas in a fashion that resembles my personal journey towards a sustainable, adaptable and inclusive guide to moral living. Indeed much of my

post-doctoral research on “passive activity” in Kierkegaard is influenced by the following works, which were either addressed to me or written in response to my persistent questions to the authors. They also played a major role in my enriching interactions with Eastern and Feminist traditions of thought. By presenting these three pieces simultaneously, like a triptych, I hope to paint a picture of what can be called a therapeutic morality- one that induces a duty to love in the face of death. The initial question “how to live well?” seems insufficient- the problems of living and dying are tied up; we must ask, “how to live and die well?” As we become honest with ourselves, and come face-to-face with death, we gain a sense of peace and start to realize that the cures for the sickness of existence are in taking upon the love of the other as a duty, and the healing process is a continuous effort and commitment to channel this love in action. This project is thus not only a testimony to the valuable insights of its various contributors, but is also an ode to love. It is love that will emerge as the recommended guiding principle for moral conduct, and my appeal will thus not rely solely on reason, faith or necessity, but a bit of all three- it is made by virtue of love’s sincerity to the human condition; its consolation of the passions; and its ability to endure and relieve all suffering. My role here is to simply etch out this significance through the works of Samuel Sahara, Yadleen Singh, and Rabten Jamyang.

The following pieces are thus arranged on the loose model of the sickness, the cure, and healing. The first, an academic essay by my PhD dissertation adviser Sam Sahara, is on the despairing incompleteness of understanding in an absolutistic, nihilistic, crowd-based, "aesthetic" or "ethical" way of life. Deriving from Kierkegaard and Buddhism, Sam observes the *sickness unto death* or despair in various ‘stages’ of life, and how one may come to have the keen awareness that brings peace of mind, the “open third eye”, by truly incorporating death into

life. The second is a memoir and personal essay by Yadleen Singh, a travel writer, who seeks a *cure* for the suffering alluded to by essay one, one that consoles the passions, and writes on the *eternal* duty to love thy neighbor as the remedy. He defends Kierkegaard's call to engage in *works* of eternal love as a duty to love the other, in order to overcome the despair of loving the self. Finally, in a letter addressed to me, Rabten Jamyang, a feminist activist, Buddhist practitioner and a friend of mine from college, discusses how we may heal and what the practice of such loving compassion looks like, with insights from her exposure to Tibetan Buddhism and feminist care ethics. Here, the virtue of the *Feminine* as maternity and playfulness comes into sight- by embracing and coming to value the feminine in the infinite space that is nature, codependent relations, and the caring energy from which all beings emerge and are sustained- one is perennially healed from suffering and finds an unbound and joyous source of energy to sustain one's compassion and engagement in works of love without succumbing to despair- necessary to liberate people from their suffering in the world today. This project thus brings together Samuel Sarah's explanation of death, Yadleen Singh's take on Love, and Rabten Jamyang's understanding of Duty, to paint the "therepeutic" picture of moral existence.

DEATH

Foreword

Samuel Sahara is a professor at U.C Berkeley, specializing in continental philosophy (specifically Kierkegaard and existentialism) and Asian philosophy, with a particular interest in getting the two areas in conversation with each other. Born in Hawaii and raised in California, Sam had not been exempted by the waves of “modern Buddhism” that hit California. The only difference was that unlike many who fled to safety in fear or drowned themselves in the "exotic," Sam learnt to surf. Starting from when he was an adolescent boy, Sam engaged with the *dharma* that his parents had introduced him to, never seeing it as Other in his life as an ordinary American. When he went to college, he studied philosophy, and eventually became a professor.

When I first met Sam, he was clad in plain, all-black attire. I had heard from the others at Berkeley that Sam’s outfits were always gloomy and dull. When I asked him about it, he simply brushed it off with a smile, saying “are you here to study with me, or to study with my outfit?” Indeed, I had chosen to go to U.C. Berkeley to study with him because of his monumental efforts in comparative East-West philosophy, even conducting trainings for philosophy professors to diversify their background knowledge. In class, Sam was an explosive character, bursting with insight. Questions followed answers which followed questions, and Sam would dance the discussion, twisting and shaking at the minds of his students. In contrast, Sam maintained a general stoicness outside the classroom, reflected in his attire. But Sam was very much concerned with the existential task, of how to overcome suffering and live and discover meaningful, authentic selfhood. A thing he loved to do was pointing at himself and ask the Zen question, “Who is this one carrying a corpse around?” It reflected his detachment from externals and his longing to liberate the minds of his students. This paper is written in that vein.

THE THIRD EYE IS THE EYE OF DEATH

Samuel Sahara

*A sincere Moral Philosophy in Kierkegaard's "Enlightening, Uplifting and Consistent" analysis of the *Sickness Unto Death**

Despair is a Sickness in the Spirit, in the Self...a disrelationship in a relation which relates itself to its own self and is constituted by another...the possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast, to be sharply aware of this sickness constitutes the Christian's advantage; to be healed of this sickness is the Christian bliss. (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 146)

*Alas! Now as the intermediate state of Samadhi (meditative absorption) arises before me,
I must enter a state free from the mass of distractions,
which is devoid of subjective apprehension,
And free from the two extremes [of absolutism and nihilism],
And attain stability in the stages of generation and perfection
At this moment, having renounced activity, and attained a singular view,
I must not fall under the sway of bewildering mental afflictions (Dorje 33).*

What is the best kind of self-other relationship, and how do we attain it? Most matters of ethical inquiry can be considered a variation of this question. At least, this is where this analysis begins, because if ethics is a matter of good attitudes and behavior, however that good is defined and rendered attainable, we must acknowledge that attitudes and behaviors are the middle term: they are like the verb, which is neither solely the action of the subject or agent, nor state of use of the object or principle, but primarily particular manifestations of the relationship between subject and object. By committing to the primacy of relationships in human experience, this paper takes on the idea that a focus on the health or quality of these relationships is most sincere to the human condition of being a self-relationship. In contrast, focusing on improving the quality of the subject in the relationships- a view desire-based or hedonist utility-theories propagate, or the object in the relationships- a view obligation based ideal-principle theories adhere to, is not fully

aware of their codependency or the middle term of being-in-a-relationship, and thus is insincere to the human condition.

The pursuit of self-interest or obligation to other-interest is not the course of action I recommend, although I argue that the individual attempt to awaken to the human condition by seeing *truly* and resolving the self-other relationship it is constituted in, is both in the interest of the self and the other, because it is necessary in attaining the highest good- the elimination of suffering caused by a dis-relation, an unsettledness or forsakenness, *in* the self. This suffering or disrelationship is what Anti-Climacus calls despair, the sickness of the human condition, and to cure this sickness is the understanding of “good” or moral behavior expounded here. Using the metaphor of seeing to describe whether and how this relationship characterizing our condition is seen, this paper describes the various levels or “stages” of awareness in decreasing order of their distance from the cure: being blind, seeing with one eye, seeing with two eyes, and opening the third eye.

Opening the third eye is a commonly used metaphor in Eastern thought, alluding to clarity of awareness and sincere understanding of the human condition that dawn at a stage of attainment or realization, called *samadhi* (integration, meditative concentration and absorption). The features of the state of *samadhi* described in the above passage from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* thus entail the necessary conditions for *opening the third eye*, which is also having the awareness that constitutes the “Christian advantage.” Using Kierkegaard’s analysis of the existential problem in *Sickness Unto Death*, I argue that *it is necessary for philosophical reflection on moral actions to meet those conditions in order to have the clear awareness and sincere understanding of the human condition that enables “good” behavior and subsequent eradication of despair*. The philosophical reflection here thus elucidates conditions that lead to

the opening of the third eye, and why they are necessary to pass into Kierkegaard's "religious stage", where the "Christian bliss" or cure of despair is attained. These conditions are-

- i) Focusing on "*subjective apprehension*" which involves considering the health/quality of the self-relationship and self-other relationships as "the good," not self/ things in and of themselves;
- ii) "*Avoiding the two extremes*" of absolutism and nihilism in our moral philosophy, as they take away from the health by not focusing on relationship for relationship's sake;
- iii) Overcoming "*the mass of distractions*," the "blindness" /unawareness of the "crowd"
- iv) Passing the first "*stage of generation*," the partial vision or aesthetic stage of self
- v) Passing the second "*stage of perfection*," the Either / Or vision of ethical stage of self
- vi) Acknowledging the eternal "*moment*" and "*renouncing activity*" to attain "*a singular view*"

Thus, necessary to curing despair, sin or immorality are these conditions that "open the third eye." *But while necessary, they are not sufficient for a moral behavior that guarantees the complete eradication of despair*, the formula to which is complete when "the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it" (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 147). Hence what is also required is the self's will to be "grounded in the Power that constituted it", or the will to Believe in a Power- the "leap of faith." But this ultimately is an individual choice. Both Anti-Climacus and I are uncomfortable to induce or justify faith with philosophical reasoning, as "the believer is surely a lover, yea, of all the lovers most in love...it would be an abomination to him, to talk in such a way as to try to prove by three reasons that there is after all something in this thing of being in love" (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 234). So this paper argues for the "open third eye"- a clear awareness, peace of mind, and sincere understanding of the human condition that moral philosophical reflection is capable of bringing, a necessary condition for eradicating despair. The

project of inspiring faith and a proper course of moral action is best left to literature, sermons, memoirs, political speeches, self-help guides, meditation or ritual manuals, not philosophy.

I Devoid of “*Subjective Apprehension*” or Despair, the Sickness of Disrelationship within us

“The study of philosophy without the longing for liberation is like dressing up a corpse”

-*The Tripura Rahasya*

We must first seek to establish why moral philosophy should involve considering the health/ quality of the relationships constituting a self as the good. By discussing the prevalence of the *subjective apprehension* of despair, a basic type of “disrelationship,” to the human condition, the desirability of a state of health liberated from the *subjective apprehension* of the disrelationship of despair can be established. Curing this human sickness is thus the good on which a sincere moral philosophical reflection should focus on.

Philosophers often talk of the good in terms of a code of conduct or a personal amount of happiness, failing to consider the possibility that the origins of “good” could be found in our response to that common everyday question, “How are you doing today?” “I have been a good person” or “I have a good amount of happiness” may be considered peculiar responses. Perhaps then, good should be understood in philosophy neither exclusively as virtue or as utility, but as a state of being or doing in wellness or health; and to attend to and exist in this good, perhaps we must consult not the lawyer or our bellies, but the “physician of the soul”, a wise being (a philosopher, perhaps) who understands your underpinning anxieties and its cures. This is what Anti-Climacus is drawing our attention to in *Sickness Unto Death*. The health of the body is a function of the vital circulation of nutrients, water, air and energy through functional relationships between the microbiome and the macrobiome. And just like these relationships the body maintains to maintain itself, there are relationships the “soul” or self needs to maintain

itself as “the self is a relation that relates itself to its own self” and the human self is “a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of the eternal and the temporal, of freedom and necessity” and “a synthesis is a relation between two factors” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 146). What is insisted is a notion that human selfhood is relationally constituted. A bundle-theory of self suggests that the self is an aggregate of things related together. But without a relatively permanent or stable point that they are related to- an idea of a “self”- they will immediately dissolve, leaving no-self. This is because, to be a self, we must relate, link or bundle certain contingent dependencies of the moment (“itself”), to a possible ideal, whole or relatively permanent self-narrative defining who we are (“its own self”). We cannot get rid of either part of the relation- abandoning the temporal denies our impending death; while the attempt to rid the eternal in man is futile, as “he cannot cast *from* him forever, as the relation to himself a man cannot get rid of any more than he can get rid of himself” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 150). What is implied here is that to possess a notion of selfhood we must have a notion of a relatively stable or eternal self (for Anti-Climacus, the spirit) to which the temporal is related. Denying the temporal or trying to cast away the eternal are both a “disrelationship” in the self. Since a disrelationship in the body causes health-failure, the disrelationship in the self is what Anti-Climacus calls despair, a sickness or absence of good.

Therein, the universality of despair is primarily based in the unease or sickness caused by two things. First is the irrefutable fact of impending death or impermanence that describes the human condition. Due to this fundamental impermanence, The First Noble Truth of the Buddhists asserts that all worldly life experiences are pervaded by a deep subjective apprehension or suffering (*dukkha*). The unreflective mind may be unconscious of this, but to the discerning mind, as the Yogabhāṣya remarks, “all is but *dukkha*” of three types: “the suffering associated with change (*parinama*), anxiety (*tapa*) and habituation (*samskara*)” (Perrett 37) and

so liberation is a desirable goal. And so Perrett remarks that “the frustration by change of our need for security is the anxiety or anguish common to all human experience”, and “it is not that there are no agreeable or pleasurable experiences (37). Rather because of the continual transformation of nature, our experience is permeated with a deep dissatisfaction or anxiety, and the radical contingency and fragility of pleasures cause the discriminating to experience even those as sorrowful” (Perrett 37). Hence, a sincere mind will be put at unease in acknowledging impermanence, which is the cause of all “*subjective apprehension*” and suffering, and pursue the good of eradicating it in oneself, and in all sentient beings or subjective individuals.

Second, because despair is a basic or fundamental type of “disrelationship” in the self that pervades human existence, it is not just based in the fact of impending death but *how* one relates life to it, thereby referred to as the “sickness *unto* death”. Despair is the sickness *unto death* because despair is a disrelationship in the self’s relations or synthesis, and an important one of these is that between life and death. Since it is the unhealthiness or suffering based in a subjective “apprehension”, attitude, or relation of life *towards* the “eternal” aspect in death, the question is not about *what* death really is but *how* death is related to, and “despair is the answer that says: It is a sickness in which Death is the last thing” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 150). So when the self sees only life’s temporal impermanence, of which death is considered the last thing, it fails to relate temporal and eternal. The self’s (dis)relationship stems not from (lack of) knowledge of *what* lies after death but from *how* the death is experienced, thought about, approached: whether the relative permanence of an imminent death has (not) been truly and healthily internalized by and synthesized into the temporal finite life. The sickness is a failure to relate to death’s “eternal” aspect-for Anti-Climacus this is God, but this is also simply a looming permanent expanse (for there is no undoing death). Just like the innate anxiety of the self in its need for

securing an impermanent life contributes to the sickness of suffering, the attitude of the self towards death as the *last event* of a fragile fleeting life causes a failure to integrate or synthesize an “eternal” death perspective (“the eye of death”) *into* temporal life. The self’s inability to constitute itself in a healthy relationship between life and death, temporal and eternal, is the sickness of despair.

Thus, the universality of this sickness, based on the suffering permeating the human experience of impermanence and the inability to properly synthesize the eternal aspect of death into one’s existence, makes it a desirable end for moral philosophical reflection. Indeed, “As the physician may say that there lives perhaps not a single man who is in perfect health, so one might say perhaps that there lives not a single man who after all is not to some extent in despair, in whose inmost part there does not dwell a disquietude, a discord, a perturbation” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 155). Its universal presence is not denied by being unaware of it, because one can go about “carrying a sickness of the spirit, which only rarely in glimpses, by and with a dread which to him is inexplicable, gives evidence of its presence” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 155), just like one goes on with life despite being unaware of the body’s lack of perfect health. Acknowledging this universal “subjective apprehension”, despair or disrelationship in the self as the “sickness” that causes pain and suffering is the first condition that a clear and sincere moral philosophical reflection seeking to “open the third eye”.

II Conceptualizing An Ethics “Free from the Two Extremes [of Absolutism and Nihilism]”

Having established the universal problem/lack of good that moral philosophy must focus on, we now turn to how exactly the good must be conceived and theorized to render it attainable. The way that a moral philosophy proceeds cannot maintain or further the non-good or suffering it seeks to eliminate; it must render it attainable. For this, I argue, it must avoid the “two

extremes” of absolutism and nihilism. An important synthesis that Kierkegaard notes constitutes “the actuality” of the self is “between necessity and possibility” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 169), where “inasmuch as it is itself, it is the necessary and inasmuch as it has to become itself, it is a possibility” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 168). Because we both are and become ourselves, despair is the dis-relationship that arises when a moral position disregards one or the other, so “the despair of possibility is the lack of necessity” and “the despair of necessity is the lack of possibility” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 168). This section discusses how nihilism and absolutism lead to the above forms of despair. For the self to be constituted as an actuality, to actually be a self, it must be where it *really* is- between earth and sky. The essential ground or earth is the limit and constraint of necessity and the expansive space of the sky is the freedom of possibility. To build castles in the sky and try to live in them is the despair of absolutism, while the despair of nihilism buries itself underground in a hole, losing the sky of possibility. Neither extreme allows for an actualized self which makes the good of eliminating despair attainable- A nihilist renders the good *impossible* to “actualize” or attain, sinking into one’s despair; and an absolutist doesn’t feel the *necessity* to “actualize” or ground/attain the good, thus ignoring its despair.

Nihilism is a position that asserts a lack of purpose or value to existence, so no possibility of meaning or good exists- things simply are, but they are meaningless, valueless. A strong version considers everything trivial, thus any spirit of becoming a true-self is looked at with contempt. Because the possibility of the self becoming other than what it is is eliminated, in a sense then, nihilism is the “despair of necessity which lacks possibility”. The loss of possibility is the determinism or fatalism where everything becomes necessary or the philistinism where everything becomes trivial (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 173). In the first form of nihilism, there is no possibility to “relax, soothe, and temper” the necessary automated-ness of the flux or

impermanence, rendering the resulting anxiety “impossible to assuage,” while the second form “tranquilizes itself in the trivial” and “imprisons possibility” to prevent “revival from spiritlessness”(Kierkegaard, *SUD* 174). Thus crushed down under the ground by necessity, the nihilist sinks further into despair because he either finds the good impossible, “straining himself against existence” or willingly renders it impossible, “spiritlessly celebrating his triumph” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 175). A hole is a hole, whether one remains there compulsively or willingly.

While nihilism buries itself, absolutism seeks to leap into the clouds and erase the ground beneath it, a suicidal attempt to defy gravity. Absolutism refers to accepting an unconditional principle as the superior or ultimate truth of reality, an abstraction claimed as real independent of contingent conditions. Nihilism was “nothing is real”, absolutism is “a possibility rendered absolutely real”. Here, as soon as the absolute is posited, reality is “attained”, the self automatically *becomes* this abstract possibility independently outside conditions of its current state of *being*. This is the “despair of possibility that is the lack of necessity”, as it does not require the possibility to be manifest in actuality because it is absolutely/unconditionally real, and thus no necessary conditions or time for “realizing” or “actualizing” it are found. So, “the self runs away from itself, as it has no necessity whereto it is bound to return” and “everything becomes more and more instantaneous” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 169). Thus, absolutism in abstract possibility makes everything possible, and goes astray in “wishful yearning” or “fear” where “instead of summoning possibility back into necessity, the man pursues the possibility and cannot find his way back to himself” or “is lead away from himself” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 170). In one form, desire gets the best of us, as it did when Descartes sought to make mind the absolute. In another, fear of losing the absolute leads one away from the necessary. The suicide-bomber fanatic is a classic example: in trying to maintain his absolute possibility, he necessitates nothing

of himself, not even the preservation of his body. Absolutism thus claims that the good is already attained in possibility, and despair is eradicated by simply positing the absolute possibility, without considering the “necessary” conditions to actualize it and render it attainable.

Kierkegaard, lumped together with other existentialists, has the unfortunate reputation of being a “sad-boy” or nihilist, the father of a philosophy of dread and despair. Yet he is also considered by some as an absolutist theologian or Christian apologetic. These judgments overlook either his positive sense of humor and duty to “upbuild” humans or his notion of the absurd in the contradiction-resolving (not denying) nature of faith. His analysis of despair is neither absolutism nor nihilism, as he clearly seeks to avoid these attitudes-

This view will seem to many a paradox, an exaggeration, and a gloomy and depressing view. It is nothing of that sort. It is not gloomy; on the contrary, it seeks to throw light upon a subject that is ordinary left in obscurity. It is not depressing; on the contrary it is uplifting as it views every man in the aspect of the highest demand made upon him, that he be spirit. Nor is it a paradox; on the contrary, it is a fundamental apprehension consistently carried through, hence it is no exaggeration. (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 155)

The absolutist is intolerant to the suggestion of contradiction, inconsistency or paradox, but for Kierkegaard the “highest form of sin (despair) is the denial of Christ (paradox)” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 262) and the only thing consistent is the “fundamental apprehension” of anxiety or despair whose source is the presence of fundamental inconsistency or disrelationship. But Kierkegaard is also not trying “to be gloomy and depressing”, as he seeks to “uplift” humans to overcome this condition. Thus, he considers the good neither already attained, nor unattainable. The good is attainable- Christ attained it and serves as the model with whom we try to live “contemporaneously”. And attaining this, Kierkegaard claims, involves passing through some stages of “upbuilding” the self. If moral philosophy is to provide an understanding of moral

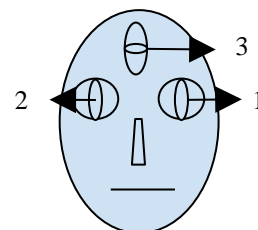
behavior, it must consider the good attainable, necessary to which is avoiding the extremes of absolutism and nihilism. Only then, can it proceed to the conditions for attaining the good.

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Death cannot explain itself. The earnestness consists precisely in this, that the observer must explain it to himself - Kierkegaard

Having established the universality of the sickness of despair as a moral problem that hinders the attainment of the “good” that is health, and the actuality in which the moral position or therapeutic method must be constituted, where the extremes of nihilism and absolutism that make the good unattainable are avoided, we now need to know the conditions of the treatment. Because the sickness is caused by the fact of impending death and a subjective attitude towards death that dis-relates or fails to synthesis it with life, a total “earnestness” or clear awareness and sincere understanding with which “the observer explains death to himself” can be considered the necessary condition for curing “the sickness unto death.” To have this earnest view of death is to “open the third eye,” or the eye of death itself, one that can take on a life-death perspective, where self is seen as “simultaneously living and dying.” Thus if “the third eye” perspective, which requires “freedom from the mass of distractions,” “stability in stages of generation and perfection,” and “attaining a singular view,” brings the necessary clear awareness and sincere understanding of the sickness of despair in one’s life, “upbuilding” to this perspective by fulfilling each of the above conditions can be considered necessary to the elimination of despair.

The “upbuilding” perspectives on death are as follows- not seeing death, seeing it as an end or *last thing* seeing it as destiny, and seeing it as Truth. One only gradually attains the awareness of the open third eye or eye of Death. The argument claims: one must first



overcome the crowd's blindness to death and have an eye *for* death. But this one-eyed vision is still not the eye *of* death, so then both eyes are to be opened, creating an either/or vision of death. Since this ethical vision anticipates and chooses, it has *eyes towards* death. To take on the third eye of Death itself is to bring the "eternal" truth of death into every moment of life and make it contemporaneous- a synthesized "singular view" of simultaneously "living and dying."

III Condition 1: Overcoming the "Mass of Distractions" or the Blindness of "the Crowd"

The city appears to you as a whole where no desire is lost and of which you are a part, and since it enjoys everything you do not enjoy, you can do nothing but inhabit this desire and be content.

-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Considered by some as the first critique of modernity or "post-modern", Kierkegaard was vocal against Western civilization's modern turn away from God and His Church, which "in a struggle for equality produced only equality in mediocrity and instead of fraternity ended with convention ridden collectivism", thus not "leveling up" but "leveling down" (Johnson xxiv). Kierkegaard despised the descent into "the abdication of responsible selfhood and the monstrous standardization and regimentation of life" (Johnson xxiv), a morality of "the crowd" which "in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction" (qtd. in Kaufmann 93). The crowd is the "mass of distractions" that keeps most preoccupied today, as "the enormous numbers who are living in the present age are to the body politic much like the brass hammers of a clavichord that swing at the slightest touch and cannot possibly maintain a definite expression; we live in an age where one hears a confused sound and scarcely knows whether it is one who is speaking or someone else" (Kierkegaard, *E/OI* 472). Thus one's notion of identity gets displaced to the crowd, or the "city" noted above. The majority of people who remain in the crowd "have pawned their reason to the motto: Conform to the age."

Such conformity to the crowd fails to sincerely reflect upon understanding the human condition: it is utterly blind to the actuality of being a self and its possibility of death. It is a form of unconscious despair, in which one refuses to come into his own being and holds onto the conditions of security or comfort in the crowd, and “when anyone asks him to occupy his own house” or suggests he isn’t happy, “he gets furious” and “calls them a killjoy” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 176). This renders one further away from the attainment of the good as one is not even aware of being constituted as a self, let alone reflecting on the constitution or resolving the “sickness unto death.” It is unconsciously absolutist as “one has a system and it is fixed, and doesn’t fear being under a delusion” and so one “is securely in despair, secured against being aware” of one’s despair by not even considering oneself as a self (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 177).

Hence, the first condition towards getting closer to resolving despair is to actual step out of the blinders of one’s cultural or conditioned existence (*samskara*) and become conscious of one’s individuality in order to take on the “task of being an individual,” of living truly in face of impermanence and impending death. The crowd cannot perform the moral task for the individual, as while “everyone can and everyone should be this one- only one attains the goal” (qtd. in Kaufmann 93). As the task for each individual is to realize and resolve their despair by truly synthesizing the self, others can only assist or upbuild one towards it. One cannot remain “blind” to one’s impending death, and the task of being a self in light of it. Only by being aware and moving away from the crowd or “mass of distractions”, one gets closer to health.

IV The One-Eyed Vision of the Aesthetic Stage of Generation

Having overcome blindness, one comes into the notion of being a self, and sees oneself as a life, but which is temporal, because it has “a last thing”- namely, death. The “last thing” is the final word on the matter, a description rendering complete, a snapshot capturing the moment.

Seeing the finitude of the living self thus naturally leads one into a stage where one starts seeing death as the hope which brings an end to or is the “last thing” to the suffering of life’s temporal change. The self will not get rid of life, as life’s impermanence is the cause of despair, but one looks *for* something infinite in a death or “a last thing” while alive, a sterile picture that renders something free from the unstable finitude of life. Laura from Milan Kundera’s *Immortality* is a perfect example of this- she makes a threat of suicide with no desire to be rid of herself. Instead, “she aspires to small immortality: to transcend herself and the unhappy moment in which she lives to do “something” to make everyone who has known her remember her” (Kundera 164).

Overcoming blindness leads to an eye *for* death, as it seeks to escape the messy, unstable finite life through developing a taste for clean-cut suffering-free sterile “last things”. So one develops an eye *for* death, like an eye for beauty or an eye for art, a taste or inclination for seeing and becoming “last things.” And just as one squints to “take in” artwork more precisely, the eye for death is a “one eyed vision,” looking *for* death in everything alive by squinting to reduce and capture it as “a last thing:” a snapshot or image fixed in time. This is the vision of A or the “aesthete” in *Either/Or*, who sees the world as the dead “last things” of recollection and art. The aesthete has an “eye for death” because he lives in the “stage of generation” and so generates everything as a “last thing”. He captures the fleeting life as a memory and projects desires, which “are already memories” (Calvino 8), onto images. The aesthete never takes delight in the real finite thing, the source of suffering he seeks to avoid, so “to live in recollection is the most perfect life imaginable” as “it has a security that no actuality possesses” and “has already passed into eternity” (Kierkegaard, *E/OI* 32). Things are desirable based on how it has been rendered dead: recollected, imagined or rendered in his own mind, as “real enjoyment consists not in what one enjoys but the idea...in not what I enjoy but in getting my own way” (Kierkegaard, *E/OI* 31).

And so the aesthete “assumes it is man’s destiny to amuse himself” and sees the world “in the antithesis of boredom/ amusement” (Kierkegaard, *E/OI* 290). Recollection and imagination serve to amuse over things, which is the only thing that brings the aesthete delight.

The squinting one-eye unfortunately develops a skewed perspective on death. In this stage, one is conscious of having a self and its impending death, but by looking at death as the “last thing” to the suffering-inducing impermanence of life, it develops an eye for identifying and delighting in the “last thing” or “death” of everything. By hoping that one could forget oneself and giving up on life’s finite contingencies one fails to truly synthesize death with life and actualize the self. This attitude towards life is expressed by A here- “A book can have a title that prompts the desire to read the book, but a title in itself can be so thought-laden, so appealing, that one will never read the book” (Kierkegaard, *E/OI* 219). Thus by never reading the book of life but generating perfect amusing titles that can be the “last-thing” of the book, the aesthete desires the “small immortality” in the memories of recollection and representation. This is a cause of suffering as the aesthete’s essential nature “is outside himself, he is always absent from himself, never present” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 222). So the aesthetic stage never “stabilizes the stage of generation” as it escapes into the delight of memories and projections, lacking grounding in the finite self (the “itself”). To open the second eye, it must get over its attachment to an infinitized or permanent self and shift perspective on death.

IV The Dual Vision of the Ethical Stage of Perfection

The movement into the ethical is an inward subjective realization or shift in perspective and not a dialectic or Hegelian progression, “a movement at the spot” not “from the spot” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 169). This is because “Hegel’s subsequent positions swallows up with the previous one, not as the stage of life swallows another, with each still retaining its validity, but as

a higher title or rank swallows up a lower title” (Kierkegaard, *E/OI* 478). So while the one eye clearly saw what it saw, and was valid in that sense, its narrow perspective sought to immortalize the subject of life by seeking “the last thing” of everything and thus failed to distinguish death from life in a way that overcame despair. In the ethical stage, one awakens more to the actuality of the self- the dual vision that sees with two eyes, either/or, perceives both life and death and clearly distinguishes the two. This is the two-eyed vision of the ethicist, who has “eyes towards death.” Life is the now and death is the after, and Judge William’s opening line of *Either/Or Part II* addressing the aesthete clearly underlines this departure- “the line on which your eye falls were written last” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 5). The ethical stage which sees with two eyes is thus clear about being situated in temporality, but does not fear it, desiring “the last thing” only as “the last thing”- a destiny. Here it clearly differentiates death from life, seeing “the last thing” as a thing in the future, which one is in no hurry to bring about. It does this by seeing death and explaining it to oneself as something one is going “towards,” and anticipates and chooses in light of this “destiny.”

To live towards death like this takes courage, and this is the virtue characteristic of the ethical stage, where “the earnestness, energy and pathos with which one chooses” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 167) matters most. Seeing an Absolute destiny in death fills one with the pathos, energy and earnestness necessary to motivate to action and transfigure life to deliver a meaningful destiny. This inwardly felt duty, zeal and courage that “bursts forth from its depth” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 257) is the necessary qualification for the ethical stage of “perfection”, which involves perfecting these attitudes or relationships, not the object. This is thus not a conformity to an external moral principle of the crowd. The aesthetic stage had clear awareness of selfhood and subjective capacity, but did not see in a way where the self acted and actualized this agency; the

ethical stage gets the courage and willpower to employ the self. Being such a choosing, moral agent “gives a person a harmony and solemnity” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 176) that is not present in the despair of the aesthetic stage, as the ethicist can transfigure oneself, while “the aesthete, despite all passion, only has a weak aspiration” which never transfigures (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 167). In *Immortality*, Laura’s aspiration for “small immortality” was the weak aspiration. Bettina who intervenes in the misery of a Pole, aspires for “grand immortality”, refusing “to die with this day and its cares” and hoping to become “an eternal memory” (Kundera 164). The ethical enacts an absolute virtue in temporality constantly, leading a life that recurrently manifests it.

The act of choosing is most important in the ethicist’s dualistic thinking, as “the ethical stage is one of commitment (repetition), while the aesthetic stage is dreamily connected to the past, or even to the moment” and “to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 166). And so wherever there is a question of an Either/Or, the ethical vision is manifest, as “the only absolute Either/Or is the choice between good and evil, which is absolutely ethical” while “the aesthetic choice is either altogether immediate and loses itself in a great multiplicity” and thus is not a choice (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 167). So it is not that the aesthete chooses evil and the ethicist virtue, but that “the esthetic is not evil but indifferent” while “the ethical essentially makes a choice a choice” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 168). For the ethical vision, “even in innocent situations, what a person chooses is always important” and “the soul is made ripe in the hour of decision” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 157). And the important thing about choosing is again not *what* but *how*, as “the point of the ethical is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 176). This is the reality the two eyes awaken to- while only one eye reduced life to an image, the two eyes see symbol and meaning- life becomes a symbolic gesture, committedly reiterating a symbol that has a perfect absolute meaningful

beyond Death. So one lives in a “stage of perfection” of constantly choosing to achieve the perfect meaning in the symbolic trajectory of life, which renders its full meaningfulness by its ultimate destiny in death. And so “in choosing, one chooses to choose and thus chooses oneself” (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 177) or to repeat actions that manifest the “good” in oneself. Here, life looks not to infinitely generate “last things”, but is a “stage of perfection” with symbolic choices rendered fully/ ultimately meaningful in death, made towards this perfected destiny.

An aspiration for immortality, however, still doesn't fully internalize death. While the ethical stage's duty is inwardly felt, it is employed in an outward fashion by means of repetition of outcome. It is not true inwardness but the partial introversion of “the university man, gentle husband, respectable father, and uncommonly competent civil functionary” (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 197) who cares for stable repetitions of the virtuous life. This “stage of perfection” is not fully stabilized, as the vision towards death is keen on its freedom to choose a life trajectory and maintain a consistent existence, whose “harmony and solemnity” it is attached to. The eyes toward death insist on their ability to choose and determine life's meaning and define the destiny of death, and to maintain this freedom it excludes contradiction (Kierkegaard, *E/OII* 174). But if the ethicist's meaningfully chosen consistent repetition of the sequence is interrupted and contradicted, by a real situation she is in or identifies with that runs in the face of an absolute meaning, despair manifests. The tragic choice problem is a common manifestation of this, where the choice confronted is immoral or meaningless either way, suspending meaningful repetition and creating despair. For example, a mother working to succeed in a corporate culture may believe it is ethical to devote more time to the first few years of a child's life. Yet she also simultaneously holds the corporate ethic, which demands her to be committed, puts work first, etc., pressuring her to return to work as soon as possible. When faced with the event of having to

choose, tragic choice manifests and despair results no matter what she does. While this is the mild version, the radical version may be Silentio's famous "teleological suspension" that God's command to sacrifice Isaac creates for Abraham. By being unable to tolerate and resolve contradiction, the partial introversion of the ethical stage becomes a despair "that breaks through to the outside and demolishes the outward guise" leading either to immoral behavior or madness (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 199). The ethical two-eyed perspective on death alone does not guarantee moral behavior.

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VI. The "Moment", Renunciation, and The Singular View of the Synthesized/Actualized Self

Having seen the reasons for despair in the narrow limiting relativism of the aesthetic stage and the dualist vision of the ethical stage, the criteria to pass out of the latter into what Kierkegaard calls the "religious stage" of the Christian's advantage emerge: true inwardness and a tolerance for contradiction. Indeed, the dualizing vision's despair lies precisely in not having a vision that can mediate the contradiction, as in its outwardness to perfect outcomes, in the face of contradiction, it must either eliminate or deny one of the things in the contradiction, which it cannot do because it identifies with both. To do so is to eliminate oneself (immorality) or deny oneself (madness or dread). In true inwardness, one is "in the moment" and "renounces" the (repetition of) outcomes in activity, thus truly internalizing the self, and in truly mediating the contradiction that we are living and dying at once, one obtains "a singular view" that synthesizes death into life, the "eye of death" itself. This brings the vision of the "open third eye" that truly gets self "to relate itself to its own self and will to be itself", which is necessary for the eradication of despair.

Truly becoming a self and “relating itself to its own self” occurs “at this moment”, as “to becomes oneself is a movement at the spot” or a movement in the present moment (Kierkegaard, *SUD* 169). It is not the ethical stage's becoming in temporality, the outward repetition that the ethical wants to manifest in its future-oriented sight towards death. It is also not momentary like the aesthetic, which is outward in the “immediacy” of the temporal. To ground the sight in the present constantly, to be *in* the moment, is to “move at the spot” and reside in the eternal present-within the temporal moment at each moment. To be inward in the temporality or impermanent phenomena of life is the task of “bringing the mind home”¹ that all the eastern traditions have stressed upon, of truly internalizing selfhood in such a way by being *in* the becoming.

Does this mean one completely removes oneself from temporality and renounces becoming anything? Not quite. To be *in* temporality is not to be out of it, and “to renounce activity” here is to merely renounce the need for having or shaping the trajectories of outcomes of activities, and is not to refrain from conscious action like the aesthete does. The catchphrase of the *Bhagavad Gita*, as I recall, is to keep performing one’s duty and not worry about the fruits of one’s actions, surrendering them (to the divine). The repetition the ethicist seeks is thus a type of vanity. In the ethical stage one cannot act in response to the situation, cannot embrace a situation where contradiction arises and act to the best of one’s abilities regardless of the outcomes. Renouncing the need to be the agent that determines the situation, and performing the duty to respond in the situation is a key theme appearing in Buddhist and Hindu texts, and the story of Abraham. By fully being inward in the “eternal” present moment or the situation, and renouncing the need to control the outward trajectory of the impermanent “temporal” (which is a vain attempt), yet having a sense of responsibility (ability to respond) and courageously taking the

¹ See Rinpoche (56).

action the situation demands, is to truly internalize eternal self and relate it with the temporality of life. By seeing life with equanimity from a stable inner point, the eye of death itself, one has a clear awareness of despair caused by impermanence and this induces a peace of mind.

Either p or not-p, says philosophy- p & not- p is a contradiction. But if death is seen as not-life, how does one tolerate the contradiction that we are living and dying? Thus, ultimately, in order to will to be a self, a third term that mediates and resolves the contradiction must arise, a third eye that resolves the perspective of the two eyes, the eye of death itself. If such a view does not arise in life, in despair one will go mad or turn absolutely immoral by willing to be a strictly-opposing contradiction. The eye of death is death's perspective, which like the aesthetic, sees the negation or non-existence in all arising phenomena, but like the ethical, finds the freedom and courage to act and participate in the moment- why fear when one is already death. Yet it is also beyond the two views, as it is a singular or non-dual view that does not see either view as opposing the other. For death, everyone is a corpse, but for that reason the eye of death neither seeks to deck and dress self and other with any inherent values (needs) and truth claims (beliefs), nor destroy self or other. It simply wills to be a self- a compassionate actor in the stage of temporal life, playing its role to the best of its abilities without abandoning or deluding itself into the role in despair. This allows one to be moral; empathizing and detaching from the outcomes at once.

Kierkegaard notes, "It is the duty of the human understanding to understand that there are things which it cannot understand, and what those things are...if it would take the trouble to understand itself it would simply have to posit the paradox" (qtd. in. Wikiquote). Thus the understanding can only posit a paradox- and create a synthesis. Not a Hegelian synthesis, where opposing views resolve into one greater ideal. Instead, the contradiction is resolved in a mere

sense that the views are not considered as negating each other, and instead the paradox is posited as a truth. But this is where we reach the limits of understanding- such a truth claim cannot be rationally believed. We do understand the need to resolve contradiction in a way that the self can will to be itself by relating itself and its own self- temporal and eternal, life and death- two things contradicting each other. But to actually resolve the contradiction, we need to believe in the third term by virtue of the absurd. Opening the third eye occurs by meeting the conditions of focusing our moral reflection on the subjective apprehension of despair, avoiding the extremes of nihilism and absolutism, overcoming the crowd's mass of distractions and upbuilding and stabilizing in the aesthetic stages of generation and ethical stage of perfection. But while cultivating the true inwardness of being in the moment, renouncing activity, and acknowledging the need for the tolerance of contradiction opens the third eye and brings clear awareness, peace of mind and sincere understanding of the human condition, it is only a passage into the religious stage, the "Christian advantage" or necessary treatment of despair. For the "Christian bliss" or the cure, we must go beyond understanding and ground the self in a Power that constitutes it, believe in The Power that renders its existence meaningful, believing by virtue of the absurd. For that, we need faith. I only show what reason can deliver best, and the best is good enough. I leave the task of inspiring the faith that eradicates despair to the poets of the Power.

LOVE

Foreword

I met Yadleen in a cafe near Piazza del-Popolo in Rome. He was sipping the greenest latte I had ever seen at a corner table, holding *Works of Love* in his hand. Because he looked South Asian and read Kierkegaard, I couldn't contain my curiosity. I found out that Yadleen Singh, born in Montreal, Canada and brought up by his immigrant Sikh family, works as a journalist for BBC Travel. He had started covering famous world pilgrimages in 2008, starting with the Hajj to Mecca. When I met him, he had just finishing walking the Road to Rome, the first trip on which he had taken off on his own. He looked physically exhausted, but gazed upon everything in the room with a strange sense of peace. In our meetings that followed, I would find out that a man who just happened to discover a Kierkegaard book at a strand store had lived upto his philosophy every day, more than I had ever managed to do for all my academic papers. A man who had broken bread with the likes of pilgrims, mystics and mendicants, and spent his nights on the road in multilingual chambers of silence. Someone who would spend hours patiently arguing against your point, until he laughed himself off for sounding too serious. Yadleen's pilgrimages and revival of his Sikh tradition had turned him resolute in his faith over years. Yet there was no particular object of faith, no God he had to crusade for- in one breath he would 'mashallah' and 'amen'. He reminded me of a distant grand aunt who prayed to the Gods of all major religions, as a sort of insurance policy for what was to come. His amicable and passionate personality reflects in this personal essay. Written upon my request, it is a blog post by him that finally touches upon his person experiences during the pilgrimage, and some philosophical positions he came to hold. He is doing many things here- showing how the duty to love endures and offers consolation to all humans, what it means to worship, and how to be alive, given the condition of human existence.

THE WORKING OF LOVE

Kierkegaard's Consolation for the Passions in the duty to "Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself"

Is Reason alone baptized, are the Passions pagans?

Faith is the highest passion in a man. There are perhaps many in every generation who do not even reach it, but no one gets further

- Soren Kierkegaard

A journalist like me is married to the rules of grammar, but often finds himself cheating with mistresses like playful metaphors and soothing stories. Both during my time at graduate school and later working as a travel writer, I would simultaneously have to entertain the mechanics of linguistic theory while amusing over objects like human culture and psyche. Exposition was my wife, and narrative my secret lover. I always carried the analytic frame from the former while I sought pleasure in the latter; never committing myself to one, objectifying both, attending to the needs of neither. And so my twenty-something self courted psychoanalysis, existentialism, and deconstruction (oh, how the French had gotten me!), and any postmodern mash-up that rang of polemics suited to the likes of an irresolute cheater like me. All this was until *things* started happening to me. Some folks would sympathetically call it an "existential crisis", others, not so sympathetically- "finding God". I often look upon it as the cracking of the ego's shell, trampled to the ground by the pilgrimages.

It may seem strange that one moves away from egotism when one sets off by oneself. But what happened to me on the road was precisely that- my ego was forced to do away with its objects of attachment and thereby had to acknowledge its eternal dependence on the entire inextricable mesh of existence that we call the world. I have published at length describing the phenomenality and cultural richness of the pilgrimages, here and on various journals, but never really discussed my personal experience. What I went through was nothing short of Death; the

death of a limited ego compelled me to ground my existence in something far more honest and truly consoling- a duty to love. That divine command preached through the ages by all religions, that golden rule acknowledged and studied by various thinkers- “love thy neighbor as thyself”- finally struck a chord upon my unholy ears! How do I explain that a simple command brought me down on my knees in worship? How do I write about the journey from egotism to love? What does ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’ even *mean*? In this entry, I grapple with these questions.

This is a snapshot from my last pilgrimage- the *Via Francigena*, better known as the ‘Road to Rome’. I decided to walk the last hundred miles of the path, taking just a notebook, a few clothes and Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*. The journey I write about today is one through landscape, text and thought. It is one that realizes the value of the golden rule as expressed by Kierkegaard in terms of how it truly, inclusively and persistently consoles human passions. To console definitely and persistently is the *working* of love that underscores the importance of the golden rule. I engage in this task by resorting to some old habits- telling a story, playing with words, and courting philosophers.

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“Thou Shall Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself”

As Thyself

“The commandment could not have phrased it any other way; no wrestler can wrap himself around the one he wrestles as this commandment wraps itself around self-love, which cannot move from the spot. This phrase does not want to teach a person that he is not to love himself, but wants to teach him proper self-love.” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 18)

Every analysis starts with assumptions, so we begin with *thyself*, which “although [it] comes last, (it) is nevertheless is the beginning” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 17). The assumption here is of self-loving itself, a basic rule about how one begins- as an ego. Kierkegaard is here countering the notion that the action prescribed by the commandment does not make or take into account claims about human nature. On the contrary, he points that it does posit the existence of self-love or ego-love as a motivation for human action, and then directs this impetus towards the right type of action. Is this a reasonable assumption ? For one, few can deny the existence of an entity with a disposition to self-maximization, whether they call this “self” an organism, ego, spirit or *ahamkara* (*I-doer*); whether the “itself” it loves is body, pleasure, honor or freedom and whether its love maximizes its chance of survival, utility, virtue or liberation. What is often contested is what counts as this thing or what its ontological status is- whether it is only the nature of human beings or of other entities too, if it is temporary or permanent, an illusory reality (self as a bundle) or *really* real (human selves as egos). Thus we do not assume much when the commandment “clearly presupposes self-love”(Kierkegaard, *WoL* 396) and says a human acts as if they had a self, expresses need and works on increasing, perfecting or improving contentment in this self.

Is positing self-love necessary for performing the duty implied by the commandment?

Well, the duty must work with what it has, self-love, and “wrap itself around it” such that it reforms the *way* in which self-love is performed, i.e. teach what “proper self-love” is and it does

this, Kierkegaard argues, by an impeccable choice of words- “not phrasing it in any other way”, but with “as thyself”. Why do the words matter? It’s time for a little wordplay.

Rule 1: Use “as thy own” instead of “as thyself”.

Rule 2: Use “who is the same as thyself” instead of “as thyself”.

Rule 3: Use “with thyself” instead of “as thyself”

Play 1: Is “I love the students as if they were my own children” different from “I love that student as I love myself”? How do you use “you are like family to me” and “you are like me”? Is “to protect your belongings as if they were my own” the same as “to protect your belongings as if they were myself”? The more you play, the latter appears to be strange, or rare at the least. Do duties require already ubiquitous behaviour, or are they asking for something special?

Play 2: Where do you use “is” and where do you simply say “as”? The more you play this game, the more difficult it gets. Sameness and likeness? Congruence and Similarity? So why not make the neighbor *the same* as thyself? I recall lovers from the Bollywood films of my childhood, who claim to be ‘*do jism, ek jaan*’ (two bodies, one soul).

Play 3: Eat the bread with butter. Now eat the bread as butter. The more you play the first version, the fuller *you* get. The more you play the second version, the more interesting *it* gets.

In each of these cases, there is “a change of eternity between the former and the latter” as command does change the nature of “self-love” in three ways- One, away from the “objects of love...that has preference’s name” which is loved as a possession/belonging valued “in contrast to the whole world” (the “other”) to a doctrine that does “not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 19). Two, away from a poetic love that seeks “union” to annihilate difference and claim one-ness, to that which is “not merely a hard truth but a profound connecting point” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 400). Three, away from applying an appendage operator on love and increasing the objects of love, to involving the imagining of a “non-self”

(other/object) that bears resemblance to the “self” (subject) (a kind of empathy). Moreover, using this wording also implies other things, important ones for Kierkegaard being not using “me” (i.e., not God or the authority issuing the commandment), since this transforms the love to one of “obedience or adoration”, which is unhealthy (*WoL*, 20); or saying “more than thyself”, a form of self-denying despair (*WoL*, 19). Thus the ‘how’ of “love thy neighbor” is determined within this “as thyself”.

Now we turn to my old lover, Freud, the champion of the self-loving ego. His critique of the golden rule is summed up by Berthold as “psychologically unrealistic, requiring a severe repression of the instinctive basis of love, which is sexual, egoistic” (88). For him, when self loves itself, a fixed ego is loving or maximizing “itself” of pleasures it personally identifies with, so asking it to appreciate the “other” or anything not “itself” is a repression. So the first critique along this line may doubt that love cannot go beyond “thyself” and the rule requires too much as the self cannot love anything else unless repressed or coerced. Both this ontology of self-love and the psychology of transforming it are fallacious. The commandment neither assumes away nor destroys self-love but transforms the *way* self *loves* itself, bringing the focus to the the middle-term or act of self-love.

The act of self-loving-itself is constituted in this relationship as there is no self unless it loves an “itself” that its notion of “self” is related to. But to sustain this relationship, “itself” need not just be bodily survival or pleasures it identifies with. We noted above how social virtue, freedom, and immortality are equally identified as self-relations voluntarily by humans. Freud’s position limits the capacity of the imagination to empathize and considers only narrow instincts of survival and pleasure (death/*eros*) as truly natural self-love, while other broader tendencies that displace or expand self are forced. Psychologists have shown, with research on social

animals, children and primates that such a notion of self-love “occupies an almost autistic universe”, because the observed existence of empathy in humans “should give pause to anyone depicting us as out only for ourselves” (De Waal 176). Human morality is an “elaboration upon pre-existing tendencies” (De Waal 181) of social appreciation, inter-subjective connections and dependencies and empathy, and these transformed forms of self-love are grounded in nature.

But does the above transformation of the act of self-love away from self-magnification in “itself” and into improving relations in which self is constituted a “severe repression” or coercive denial of the basic self-love? That the above transformation is neither desirable nor attainable without denial and coercion of self-love is questionable. The rule is clearly not asking for denial because Christ commands the love for one’s neighbor “to be just as great as’ the love for ourselves” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 396), so we cannot repress self-love in love of other. It is actually more akin to what Freud calls “sublimation of the instincts”, or creating “finer and higher” satisfactions through social, scientific or artistic *work* (48). The right actions for Kierkegaard are, after all, *works* of love. These works move the love away from a limited notion of the desires of the “subject” to a desirable predicate or *verb*, works and actions with a broader scope than survival and pleasure maximizing. I recently read somewhere about psychological findings which suggested that heightened death awareness reduced subjective vitality and self-regulation, but only for individuals with low, not high, levels of interdependent self-construal². So if love is limited to the impermanent ego or “itself”, seeking its own survival-pleasures it identifies with is counterproductive and brings about an innate undesirable despair. By expanding or displacing, the transformation *upbuilds* self-love, and does not coerce it by forcing a norm- it redirects the energy of self-love by engaging in actions that see the relationships a self is constituted in

² See Juhl and Clay

through its own empathic ability. Coercion is not *necessary* to the rule of empathy or how it is taught- “tones of threat or condemnation” accompanying the rule “may become associated in the child’s mind with [it]” but “the wise parent learns loving ways to teach it” (Wattles 107).

Kierkegaard aptly concludes, “if a cunning deceiver asks how I shall love my neighbor, to get the Law to be verbose and prolix, then the commandment mere repeats “as yourself,” and the only escape is to “cast doubt on who the neighbor is” (*WoL* 20). So Freud could retaliate by saying that inculcating empathy for and have equanimous appreciation of all is impossible. It occurs only in rare occasions of yogis and saints who “kill off the instincts” (Freud 47) or “make themselves independent of their object’s acquiescence by displacing what they mainly value from being loved on to loving,” (Freud 81) thus “forfeiting a part of its own value” (Freud 82). Self-love ultimately wins because the ability to connect or relate is always based in the self’s preferences. While the ability to love beyond preference may not be very prevalent, this is precisely the problem and why a commandment urging and humbling one to develop it is necessary. It may be possible to relate without self-preference, as with the neighbor.

--X--X--X--

Viterbo is about seventy-five miles from Rome, an ancient commune town tucked in the hills of the Lazio region. It was once the seat of the Catholic Church, but that morning, the town appeared to have fallen from its former glory. The April sun had fully dawned on the eastern horizon, ready for the day, and Viterbo lay there in a broken buzz- half thrumming like an industry town and half slumbering like a farming village.

A fork in the road took me out of Viterbo’s uneasy commotion and into the countryside. The noise of the town soon subsided, leaving me to my heaving and panting. I had said I was

doing the walk alone, but I couldn't quite part with the company of my backpack, a three-foot long forty pound fellow who made his presence felt. A few times I stopped, to fidget with his straps and adjust my posture. Eventually, we made peace.

About half an hour into the journey, I was walking on a jagged tar road, lined by bungalows and manses- what appeared to be large country houses of the affluent. All of a sudden, a ferocious cacophony stirred the tepid air. In the house yards on either side of the road, large hounds had set off on a barking spree. But what I thought was irritated self-defense turned into an irate, raging chorus of roars. There were fences that separated me from them, but they jumped and clashed again and again against the iron mesh, baring their teeth at me; as if their deepest desire was to rip my belly apart. I kept walking but they would follow me down the fence. And when I had passed the estate, they did not stop- the dogs in the next house readily joined in welcoming me with the same greeting. My mind grew confused, and my heart dropped in debilitation.

What was maybe a one-mile stretch felt like an excruciating passage through inferno. The hounds of hell, I thought. Fear had clouded my mind, like smoky tears. The cheery optimism with which I had taken the road was gone. I was far enough that the sound had stopped, but the noise continued to ring in my head. Such a start was surely ominous of something? I shuddered at the thought. The path soon entered a thicket, and with a shaky anxious heart, I followed.

And from there, fear became my guide. At every twitch in the bush, I twitched along. Every time a blade of grass brushed my leg, I anticipated a snake in the bush. The thought of being alone bothered me so much that with every turn, I yearned to see a human. I gradually got to a fork in the path. There were no signs this time. The path ahead was narrow, like the one I was on, disappearing into the vegetation. The path to the right widened ahead. My fear had made the decision for me. I turned right. Soon, I was lost.

I passed by a broken tractor. Then, some farmland appeared, and after that, a tiny tar road. Soon, human life also appeared, in the form of an old man on a rickety Luna. I did not know where I was, but I knew the name of the first town on my path.

I asked him how far San Martino was.

He replied- “you’re on the wrong path, son!”

I know. “Where should I go?”, I asked in my broken Italian.

He gestured at his backseat, and I hopped on. We rode down a hill until we reached a highway, where he told me to get off.

“Quattro!” he said, pointing towards San Martino, and rode off in the other direction.

I dragged my feet along the side of the highway, as buses and cars hustled by. *Am I on the wrong path?*, I asked myself. Why I was doing this, it was pointless. *For Christ*, the answer came. But with the hounds, and getting lost an hour into the journey, I doubted God was looking, or really cared. Perhaps, he wouldn’t care if I took a bus and cheated my way to Rome either. *But He is here, in you.* Well, where was he when I got lost? *Still here, but you weren’t looking. You were looking with your fear instead.*

Twice I was tempted to hitch a ride. These were extra miles anyway, right? But those feet of mine dragged me along, all the way up the road to San Martino.

I found out that I had added two hours to the journey. A cafe-owner assured me that up the slope of the hill, I would be back on the route. Thanking her with a smile, I took off to the steep incline ahead.

The road wound up the slope like a serpent on an ant-hill. Soon there was another fork in the road, right where a large tree stood. I greeted this one with a sigh of relief- a route marker saying “Via Francigena” stood to my right. When I approached the tree, I found a little patio under it. A little shrine for the Virgin had been built on it. I entered the patio, and sat down.

With grateful eyes, I looked at the Virgin’s shrine, adorned with blue flowers. My whole being exhaled with a sense of solace. I felt like a child who had run into his mother’s lap. I took my backpack off, and relaxed. I took out *Works of Love* and flipped the pages open.

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Thy Neighbor

“The concept neighbor is actually the redoubling of your own self. The neighbor is what thinkers call the other;” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 21) but the neighbor is the *first you*.” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 57)

What is “redoubling” and how is it made possible with a neighbor? Kierkegaard says, ordinarily, “The lover does not love the beloved as himself (subject) because he is imposing the “requirements of erotic love”, i.e. the object is not allowed to be free (*WoL* 21). A lover that loves something by virtue of preferential passion or objective reason alone would not be willing to give up this love if the beloved required it. In this sense, there is no redoubling, because this sort of love only extends the single self who dreads being severed from the object it considers “itself” and is unwilling to part *in love* with the object. This is merely an “other I”, whether it is the poet’s muse or an absolute ideal. So when the situation demands or forces separation, such love turns to despair. Thus even if self-love is transformed to unlimited giving or devotion, but remains towards this “other I”, it cannot sincerely and enduringly console the passions (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 54). Inasmuch as love of the beloved, the “love as thy own”, seeks to transfer or expand itself, its own subjectivity into the other (either/or), it does not come a step closer to the neighbor’s subjectivity, the “first you”. Only the concept of the neighbor ‘redoubles’ subjectivity and calls for inter-subjective love. What then distinguishes “thy neighbor” as an object of love?

Rule 1: Use “love” with any object but “thy neighbor”

Rule 2: Complete the sentence “thy neighbor who”

Rule 3: Use “all people” instead of “thy neighbor”

Play 1: The word worship is derived from “worthiness, acknowledgement of worth”. What do you chose to worship? Your inspiration, your friends, your acquaintances and colleagues, your beloved one, your family; or “nature”, “dignity of life”, “society”, “nation”, “education”. This is a trap, a classic game of either/or, passion/reason. The escape route: “*eternity*’s thy neighbor”.

Play 2: Thy neighbor who is cultured? Who is distinguished? Who is miserable? Who is poor? Who lives next to you? Who lives two doors down? Who lives in the same town? Suddenly, that they are a neighbor becomes irrelevant. Qualities catch the preferential gaze of the eyes looking for similarities and dissimilarities.

Play 3: How do you even start this game? Do you love one at a time till you have loved all people? Do you pick a representative sample with one of every different “kind” of people and love them? Do you gather a crowd of people on a platform (online streaming?) and declare love to them? When one says one loves a “people”, one says nothing at all. A gem from Kierkegaard- “None has more contempt for what it is to be an individual than they who make it their profession to lead the crowd” (qtd. in Kauffman 94).

The importance of “thy neighbor” becomes clearer. Firstly, the value of this object lies in the fact that it escapes both forms of despair- worship of a concrete temporal thing in passionate preferential love, or the worship of an abstract principle “into which an existing spirit transforms when he abstracts from himself qua existing individual” (Kierkegaard, *CUP* 119). The *neighbor*, who “is the person who is *nearer* to you than anyone else, yet not in the sense of preferential love in that he *isn't nearer than you are* to yourself... But he ought to be *just as near* to you” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 21) resolves both forms of despair. It is the object of existential (spatial/temporal) proximity one is situated with and yet does not despair over its impermanence or get “passionate” about, as in preferential love when it is “nearer than yourself”. The neighbor is the eternal proximate “other” as “Death cannot deprive you of the neighbor, for if it takes one, life

immediately gives you another” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 65). Second, this lack of preference also indicates that the neighbor is a mark of equality, not loved just for being kind, energetic, distinguished, poor etc. As it loves one who is near or *coexists*, their qualities are not necessary to inspire love- it is not marked by a quality of similarity/dissimilarity based on preferred taste (beautiful, cruel, etc.) or principle (honorable, distinguished, etc.). You instead love an individual qua neighbor. Kierkegaard notes-

To love someone because he is more distinguished than you (adoration) can very easily be preferential love. To love someone because he is more lowly than you (sympathy) can so easily be the condescension of preferential love. No, to love the neighbor is equality. The neighbor is every person, since on the basis of dissimilarity he is not your neighbor, nor on the basis of similarity to you in your dissimilarity from other people. (*WoL*, 60)

Finally, since the neighbor is “every person” the neighbor cannot be a people or a crowd, because Kierkegaard notes that “a crowd in its very concept is the untruth” (qtd. in Kauffman 93). Although the commandment does want love to be directed at all human beings regardless of differences, it does not phrase it this way as it can be mistaken for the crowd, or all individuals *en masse*. One does not have to seek out every individual or take on some active, aggressive form of love which goes out into the world and collects all/transforms every object, but merely treat with accepting and responsive love the first or proximate object, the “first you.” It doesn’t fix the (nature, results, extent, number of) objects of love but responds lovingly to each individual’s situation.

Freud’s complaint comes back into picture. Since neighbor is an “empty” individual void of any characteristic to inspire love, and it is the qualities of preference- similarity and dissimilarity, desire and aversion, whether selfless or selfish, that gives love its value or meaning, he argues that neighborly love is impossible. So, the Golden Rule “devalues love by failing to discriminate those whom I actually have affection for (or desire) and those I do not- it

cheapens my love by giving it to everyone, with my eyes closed” and that “for the most part people are ‘wolves to me who do not deserve my love’” (Berthold, 88). So there are two senses in which Freud could mean cheapening of love- directed at an empty object that cannot be loved and not having the quality that satisfies the subject to and inspire love. But while Freud may consider these a devaluation of love, it is the opposite in Kierkegaard- a revaluation of love.

The neighbor is perfect to inspire a love that enduringly consoles, because it perfects the love, not the object. Kierkegaard notes how “a man who has arranged his life such that he was surrounded by favorable conditions” (*WoL* 65), and feels well only in this comfortable arrangement of “perfect objects” has not perfected love because it cannot console enduringly outside the conditions- when the law of impermanence in temporality hits, despair manifests. He writes, “let the world dispute as much as it wishes which object of love is the most perfect- there can never be any dispute that love for the neighbor is the most perfect love” (*WoL* 66). So while it may not be a perfect object or have particular qualities, the neighbor is the best fit for a perfect love: it endures and does not succumb to despair. Loving other particular perfect objects fails to realize that when “death falls on the stage of actual existence,” we are all “merely human beings,” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 87) subjects who in a quest for temporal gratification in loving objects that don’t last. When one realizes loving no particular object can give lasting consolation, it can turn nihilistic and love nothing, maintaining despair, or gain meaning by loving the nearest or the “first you” in the given situation of every moment- the neighbor. We do love dead ones but this is a cause for mourning, which if it is maintained after a certain time, can lead to the melancholy of living in memory. Loving such a neighbor is not loving nothing, as the neighbor is not treated as “empty” of subjective content or nihilistically “as nothing” because in neighborly love, one “loves each one individually” and isn’t “proudly independent of object”

(Kierkegaard, *WoL* 67) as one does not seek a perfect object invariant across time. One's love *works on* the subjectivity of the first you in the moment, filling where there is emptiness or indifference and emptying where there is an overbearing fullness of heart, loving *perfectly* either way. As it loves in a given time and place, it is not anxious over the loss of an object death can take it away. This maintains love's "sobriety" and "level headedness" (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 19), thereby perfecting the love.

But how can we love *anyone* who is near in the moment, if it is our preferences that give our love value or meaning? Because the other is a neighbor, nothing more, nothing less, there is apparently no similarity or dissimilarity which causes attachment/aversion to the other, thus providing no value to love the other. Does preference give value to love? Well, when it comes to eating- does the need to eat derive from the expansion of the eater or from a particular food item identified as desirable? Surely, wouldn't the former make us fat and lethargic, while the latter one sided-diet would narrow the functioning of the system? Just like the value of eating is to maintain health in the body, the value of loving is to maintain a joyous balanced relationship in the self, needed to live free from the dis-relation of despair. Preferences are highly vulnerable to compulsive conditionings based in the fears and habits of satisfaction and attachment- so preferential love maintains despair, as "preferential love's most passionate boundlessness to love only a single person" occurs by *excluding* (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 52). But love that "undergoes eternity's change" knows no "habit that can gain power over it" (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 37) as by seeing the equal eternal value of all beings in the grave of death- either as corpses or souls with basic dignity, it can "gives itself" to life as it comes, not excluding a single one, *including* the nearest or "first you" at any time, thus maintaining balance in one's love with an attitude of equanimity. Acknowledging death's equality frees us not just from attachment but fear, as one

cannot sincerely say someone doesn't deserve our love because even evilness or cruelty acts from the fear underlying the lack of awareness and foresight into despair or the freedom and equality beyond it. It becomes all the more necessary to not fear them, but see their impermanence and the despair it brings them, and love them as an eternal *equal*, as a co-existing neighbor.

We have thus claimed that one must love the "other" by sincerely recognizing their equality in death and loving their situational qualities as the "first you". This other or first you is one's neighbor, the one in the immediate or "nearest" moment, an individual co-existor in ordinary life, who deserves this treatment. While one doesn't deny the diverse play of qualities that lives are, as "love humbly turns outwards and loves each one individually", it does not over-indulge, shy away and "makes exceptions" for any of these qualities. The preferential poets or idealists never wrote a song or theory about the neighbor, because they are so ordinary.

A final come-back for Freud would be that this requires too much- one is too weak to engage in this love for all and it becomes diluted by doing so. This assumes a limited capacity to love which is weakened by spreading, thereby necessitating a "concentration" of love. In one sense this is a misunderstanding of each "thy neighbor" as all "people" or the crowd, and in another sense, it is a false notion of love. If the object of love is overwhelming, requires a multiplicity of action within a certain of time, or must be something one can exert oneself upon, one could be weak to engage in it. But the neighbor is not all people, not each and every human at the same time, nor a crowd one must control. Moreover, because the aggressive-sexual metaphor that gives strength to love in an ego-object relationship doesn't apply to the neighbor, it doesn't mean the neighbor receives "diluted" love. The affective power, energy and emotion of love does not originate in the ego- psychoanalysts today understand how the affects are "held in

common” and pre-exist the infant while the ego appropriates it and makes up its story³ by identifying with some of their patterns. Just like the energy of libidinal ego-love is a persisting source of action that does not exhaust until death, there is no reason that its transformation that channels this love into the neighbor limits the capacity to treat them lovingly. But what is the “love” which I have for my neighbor? A box of mystery awaits us...

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Within minutes, the landscape changed. The dense sun-kissed lemon greens and olive greens gave way to a more deciduous foliage. An array of tall wooden pillars arose on both sides as far as the eyes could see, decked with pine roofs that canopied the golden brown forest floor.

I was back in a forest, but not one that was consuming me. The path was wide, and my mind felt spacious. The rows and rows of trees stood like a gathering of frail and gentle crones, and a crisp cold air breezed through the gaps between them, carrying the gossip of the day. Each tree looked just like the other, but each whispering woosh carried its own quibbles and murmurs.

And then came a fork in the road. This time, the wide path continued on forward, but the sign pointed to the smaller one, draped in dead leaves and curling its way into the woods. I hesitated for a bit, but decided it would be best not to repeat any mistakes. With a little more confidence, I descended into the forest.

It was so, utterly, quiet; as my grandma used to say, a pin-drop silence. I couldn't help but stop every now and then, to take in the magic of the stillness around me. Such virginal Nature had been privy to me. Having snuck into her private chambers, I was both too tempted and too shy to bear witness to her beauty. I took off before she could overwhelm me, continuing on my path.

³ See Brannan, 8.

Soon I reached a clearing in the forest, on the edge of a little hill. I was taken by surprise—a picnic table stood a few feet ahead of me. Confused, I looked around to see why it was there. Upon inspection I discovered a flight of cobble-stone steps that descended from the edge and disappeared into the hill, underneath where I stood. Seduced by curiosity, I climbed down.

The mouth of a crevice greeted me at the bottom. Inside it, there stood a dark stone statue of Jesus on the cross, worn and webbed. A dozen combust candles, aged and hardened, stood all around the figure. A sense of amazement tickled me up and down my spine. *Just when the utter isolation had got me thinking what a God-forsaken place this was!*

I knelt. I knew not what to pray for. But it didn't feel like that mattered now. The company was enough. I said my thanks, and left the place.

It was almost two in the afternoon. The hope was to get lunch at this small commune in the midst of the forest. I hadn't eaten since the morning, and I was running out of water as well. According to my calculations, I was about to arrive soon. Eventually, I emerged onto a dirt road. A huge concrete wall stood in front of me. Assuming it was the fence to the commune, I walked across to take a look.

I was looking at an empty field, with a tiny outhouse. No other buildings. No commune. *Had I misread the map? Was THIS it?* My hunger roared at me through my stomach walls, feeling betrayed.

The sign told me to go left, but the path looked like it was getting wider to the right. Begrudgingly, I turned left. The wall was still to my right, and I was hoping some houses would soon emerge. But, the path got narrower and narrower, until I was facing the mouth of the forest.

No, this can't be it. If I reentered the woods, it would take me another two hours to get to the next town. An uneasy fear crept down my body, and I felt weak in my legs.

And then, all of a sudden, the church bells rang.

I turned around with a jolt, looking towards the direction of the sound. At a distance, I could see the bell tower, and the rest of the edifice. Not seeing a path to the church, I walked straight through the bushy field.

Snakes! Spiders! Snakes!, the mind kept whispering. But my hungry body had overpowered my fearful mind. Thorn and bramble pricked me all over my legs. But I ran, like a bride who was late to her own wedding.

I soon reached a barbed wire fence, on the other side of which was the backyard to the church. First, I threw my backpack over. Then, I climbed the wall, slowly and carefully, recalling my skills from childhood as the monkey in the neighborhood. I jumped down with a thud.

It was only when I was inside I realized what I had done. *You Idiot! You can't knock on their back door. What will they say- come in, dear trespasser?* I walked around the backyard to the front wall. This one was higher, and made of cement. I repeated the throwing and jumping. A bush eased my landing this time.

I rang the bell. A few seconds later, a middle aged woman opened the door. She had short grey hair, and wore a purple dress. *Pellegrino*, I said panting, *aveti qualcosa bere? A mangiare?* She smiled and nodded, asking me to come inside.

As we walked through the building, I realized it was a monastery. She began to speak in rapid Italian, so I had to confess that I did not understand. Almost as quickly as she had initially spoken, she switched to fluent English. She told me that they don't get many guests during this time of the year. She was happy that I would be joining them for lunch.

At the dining table, were four people, all older than Viola, the lady who had let me in. I looked around at the curious gathering. The *padre* sat across from me, dressed in all black; next to him was a black nun clad in white robes. There were two other older men, frail and balding. They were *Greek*, I found out.

Ms Viola brought out the food. It was a simple meal- spaghetti with pomodoro sauce, some roasted artichoke flowers, and bread. I resisted the urge to gobble it up; it tasted so, utterly,

delicious. Never had I eaten a meal with so much gratitude. I thanked everyone and everything that came to my mind.

The conversation at the table took strange turns. First we talked about the *sister's* time in Kerala, India, and she told me about her experiences with some Indian festivals. The padre asked me about my book, and he was so excited to know I was reading Kierkegaard. He himself had studied philosophy in college. "Only Kierkegaard could put to words what it felt like to be a man of faith in a world of reason," he said with a sigh. I smiled.

And then, the question came. "So are you catholic?"

I didn't know how to answer that.

"No. But I am doing this pilgrimage for Jesus. I'm just spiritual". *You sound like an idiot.*

I received blank stares for a second, which eventually turned to smiles. I was relieved. The conversation resumed. Coincidentally, the *padre* told me, he was speaking about Gandhi at a sermon that evening, in a nearby town. He showed me his speech and asked me if it was good. We then went on to talk about the Passion of the Christ, the sect the monastery was part of.

"So what do you guys believe in?"

"Well, we believe the point to Christ is the passion of Christ. That a man could make his task to take on the suffering of the world, this is great, this is divine. The basic idea is simply this my friend- there is no salvation without suffering. Without the passions, there is no redemption."

There is no salvation without suffering. That's exactly what I needed to hear.

The sister then told me that this was where St Francis himself had stayed, on his way to Rome. He had spent the rest of his life thereafter as well. *How exciting!* The padre showed me around the monastery, and even St Francis' chambers. The room was a little bigger than a closet, with a wooden table and a cement bed. A tiny window looked out into the hills. A few of his belongings remained in glass cabinets- books, mostly. *What a simple, austere life.*

I needed to get going. I thanked the padre with all my heart, and knelt, giving him a kiss on the hand. I said goodbye to the sister, thanking her for her stories, and the two old men, who hadn't spoken much because of the language barrier. When I was leaving, Viola stopped me to put some fig cakes, a bag of fruits and a bottle of water in my hand. I hugged her tight.

I left St. Francis's monastery, filled with the hope that I was being looked after and loved.

Love

“Love is a need, the deepest need, in the person in whom there is love for the neighbor; he does not need people just to have someone to love, he needs to love” (*WoL* 67)

If we were to assume that questions of “what” are actually reducible to questions of “how” (“how do I practice this idea called love?”), then the task at hand is much simpler. We could use Kierkegaard's response to the skeptic's question “how to love the neighbor” - “as thyself”. Yet, we know that eternal love is a transformation of preferential self-love to a certain type of relationship between the self and other (an I-Thou relationship), and it is precisely what this transformed relationship looks like or how it *works* we are interested in. It doesn't matter if we ask what the nature of the love in the treatment of one's neighbor is, or how it manifests in the relationship to one's neighbor, it is important to learn what constitute as *works* of love.

Kierkegaard's take on the nature of love that has been transformed to eternal love is best understood from the passage above as the expression of a *heartfelt* need to love and to engage in an act of loving rather than a need for the object, thus ‘independent in blessed dependence’. An understanding of love, through a close reading of a biblical saying about “love's hidden life and recognizability by its fruits,” emerges as that which “connects the temporal and eternity, which for that very reason is before everything and remains after everything is gone” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 6). Crucial to understand what love (that has undergone the transformation of eternity with “thy-neighbor”) means is how Kierkegaard sees Christ, who is his model for love; Kierkegaard says that “God is Love and we can be like God only in loving” (*WoL* 63), i.e. love is the way of the eternal, and on this way we ground the temporal self in the eternal. Do these descriptions of eternal love's *workings* still seem incomplete to you? Perhaps they were meant to. Or perhaps you are trying to fix it *as such and such*. Let us try to bridge this gap by grasping at some words.

Rule 1: Add “show that you” before love.

Rule 2 Use “fulfill” instead of love .

Rule 3 Use “feel for” instead of love.

Game 1: I donated to charity. I have loved. I invited my black neighbors home for dinner. I have loved. I stand in solidarity with Standing Rock. I have loved..... We play this game all the time, and always win. It is far too easy.

Game 2: Round 1: You have new neighbors. You decide to invite them over for a meal. You cook a *fulfilling* meal of pork roast. They turn out to be Muslims. Round 2: You have more new neighbors. You don't want to repeat your mistake from round one. You go over to get to *know* them. They love hunting and guns. You buy them a gun to *fulfill* the wish. They misuse it.

Game 3: Enact various situations in which you ‘feel for’ another. In these enactments , are you acting, or merely reacting? At most, I cry, sympathize and exclaim. An expression of despair over another's despair. A reactive expression of despair is not a responsible remedy to despair.

We see here what love is not. It is not a declaration of love or a ‘performative utterance’ of a loving action that can be *works* of love. Such love hasn't borne fruit because “One should know by such fruits that they are only leaves, if you devoured your leaves, you will destroy your fruit and be left standing like a withered tree. Immature and deceitful love is known by this, words and platitudes are its only fruit” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 12). However, even performing an altruistic action doesn't define it as a work of love.

There is no work, not even the best, about which we unconditionally dare to say, the one who does this unconditionally demonstrates love. It depends on *how* the work is done. There are works in a particular sense that are called works of love. But even giving to charity and clothing the naked do not truly demonstrate or make known a person's love, inasmuch as one can do works of love in an unwilling, even in a self-loving way, and if this is so the work of love is no work at all. (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 13)

How the the work is meant or done is decisive in determining and recognizing love by its fruits, but here again there is nothing, no “thus and so” that demonstrates “unconditionally the

presence or absence of love” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 14). This is why “fulfilling” a need (for an object) in the neighbor or in the self is not unconditionally a work of love, because it can lead to the despair of needs and preferences of similarity and dissimilarity, whereas what a work of love must effectively do is ‘express of a heartfelt need to love’, be able to console the neighbors need by engaging them in a need to be loving. But to merely “feel for” thy neighbor, however heartfelt, does not express a need to love. In fact, it expresses one’s despair over the other’s despairing need to love an object, doing nothing to bring about the right results- the elimination of despair to which loving responsive engagement, not a feeling or fully passive reaction, is the solution.

The key here is to understand the interplay of action, passionate feeling and necessity. By linking our temporality (of despair) to eternity in love of the eternal other-one’s neighbor- and thereby placing faith in the absolute equality of eternity upon death; a passionate (preferential/ ‘with-suffering’) feeling of needing temporal objects is transformed into a passionate feeling (‘heartfelt’) of needing the eternal I-Thou relationship to console us in temporality until death. But if we do thus create a heartfelt need for this relationship of love, then we, like in all acts of passion, engage the need by striving to persistently love the eternal-other so that the other can ‘recognize this eternal love by its fruits’(Kierkegaard, *WoL* 10) in the temporal. It is the striving to master the art of devotion, the art of directing the energy of temporal life into an eternal I-Thou relationship that bears blissful fruit. So eternal love is devotional, it links passions of temporality to the consolation of eternity by bringing temporal self and eternal other into a relationship, and a perennial striving to maintain (as Jesus did) this relationship of love, which consoles the passions (“saves” humanity”) by freeing them from the fetters of despair (sin). The Gurus and Buddhas of compassion, like Christ, model perfected love. By acknowledging

dependence (the need to love), one is eternally independent (from the need of temporal objects), which is *how* we “live contemporaneously with Christ”(Kierkegaard, *WoL* 14). So without real neighbors, one can still satisfy the need to love by devoting oneself to a “Lord”, who as “a procedural ideal”(model) which produces the good (lack of sin/ despair) when perfected⁴, serves as the nearest Thou for love.

The Kantian position has attacked these passions and thus “deprived them of their strength” by “confusing” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 52) the preferential passion to “the highest passion” of faith, along with other skeptics who find love altogether vague to yield concrete directives for action (Berthold 88). To the latter we concede, there is no outward behavior or set of behaviors that we can determine definitely as a heartfelt engagement in works of loving, but could look for signs of such a passion if we wish- altruism, benevolence, equanimity, devotedness, etc. But that is not the point, “to encourage us to get busy judging one another”, because “[the commandment] is rather spoken admonishingly to the single individual, to you my listener, and to me, to encourage him to not allow his love to become unfruitful but to work so that it could be known by its fruits, whether or not these come to be known by others” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 14).

Concreteness (as opposed to vagueness) in temporality is not a desirable quality of a love bound to eternity, since one cannot fix the usage of words, acts, or works which qualify unconditionally as an “expression of a passionate need to love” because love of the neighbor “recognizes that ethical deliberation is always situational, therefore ambiguous, uncertain, and obscure” (Berthold 101). Problems of how to treat people’s differing wants (Berthold 88) also don’t come up because eternal love is focused neither exclusively on the needs of the “I” nor the “other” but the need for the I-thou Relationship which one seeks to maintain, finding immediate consolation in

⁴ Ranganathan, Shyam on Bhakti in “Hindu Ethics.”

this task for any other need. Needing most to have a need, relating to the co-exister, devoting to nurture this relation, that is the nature of love.

But Kant (can't) one perform these loving actions without passion whatsoever, in a form of "disinterested benevolence" that would be practical, directing the will away from the "pathological" (Berthold 93)? Kant's critical gaze would shun a morality of love that relies on one's passionate dispositions in order to redeem them. For him, the commandment needs to "depsychologize" love and reduce it from passion to benevolence- "love must therefore be made 'small', minimized into nothingness as an emotion, for the duty to benevolence is derived from reason alone, setting aside affective attachments or aversions to the object of love" (Berthold 93). Reason may help avoid attachment and aversion to objects, but for Kierkegaard one in Reason cannot abstract away from the passions as "the abstract thinker still pays her debt to existence because she exists in spite of all abstraction"(Kierkegaard, *CUP* 180). That she exists, and is in debt or a relationship of need to life, is the ground of the passionate, temporal self. The passionate 'I' exists every second one is alive, in need of an object. Reason provides no consolation for this passionate self, the existing life, the *suffering over*(passion) and expressing of a need. In fact it ignores it, or represses it, or sublimates it by transforming it into passion for an ethical, scientific or artistic idea, which still leads to despair inasmuch as it exists temporally. Faith realizes the futility of the passion for the 'other I', for outward temporary objects one inclines or adheres to, but knows one cannot deny the passion of life. So it resolves the contradiction in love, directs the passion to eternity, to love that is love of one's neighbor, to the act of loving, and the blissful relationship of devotion. So passion is recognized and given full consolation by, through, and in eternal love. Given of course, one can engage in this love consistently, that one listens to the "Thou shall" or takes it upon as a duty.

I reached Capranica at about six thirty in the evening. Sutri, my final destination for the day, was only three kilometers ahead. I was amazed at myself- how had I walked thirty kilometers? My body was verging on exhaustion, but my mind felt fresh. Since I had left the monastery, I had gone past farmlands, natural parks, orchards of lemon trees and olive trees and meadows of wildflower, along with a lot of roadside walking. Occasionally people would stop, asking me if I was lost. I thanked them, and kept going.

I was sitting on a footpath at the edge of Capranica, right where the town road met the highway. I ate my fig cakes and oranges. Sunset was at eight, and Sutri was three miles away.

I got this, I told myself.

I had imagined the rest of the path to be by the highway. But soon the path forked into a dirt road, and took me up a hill. I went past a b'n'b and a couple of country houses. *Should I stay here?* Even if it was off the highway, it would be four to five kilometers at most. I assured myself and kept going.

Soon, I passed by a ranch with a horse in it. The horse stopped eating and looking straight into my eyes. We exchanged eye contact for a good five minutes.

What are you trying to tell me? The horse just kept looking. *Come closer.* He wouldn't budge. I decided it was time to get going. I said goodbye, and walked away.

A few minutes later, the dirt path ended. A path opened into a thicket, just like the one from the morning. *A forest, now? But Sutri was only three kilometers away.* I entered. *Probably just a small stretch*, I told myself. But once I was in the wilderness, it went on and on.

It was dark inside, the forest humid and thick. Lush green bushes were all around me, wet from recent rain, and I could barely see what was beyond them. Grass crept onto my legs, and the path was soft with freshly stirred mud. A tiny rivulet slipped by next to the path. As the sun kept setting, my visibility grew dimmer and dimmer.

The demons of fear began dancing on my belly again, to the beat of my thudding heart. The forest kept going on and on and on- it just wouldn't end. Anxiety came jutting out of my

mouth, and I began gasping. My exhausted body only exacerbated the pain. I couldn't keep going any more.

It is in moments like these that you realize that your worst enemy in the world is your wretched mind. *You are going to die here. How long would it take for someone to discover your body? You should just stop, how does anything matter now. Just lie down here and let the snakes get you, who cares if they are poisonous, you are as good as dead anyway.*

Yet a tiny part of me, the spirit, despite being assaulted and debilitated by my mind, refused to stop. *Just walk till you can't anymore,* it said, its voice weak and frail.

I soon reached an open clearing. There was a road to the left. And to the right, the path went back into the forest. *No, No, No.* Almost breathless by this point, I wanted to just give up.

Sighing, I went back into the forest.

It had been more than an hour since I had left Capranica. My mind was at it again. *You probably miscalculated. This path probably bypasses Sutri, and keeps going. You should just fall asleep. It's not so bad dying like this, in nature.* Tired and scared, I almost gave in.

No, keep going! The other voice in my head was louder this time. *You see that big rock right there. It's right around the corner. Yes, Right there. Keep going, keep going. I promise.* I reached the big rock. The path curved around it. On the other side, was a clearing.

The last few rays of the sun were dangling on the western horizon. Ahead of me, the path turned into a village road. There were houses on both sides. *Sutri.*

I collapsed to the ground on my knees, and tears welled my eyes. I burst out, wailing. I cried and cried and cried, in an ecstasy I had not known before. No widow had wept louder in agony, no baby had bawled louder in need.

My howling had set the dogs off. On and on they howled, not unlike that morning. *Oh how sweet their voices sounded! Oh how wonderful it was to be acknowledged!* I wanted to go and hug them, thank them for being so, so, loving. As night gathered, I got on my feet and walked into the village.

Thou Shall

“Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured against every change, made free in blessed independence, eternally and happily secured against despair”(WoL 29)

Isn't there a way to “love thy neighbor as thyself” that can be taught or justified, which I can then chose to perform? Why do I need to obey someone to feel love? How can the obedience bring about freedom or love? Duty seemed incompatible with love from the start. Maybe we need to shake up the convictions of our reason. You know the drill.

Rule 1: Use “One should” instead of “Thou Shall”

Rule 2: Use “Ought to” instead of Shall

Rule 3: Use “Will” instead of Shall

Game 1: Who is the “one”? Someone who ascribes to this rule. Who ascribes to the rule? Someone who finds it convincing. Who finds it convincing? Someone who has reasons to believe it works. Who has reasons to believe it works? The game is to go further and further away from *your* duty, here and now.

Game 2: You ought to read this. You should read this. You ought to play it like this. You should play it like this. You ought to drink this; You should drink this. Keep going...Which one is *trying* to compel you, and which telling you to act? One opens up an inquiry about guiding principles, the other urges to action.

Game 3: You're a psychoanalyst with two patients

Mr A: I wouldn't go there. I will take them. I won't need this. I would love it.

Mr B: I shouldn't go there. I shall take them. I shan't need this. I should love it.

One only expresses. The other only responds. .Any guesses?

Thus, when it is “one” or a “person” who is prescribed the behavior, an interactive distance is created, which allows us to distantly engage in analysis instead of engaging in action.

If it wasn't thou, addressed to us personally, we go further and further away from performing the duty, as no one requires our passions to be channeled a certain way. So we would keep examining the rule and discussing and deliberating it, instead of responsibly carrying it out. Kierkegaard affirms this notion that "testing is in itself inventive and will not be exhausted any more than sagacity has ever been able to calculate all contingencies" whereas "when one shall, it is eternally decided" (*WoL* 34). Moreover, since the duty is a "shall" not an "ought", it is more a rule one follows and less a moral ideal or principle one adheres to. So while agreeing with Kant that without responsibility and a resolute sense of commitment to an ideal, the idea of ethical commands would be meaningless (Berthold 88), for Kierkegaard the type of committed responsibility required "is not commitment to principle but accomplishment in practice" (*WoL* 46). An infantile believer precisely does this- by positing the ideal and believing it as a true moral claim, he considers the task of believing accomplished. For it to be persistently applied, the rule must be immediate, a "shall", not a moral principle or object of ethical deliberation, an "ought". A reasoned duty based in a moral principle is weaker than a required moral aspiration commanding the passions directly. Finally, "eternity's shall binds and guides this great *need* to love so that it doesn't go astray and turn into pride" (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 67). What one misses when one "wills" to love is the acknowledgment that such a love is a *need*, a dependence for one's well-being- not an expression of *want* or distinguished preference but a response to follow a call of duty.

Kant points out that it is a contradiction to say that "to love is a duty" (*WoL* 24). As "feelings are utterly subjective, and to ground moral action on such *inclinations* would doom us to ethical relativism" (Berthold 89), a duty to feel or love is an absurd argument. Firstly, the inclinations are not so subjective or uncontrollable that they cannot be related to a universal and

harnessed in a way that overcomes despairing inclination towards temporal objects. Note that we all inevitably “worship” or place worth and faith in something in order to direct our life energies and tenaciously live on- passionate feelings are not denied in duty. But if the passions obliged to a temporal force or end, say as they are when we engage in social, scientific or artistic works, they still don’t have the guarantee of eternal stimulus which comes from an eternal commandment. Whoever the duty might be to - God, humanity, the State - matters only in so far as the duty can be made eternal. But if universals are abstractions, abstracted *out* of life, not contained *in* life, they are not grounded in the passions of existence. Therefore, an inward dutiful faith through loving devotion to an eternal that pervades or is imminent to the temporal attains a steadfast anchor. The Divine offers us that.

But perhaps, faith that resolves temporal subjective passions with a universal sense of duty is virtuous *because* it allows for the absurd, the absurd whose virtue is to resolve the contradictions that bring despair, to bring the eternal other or neighbor and temporal self into a relationship, to “love thy neighbor (other) as thyself”. The eternal I-thou relationship⁵ within the commandment, of self and neighbor, is anchored in the I-thou relationship between commander and commanded, i.e. the Divine eternal and the existing individual. Becoming a thou to Christ made each of us eternity’s “first you”, entering thus the loving relationship that consoles humanity by having realized eternal in temporal. Faith in Christ is devotion to a model of perfected love, upon which the consolation of eternal equality of the neighbor is built, who is also the first you. By eternally committing to this model, we are secured from the despair of every change- eternal love is practiced within temporality i.e. made available and at one’s disposal eternally at every present moment, but it transcends the despairing limits of temporal

⁵ See Martin Buber for this reference.

self-love by finding an expression in the eternal other and first you-“the neighbor”. The faith in the “thou”, and the “shall” that seeks immediate realization, grounds the act of loving the neighbor in an enduring duty and immediate obligation.

Because the commandment urges us to strive for and gain the perfections of eternity within temporality, “it is very unrewarding to love the neighbor,” or as Freud points out, it “puts one at a disadvantage” (Berthold 88). The task at hand is indeed difficult, and can be unrewarding and disadvantageous in the temporal- “one is easily exposed to attacks from all sides of dissimilarity; he easily becomes like a lost sheep among ravenous wolves” (Kierkegaard, *WoL* 79). While from temporal self-love’s point of view this is a disadvantage, to eternity, it is the highest passion of life. Kierkegaard laments- “we forget that the dissimilarities of life are like an actor's costume, which should hang loosely on the individuals, free of tight knots so that in the moment of transformation the garment can be cast off easily” (*WoL* 87). Eternally, the person who “keeps in mind at all times that his dissimilarity is a disguise” (*WoL* 88) and sees glimmering in each individual “the essential other, which is common to all, the eternal resemblance, the likeness”, can play along in the drama and fully emote in the love of the neighbor. The striving to expresses the need to love by truly and fully embracing the temporal isn’t meant to be easy-it is an attempt to live contemporaneously as Christ, something that takes passion- persistent effort and defiance of the temptations to exclude the other.

DUTY

Foreword

Born in Dharamsala, India, to Tibetan parents, Rabten moved to Astoria, Queens when she was eight, coming into being in a world of infinite possibility. Rabten was not one to shy away from such a rebirth, embracing every situation and person she met as a learning experience, always inquisitive and curious. When she was older, she understood that the experiences which we learn from are not always pleasant- life also taught her the nature of suffering. Yet Rabten labored on, curious to know everything there was to know, feel everything there was to feel. This energy got her into Mount Holyoke College, where she met me.

It was not long before Rabten and I became dear friends. We talked about everything from Socrates to our sexcapedes. We revised Orkut profiles and relieved wounded memories for each other. We would also go together to protests and campus events, making those calls for radical feminist liberation from time to time. Rabten was always involved more than me when it came to campus activism, given especially the media attention to Tibet in those days. With passion she would make her demands for freedom, a passion that continued on to her work as an activist and a therapist for people with experiences of oppression. But having left the classroom and entered the field, Rabten also got more nuanced in her insight, and practical in her quest for liberation. As someone I know who incorporates the wisdom of Buddhism and feminist ethics into her daily work, I sent her a letter, asking her to provide some insight. I asked her how we could heal ourselves from suffering. I asked her how we engage in a morality that cultivates the wisdom to remove the sickness of suffering and the passion to cure with love. Before I move to Rabten's response to my question, I would like to give you a better picture of Rabten so you may understand where she is coming from. Below is a piece written by her in a college magazine-

Who wore the dress? Was it the mistress, the wife, or the daughter? Which dress? The Dress of Civilization, of course!

How could the mistress wear such a dress? The mistress exists as long as a man is forced to wear a wife, and the wife is forced to wear him.

A man thinks he is naked with a mistress. Such a man is mistaken. He still wears a dress, a summer one- floral, short- making his knees naked but keeping his shame intact. Apt for the heat of the season. And his mistress wears him, for she is afraid of the cold. Afraid of marriages where winters always follow summers. Oh, this poor tropic child! This creature of habit! She yearns not for nudity but for the dress of civilization apt for her sun-kissed body. Indeed, after the sun has kissed her, which man with shame and pride (for the two come together) allows himself to be worn by his summer queen. Allows himself to strut around in a floral dress, when the sun disappears in the winter and takes his maidens with him.

So she wears the dress of civilization best for her tropical body- the dress of a mistress is the man who prefers to hide like a coward from the icy clutches of winter, when the sun is not around.

The wife wears the dress of civilization, but not the man she is forced to wear. No, she wears a man who is hers in principle and law, but who does not exist. She wears a dress that is invisible to her but is visible to everyone else, especially that promised man who decides to bed her only in the winter. He sees her dress clearly, and he knows that everyone else think him to be that dress. But he does not identify with that dress. No amount of make-up, covering himself in fancy fur, gowns, blazers and jackets, can transform him into that dress. Yet the world says, "Oh look! It is the wife and her gorgeous dress!" Such is the deception of winter, when the sun is obscured with clouds of snow.

The dress is invisible to the wife, but she very much feels its weight, and is aware that she is not naked. She loves her invisible dress in the summer. But in the winter, a visible version of her dress superimposes itself on her visible one, such that she can longer see the original, the pure,

the complete. Once the weight is off, the invisible dress remains, albeit a little crumpled. Yet she continues to wear it, refusing to be nude.

Does the daughter wear it? She is born with a dress! Alas, how is one expected to grow if one wears the same dress since birth! The Father is a woman's tightest dress, putting her in extreme discomfort, which appears to be sexy in the eyes of others.

No matter what time of the year, a man must accessorize- chains, bracelets, rings, earrings. As long as a man is obsessed with his jewelry, the daughter wears him. Of course, she is the model, and his is the artistry that has made her both uncomfortable and beautiful. That's why people compliment him, not she who wears him. But sometimes a man is not obsessed with jewelry, with looking pretty, with complements. The daughter of such a man is born without a dress, and remains nude without knowing what it means to be otherwise.

Sometimes though, this isn't the case, and the daughter in rebellion, tears the dress open, and subsequently a man is stripped bare. If he bears this and embraces his nudity, there is no need to make more dresses. If only every man could do such a thing- bear to look at his naked daughter and self.

Having read this, we may now turn to what Rabten has to say, seeing both continuities and discontinuities in her perspective. By understand better her journey to get to where she is now, and how she got there, we can think about how we might undertake that journey ourselves.

MOTHER, NOT OTHER

Dearest Mouna,

Your letter came as a pleasant surprise. The questions you pose stirred and prodded at thoughts that had arisen but never quite settled down; thoughts I had only started to examine but which I could no longer put aside. You ask the right questions, sister. What the world desperately does need is the *feminine*, to heal and liberate it from suffering, and you echo the concerns a teacher of mine once had- as things are going today, women may eventually win, but the *feminine* will lose out. You also probably felt it was right to ask me these questions because of my work on the field, and my incessant laboring to teach the value of the *feminine*, of beauty and caring, of aesthetic joy and compassion. It may come as a surprise to you that I have left that world behind for now and moved back to Dharamsala. A nunnery has taken me in. The whole affair has been rather smooth- they are even graciously letting me offer my services to a women's self-employment program in the area, and a rehabilitation program in Chandigarh for orphaned and abandoned boys and young men with criminal records. I know what you must be thinking- *Why?* You have every right to question me, Mouna. We were doing so much work, such good work there, trying so hard to temper the climate and preach tolerance in the midst of noisy liberal discourses and austere conservative dogmas. And we were making progress. But the recent turn of events has left me questioning if our activism had borne fruit, if our appeals were just ringing on deaf ears, or worse, resounding in echo chambers. Most of all, seeing so many of the sisters, brothers, and folk we worked with, hand in hand, resort back to a "justified anger" and "productive rage", which is nothing but damaging, especially to themselves; had left me broken hearted. I have not succumbed to despair and helplessness- no, that I will not do. The

Dharma teaches me that insightful patience and compassion must be inculcated and practiced, despite everything; especially despite everything. But I possessed no skillful means at that moment, no real insight to heal the wounds of past suffering, bitterness, and contempt, knew no way to nourish and energize into action. Compassion sounded great in concept, but difficult in practice, and even more difficult to teach my fellow men and women. While I could feel it in my heart, show it in my actions, and make statements like “put the ‘feminine’ back in feminism,” I could not persuade. In vain I tried to heal from the bottom-up, taking in the issue on the ground every day, discussing it with therapists and activists, giving speeches with the hope that they would move people to compassion. I could not do it. I knew easily how to deal with anger directed towards me, for whatever personal issue someone had taken with me. But I did not know how to counter the anger thrown at compassion, at the very notion of compassion itself. It is a catch-twenty-two, you see- when someone is angry, you show patience, you don’t counter their inflating ego with your own. You empathize with their view, feeling whatever they feel- truly being *with* their *passion* or suffering till it passes. But how do you do it when this compassion itself is attacked, from both sides. When your very act of deflating the ego is hated and resisted, when conservatives can call it “weakness” or “emotionality” and liberals call it a “privilege” of those not oppressed to be selfless and egoless? How does one heal the resistance to compassion and to selflessness itself? How is empathy created in a crisis of mistrust and pessimism? And so, the divide has gotten worse; when what is true and what is good is thrown into doubt and severely contested, their presence becomes precarious. I echo McIntyre’s suspicions about the condition of moral pluralism during our times, which is more an “inharmonious mélange of ill-assorted fragments” than it is an “ordered dialogue of intersecting

viewpoints”⁶. Ultimately though, neither sides emerge as a winner- Discord remains seated on the throne.

I realize now that my ego had identified itself so strongly with compassion, that it saw itself as being attacked. Because I had maintained my ego, my selfhood as a compassionate being, I had mistaken my empathy and care for the virtues of the feminine, when the role and importance of the feminine is much greater than what I had understood it to be. Most of all, my compassion lacked the insight that makes compassion a blissful and playful act, never burdensome and tiring. I didn’t have the insight to uncover delusions that went into attacking compassion, or I was seeing them and willingly ignoring them, so as to not offend the Other. Under the delusion that compassion could be attacked at all, as if it was an event in historic time which had to be achieved and maintained, I constantly stepped on eggshells trying to create compassion, not realizing that the source of compassion was the infinite space in which everything was contained and sheltered, the source of all individuation and existence- there was no Other to offend here. I had also failed to understand the *feminine*’s greatest virtue, especially the *Feminine* in my tradition- the wisdom of the *dakinis* and the *Taras*, of *Samantabhadri* and *Akasadhatvisvari*, who had always been a distant presence but had never made their way into my work, into any of my efforts to awaken the *feminine* with men and women who have forsaken it. All my work had been mere disparate re-renderings of teachings from the Dharma and from the Feminist tradition- some on patience, others on care and concern, and some on compassion. They had not been integrated in any meaningful way. Every day here, after we chant the hymns of the morning, we dedicate them to “*all sentient beings, the children of Buddha nature*”, hoping that

⁶See McIntyre 10.

they realize the ultimate nature of mind, which is “*Insight and Compassion in Blissful Union.*”⁷ So far, I did not have the insight that understands and channels infinite compassion spontaneously, or the compassion that can truly heal others with insightful skill. Queer is the question you ask me, *How do we heal?*, which I myself was trying to answer, and queerer still that you ask me now, at this intermediate state my life has found itself in; as I have been looking back to go forward, turning in to go outward, plunging deep into the teachings to rise high, I am neither here nor there, but in an in-between.⁸ In this letter, I grapple with your question as I simultaneously attempt to answer it. To understand the in-between, the how of here-to-there, we must look straight into the problem in the here, the suffering we must heal, to figure out how to get to the “there” of blissful union- of how we may heal. This is only a *work- in-progress*: while the truth and the good, insight and compassion, are timeless and eternal, their meaning or method is always contemporary. I contemplate a way that we may get closer to that blissful union of selfless insight and compassionate action today, a way you, me, and the rest of the world can fill the space to whatever each of us have been missing.

My teacher once told me that while animals experience pain and pleasure, only humans despair and suffer, because even a child makes sure she first learns to say three things- whaddit?, wannit! and don-wannit! She was referring here to the language of the three poisons in the Buddhist world - ignorance, desire and aversion- which we are quick to plunge into and master as we grow older. They keep the wheel of *samsara* spinning, and afflict us in complicated, intertwined ways today; we must recognize them before they ensnare us further. Insight into the

⁷ Dorje vii.

⁸The *bar-do*, translating to in-between, is really important to the Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Every arising phenomena is a part of the four main Bardos: the *bardo* of life, moment of death, of dharmata or ground, and of becoming or rebirth; and there are two more bardos within the bardo of life: samadhi/ meditation (the practice of the day) and dreams (the practice of the night) (Rinpoche, 103-08). Each bardo comes with the opportunity of liberation.

ways in which we suffer today and what brings this about is necessary. Feminists and Tibetan Buddhists, of times past and present, have tried to diagnose the condition of our suffering, particularly as it manifests in contemporary problems. They seem to give us different pictures, but bringing them together might reveal some of the mental, verbal and physical preoccupations of our time that are responsible for where we are.

The Buddhists divide samsara, the entire space of existence (conditioned by suffering) into six-realms into which beings cycle- the realms of the gods, the demi-gods or jealous gods, humans, animals, the hungry ghosts, and the hellish realms. The *hells* are places of intense physical, emotional and mental pain, occupied by angry beings who have come to identify so strongly with giving and receiving pain that it becomes the only reality they can think of. The animal realm conditioned by ignorance involves an existence limited to survival and reproduction- sleep and satiation are the greatest bliss known to beings who inhabit this space. While the animals are easily satisfied, the hungry spirits never are, they occupy a space of insatiable desire- everything they crave becomes “blood” and “pus,” only increasing their craving. The *gods* live in pleasure, proud and obsessed with their bliss and self-aggrandizement - the classic utilitarian may be channeling the energy from this realm in his theories. The *demi-gods* are jealous and resent the luxury of the gods. They are competitive and always trying to usurp their alter-egos and counterparts, quarreling and problematizing things constantly- power and critique- obsessed media folk and Marxist academics may be living in such a place. The human realm is the consensus reality we occupy. It is a space of fluid objects, symbols and tropes of human desire, which we taken in, process and incorporate through physical, verbal and imaginary actions, making a personal narrative with them that we are motivated to realize. So a human self gets embedded in these relations between things, which it constitutes its unique self-

narrative with. And its suffering is in relation to these relations- it is isolated or constrained by them, it is nostalgic about or regrets them, it expects them and gets disappointed. Buddhists believe this to be the most precious space, the only realm where liberation may occur, as only with this desire one can desire the freedom from being trapped by desire, only with a motive to realize something can we realize the nothingness or cessation of *nirvana*, and only in the state of in-betweenness of being a relational entity can we attain the freedom of non-duality between samsara and nirvana. It is interesting that some feminists make similar arguments; that human beings are relational selves, and improving the nature of the relations of need- like making them more caring- may be foundational⁹ to our moral engagement with the world. It is also interesting to note that suffering is characterized as spaces or places occupied by the mind that have been defiled, an idea I will return to later.

This description may help map out the landscape of our own suffering today, and identify different patterns of behavior we must heal from. In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche does a good job identifying spaces in our world that manifest as realms of gods, demigods and hungry ghosts. He writes-

Imagine the gods: tall, blond surfers, lounging on beaches and in gardens flooded by brilliant sunshine, listening to any kind of music they choose, intoxicated by every kind of stimulant, high on meditation, yoga, bodywork, and ways of improving themselves, never taxing their brains, never confronting any complex or painful situation, never conscious of their true nature, so anesthetized that they are never aware of what their condition really is. If some parts of California and Australia spring to mind as the realm of the gods, you can see the demigod realm being acted out every day perhaps in the intrigue and rivalry of Wall Street, or in the seething corridors of Washington and Whitehall. And the hungry ghost realms? They exist wherever people, though immensely rich, are never satisfied, craving to take over this company or that one, or endlessly playing out their greed in court cases¹⁰

⁹ Noddings, *MF* 33.

¹⁰ Rinpoche 113.

Amazing, Rinpoche has managed to finally give a proper account of differences between East Coasters and West Coasters! And while his take on the L.A. hipsters and vicious New-Yorkers sure did crack us up, the mindscape in which he put those “immensely rich, but never satisfied” beings left me really concerned about the plight of the kind of people in power today. The crowd that blindly supports such people may also probably be living in the deep-seated delusion of the animal realm, a place that cannot be missed in modernity. Many men and women today see themselves as *rational animals*- born to (rationally) eat, sleep and procreate and nothing else. The herd’s ignorance self-proclaimed as reason is a rather dangerous territory in the field of suffering. Even the hell energy may come to manifest in our world occasionally- from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, to Syria and the camps of terrorists, we see despair at its angry, violent, worst. Most humans though, are living in their own personal tales of tragedy and comedy, of “pain, grief, loss and frustration” and “real and dramatic purpose.”¹¹ To be *human* is also to be able to get yourself to be in such a space, because realizing our suffering and overcoming it in the nature of the mind is a capacity we all have as humans, despite other realms or mind-spaces we may occasionally slip into and find ourselves in. This is why the Buddhists insist, there is a path to liberation for each of us.

The problem then, in each of the six realms of suffering, is the act of *identification*, the primary function of the ego. In the non-human realms, one identifies with a single emotion or affective state, which is then projected and crystallized into an entire realm the mind comes to occupy. The average human identifies with a unique personal narrative, the ego, which appropriates certain relations to itself, is afflicted by the various emotions it “others” from time to time, bringing it frustration and suffering. A feminist psychoanalytic perspective has a similar

¹¹ Rinpoche 114.

take on ego formation- Brennan considers the dynamic space of relational affective structures between subjects to pre-exist the infant, which the ego then appropriates to make up its own story.¹² But this becomes what Guilmette calls a “foundational fantasy,” as we think of ourselves as separate from others and self-contained, becoming “an echo-chamber of energy under assault with itself instead of being at harmony with the universe.”¹³ The ego is thus a *demarcation* of space, and this demarcation is precisely at the root of suffering, it is precisely the source of living in a *defiled space*. In Tibetan, the ego is called *dak dzin*, meaning “grasping to a self”- it is not a real thing but “the incessant movements of grasping a delusory notion of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, self and other, and all other concepts, ideas and desires, and activity that will sustain this false construction.”¹⁴ Moreover, as Rinpoche notes, grasping is futile from the start since there is no basis or truth in it, what we are grasping is by nature ungraspable, a dynamic field escaping rigid definitions. But we identify so strongly with the activity that “we identify our survival with its survival, its interests as our interests”, and “the thought of losing this delusion terrifies us: we think without it, we are colorless, brain-dead, robots.”¹⁵ Immoral behavior stemming from the ego’s sense of helplessness and fear of separation from things it identifies with is also the notion of evil we find in Noddings.¹⁶

The fear of impermanence, of losing control and of the unknown ties us down to the fantasy, and even if we see through the delusion, we are too scared to abandon it¹⁷ like I had been. Without knowing what lies on the other side, this unique construction is our best bet. But

¹² Guilmette, “The politics of personal feeling.”

¹³ Guilmette, “The politics of personal feeling.”

¹⁴ Rinpoche 116.

¹⁵ Rinpoche 117.

¹⁶ Noddings, *WE* 3.

¹⁷ Rinpoche 117.

however well-constructed our construction may be, the belief that *I* am reasonable and knowledgeable, *I* am compassionate, kind and moral or *I* am spiritual is still the illusion of an ego which cannot be sustained in and of itself, and successfully remove suffering thereafter. In today's world, this construction has been glorified to a great degree- in our personal Facebook profiles that curate the ego's attachments, in our movies about "self-made" and "independent" men and women, and in the brand of identity politics and relativism many of our universities notoriously push in their post-everything discourses (you must see this article about Trump as a postmodern God). An increasing demarcation and defilement of space by the ego under a highly prevalent fear of impermanence, losing control and the unknown is the nature of our predicament today. What is the cause for such a predicament? Impermanence is a law of *nature*, to be feared only by one who has forsaken nature. Losing control is an issue when one cannot see oneself as *dependent* on another, but sees oneself as "independent," thus still dependent on the act of controlling for one's meaning. And the unknown, the *absence* or gap in one's frame of understanding, is discomfiting only to one attached to the completely known, the *present*, the full. A distance from *nature*, a disdain for *dependence*, and a discomfort with *absence*- these are the cultural moods of our times. So you know the answer I am about to give you- the neglect of the *feminine* has everything to do with our current predicament.

While all feminists are concerned by the neglect and devaluation of women's needs, some have gone further to explore the implications of undermining the feminine itself¹⁸, that which women were traditionally relegated to, for truth and morality in our culture as a whole. Most of my work in the past has been inspired by these feminists- I was trying to overcome those persisting tendencies in our activism and politics to work with the patriarchal categories of

¹⁸ She is referring to the works of Nel Noddings and Michael Slote

“superior” and “inferior” or “true self” and “less of a self” through which the traditionally *feminine* qualities like body, care or relational-being were seen. But in light of my recent contemplation of the *Taras*, the great Mothers of the Tibetan tradition, I found myself with a fresh, broader insight on the role and importance of the *Feminine*, one which I will get to briefly. This insight, combined with my desire to understand why exactly dependence, nature, and absence have been devalued, made me revisit some pictures painted by feminists on the suffering of women and neglect of the feminine in our culture, hoping to see things I had missed.

Someone I hesitantly turned to was Simone de Beauvoir, as much of what she had said ran against my goals of celebrating basic human interdependency, naturality, and existence in-and-of-itself. At first glance, De Beauvoir may seem to have a disdain for the historically feminine, and her insistence on the “independent woman” who has a “grasp on the world” and “a life of activity in society” as primary and superior to a woman in love or a woman of faith who “puts herself into relation with her double, or God”¹⁹ had initially pushed me away from her. Moreover the recovery of the feminine is not a task for De Beauvoir, since *femininity* is a mere construct or “myth” “that never existed,”²⁰ so the liberation of woman consisted not in making man see the truth of his relational dependencies more, but for women to break this social illusion and claim independence. Despite De Beauvoir’s disdain for dependence, there are two extremely valuable insights on the causes of the mistreatment of women in her work.

The first interesting insight is an observation on De Beauvoir’s part: that unlike the oppression of blacks or Jews, the origins of the oppression of women is not attributable to a

¹⁹ De Beauvoir 712.

²⁰ De Beauvoir xxxvii.

historic event, or to an occurrence in *time*.²¹ While this may make one conclude that the status of women cannot be changed and “is absolute as it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historic facts,” De Beauvoir suggests it is foolish to believe this, because the “nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than historic reality.”²² She believes the reason for continued subjugation is that women have no history or solidarity- a narrative “unit” or identity, an ego that has a sense of communal “feeling together” with other women as opposed to non-women ie men.²³ But what she is thus alluding to, even though she may not phrase it in these terms, is that maybe the source of the mistreatment of women (and thus also the neglect of the feminine) is not a historic concept or a matter of occurrence in time, but a spatial concept. It is not a historic development of a “male agenda” or a narrative identity but lies in the way that a certain relational *space*, between men and women, has been defined, demarcated and disrespected by men’s notion of self or ego to mean certain things. Such obstructions in space are precisely the defilements of space contributing to women’s (and men’s) suffering. They also prevent relations or an experience of connections between women to recognize and undo such suffering. The neglect and disrespect of space is an important idea, and I will return to it again.

So De Beauvoir then looks for the causes of women's subjugation in the definitions of the man-woman relationship, which leads to her second crucial insight, the “myth” the man has built around woman of the “*feminine*”. De Beauvoir’s attack I believe is not really so much on the mythic nature of the “*feminine*”, but the patriarchal “myth” of the *feminine*’s status as the *Other* - the idea that woman, and everything associated with her (body, nature) is Other to man.²⁴ Thus,

²¹ De Beauvoir xlii.

²² De Beauvoir xlii-xliii.

²³ De Beauvoir xliii.

²⁴ De Beauvoir, xli.

“female values were set up in opposition to male values” and “the feminine domain of life, of immanence” was made to stand in opposition to spirit, of “self-justification through transcendence,” as men could claim the latter for themselves only “by locking women up”²⁵ or subjugating them to the former because they were fundamentally dependent on the former task for reproducing their existence. Thus man *others* woman, because in order to pursue his own *self* or special meaning to “take control of the instant and mould the future”, he must *other* life, the physical, the being-in-itself, on which he is nonetheless dependent and so demands it from woman. Why is he able to do so? De Beauvoir believes woman accepts the status of the Other because of being “bound to the body in maternity,”²⁶ and her biological task of reproducing life and existence sustains her subjugation. But while both women and *femininity*, or the aspects of being they are locked into, are labeled “Other”, and thus denied a sense of value-in-and of itself or self-consciousness, De Beauvoir maintains the masculine in the dichotomy (spirit, culture, existence, transcendence) as the true possibility of selfhood which all men and women, bestowed the existential task, must become. Sheer life, body, nature, immanent relational being is subordinate in status- in fact the maternal body is a trap- and women simply must control it just like men. While I am not denying the virtue of bodily autonomy- no other being should control the body that nature has lent us personally, there is still a problem: despite pointing to the problematic nature of making *Other* that which is immanent in us and we are dependent on, the *feminine* remains the *Other* to De Beauvoir. In this framework, men and women see themselves as a Self whose Other is nature, the body, the world- that which they *are* dependent on but seek to *become* uniquely different from and control.

²⁵ De Beauvoir, 69.

²⁶ De Beauvoir, 69.

I do truly appreciate De Beauvoir's revolutionary sentiment for her time, urging man to recognize in woman a fellow subject and human being, not a mythic Other, which in no way reduces the richness of the relations he has with woman.²⁷ However, she limits her notion of what it means to be human to the “autonomous individuality”²⁸ of a self, demarcating itself from and Othering the space of interrelated dependencies in which it finds itself. And while women ought to condemn the patriarchy's abuse of these dependence relations, the project of getting men and women to respect dependence relations in and of themselves is foreign to her. This is why Noddings writes in response to De Beauvoir, “if there are elements of fulfillment and happiness in women's traditional activities, then women should describe and defend them and should urge men to consider participating in them”, and the real human developmental task should be the “incorporation and acceptance of the Other”²⁹ i.e. the feminine.

In Noddings, there is also a description of what is reflected in the masculine disregard for Nature, sheer life and the body, which de Beauvoir also had considered subordinate, “confused”, and “limited”, especially with regards to the maternal body. Noddings describes how a pessimist sees only the body's impermanence with regard to time, i.e. its temporariness, and is filled with disgust and repulsion at the violent act of consumption and digestion with which everything exists in nature. But she notes-

The pessimists account is not so much wrong as it is incomplete- It either fails to see the savage lion tenderly nursing her cubs and the cubs play energetically in the sun, or it discounts these activities as foolishness. Failing to see how the human mother's activity builds rationally on animal instincts to live and nurture young (pessimists) consider it an irrational acceptance of the happiness life offers. But it is the pessimists who are irrational, for they cannot act on what they prescribe as logically required³⁰

²⁷ De Beauvoir 276.

²⁸ De Beauvoir 277.

²⁹ Noddings, *WE* 224.

³⁰ Noddings, *WE* 123-124.

Noddings' references reminded me of the "circle of life" from *The Lion King*, the idea of nature as the web of energy which circles through each of us, neither fully created nor destroyed, but preserved through care. Nature is more a dynamic energy field, a space that is constantly being repurposed to support life, our bodies taken on loan from and returned to it. One who has forsaken nature does not see how he is created, contained in and sustained by nature's care, and thinks he has ownership of or property rights to that which he only has tenant's rights for. He only sees nature's destruction as savagery, and cannot come to terms with the fact that everything that emerges from nature must return to it sooner and later. But sustaining the constant change in nature with care and playfulness is necessary, "logically required". For Noddings, the natural and stronger basis for ethics is not a moral principle-based logic but caring, as it is based in the psychic relatedness of beings and a receptive rationality of the caring³¹ that sustains life. And because "natural caring exists prior to formal thought", it is an empirical reality, not a utopian one,³² and this caring relation is the foundation of moral life in culture. I am reminded of the numerous videos I have seen of lionesses and leopards, caring for the young of monkey, wildebeest, and other prey. But from the point of view of the demarcated ego, there is dread of not being able to control this care and impermanence, of running out of the care and wanting to be "independent", and this "foundational fantasy" throws it "off balance" with nature and the universe, causing great unhappiness to itself and others. Tell me, if we had not been so forsaken from nature, from the cosmos, and were in harmony with it, would there be this entire hullabaloo about saving the environment?

³¹ Noddings, *Caring* 1.

³² Noddings, *MF*, 45.

Finally, Lisa Guenther, a feminist phenomenologist, also throws light at the source of the psychological discomfort with absence in our society, as understood by Kristeva and Levinas. Guenther uses Kristeva's psychoanalytic frame and explores a human's relation to the body of their mother, which must be severed to emerge as a distinctive self. But to the ego, this entails "mourning the loss of the most intense love object and sense of fullness" which one either resolves by finding a symbolic substitute love object, an "other" to sustain the ego's fullness that is impermanent nevertheless, or one is unable or refuses to find adequate compensation, turning melancholic.³³ In both cases though, we have one withdrawing into the delusion of the ego. There is an underlying sadness as the world is "empty and meaningless" no longer with a presence, as the "lost object in melancholia is unknown, unnamable; like the maternal body itself, it resists adequate symbolization, shatters identity". This matricide or loss of the maternal body, "the origin and my container," the "support for my existence" and creation is what one is necessarily severed from upon individuation.³⁴ The "gift" of our own body from this source is forgotten by the trauma of the initial loss, and every time we are reminded of the maternal, or are encountered with the sense of absence and unknowability that characterized the source of our mourning and melancholia, we are left discomforted.

While this trauma is part of the discomfort shown towards the maternal and the female body (which women may also have, since they are also borne by mothers), another important reason for it is the attitude towards maternal bearing, which for Levinas is not "a mute biological repetition in time or heroic existential transcendence, but a "hope" which occurs in time, yet goes

³³ Guenther 119

³⁴ Guenther 120

beyond time.³⁵ An ethical and maternal bearing is to “endure the ‘infinite’ *in* time, which is not endless or eternal but rather finds its articulation in a finite body who bears in its flesh the infinite and un-bearable Other.”³⁶ But because the maternal body makes *space* for an-other possibility and hope in birth, thus symbolizing a space for infinite possibility in time, it exists in anarchic/diachronous time,³⁷ and is *achronous* in a certain sense. But this cannot be tolerated by the ego that has identified with a limited possibility and a chronological narrative. Such is the fundamental intolerance for the miraculous, for the act of hoping, for the possibility of simultaneous existence and horizons of time in space. Why do people on both sides of the political spectrum brush off appeals to tolerance and the simultaneous affirmation of diverse opinions or ones different from their personal narratives as either unreasonable contradiction, or weak emotionality, so easily? Because they have forsaken this ability to bear hope, to not only imagine but be pregnant with the infinite possibility of an Other, in actuality. Both the sense of *absence* or unknowability, like the ghost limb of an amputee, and the inability for *achronous* bearing of infinite possibility, results from not having come to terms with one’s relation to the maternal or its virtue.

Thus we see how the increased attachment to the ego and its individuation, resulting from a fear of losing control, impermanence, and the unknown, originate in the Othering of the *feminine*- of relational being and dependency, of nature, and of the maternal respectively. All of these have to do with the ego’s demarcation away from the space that is the ground of existence (the desire to *transcend* the dependency or relationality we are *imminent* in), the source of nourishment (the ignorance of nature’s playfulness and the indebtedness to its *care*) and the

³⁵ Guenther 106

³⁶ Guenther 107

³⁷ Guenther 106

womb that bears possibility (the relationship of aversion to the *lost* and dangerously *achronous* maternal body). You may have anticipated where I am going with this. If not, this passage by Foucault could lead you there-

A critique could be carried out of this devaluation of space that has prevailed for generations. Space was treated as the dead, fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the other hand, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. If one started to talk in terms of space that meant one was hostile to time. It meant, as the fools say, that one “denied history,” that one was a “technocrat.” They didn’t understand that to trace the forms of implantation, delimitation, and demarcation of objects, the modes of tabulation, the organization of domains meant the throwing into relief of processes- historic ones, needless to say- of power.³⁸

Space! Space! Space! Everything we call the feminine- *relational dependency, nature, absence and unfathomable*- is associated with the dynamic energy field of space; and everything we call masculine- *independent spirit, culture and its history, presence and manifestation* - is an abstraction of the time that penetrates space. But we live in space-time, my dear, this is our reality; the union of the masculine and feminine creates all of us. By letting our desire, ignorance and aversion get the best of us, we have become so delusional as to identify only with our reality in time, our life-narratives, at the cost of othering, neglecting, disrespecting, and thus defiling the reality of space. Such spatial neglect, disrespect and devaluation is precisely what we noted as the reason for the spaces of suffering in samsara.

In the Tibetan tradition, the female Buddhas represent insight and knowledge, and the male Buddhas represent compassionate action. The feminine is not opposed to the masculine- one is not possible without the other, and they must thus be brought together in union to realize the nature of mind. What had suddenly struck me was that Space, the Mother *Akasadhatvisvari* (meaning: the divine conscious being of the space element) was the consort of *Vairocana*, the Buddha of Reality or Wisdom. The Insight of the dynamic relational space or energy is the

³⁸ qtd. in Rodman 640.

insight that knows Reality and discovers the true selflessness of all things manifest in space, facilitating thereby the ability to act with wisdom in time. Any notion of a true or meaningful Self seen as separate from the Other thus automatically demarcates the relational nurturing, energetic space of infinite possibility, the Mother. Moreover, the *dakinis* represent the insight into the playfulness of being in this space and Tara the energetic space that sustains compassionate action and consistent caring. All actions are the sum of energy over time, and without the insight of the feminine, which is not brought in union with the masculine, there is no *energy* for sustaining our *actions* in *time*. No wonder then, that I could not energize my compassion, no wonder I had failed to heal.

So now that we know where we are, why we are here, and what the insight necessary to get to the “there” of eradicating suffering and uniting insight and compassion into blissful action, we need to understand how to cultivate such an insight in our practice and actions, how to truly heal the relational space of self-other relationships we exist in.

In order to develop such an insight then, we must revalue the feminine and incorporate it into life, for which we need a new perspective on space and the understanding of our self-in-space. What would such a perspective entail? Here is a simple activity. Look around you. What do you see? You either probably just noted and surveyed all the things where you are. Or you looked at a particular object and noted its features, paying attention to its qualities and properties. Now try to look again, but this time notice the space between objects rather than the objects themselves. Maintain your attention on this space for a minute or so. Whenever I have done this activity, I have felt my gaze broaden, embracing all the objects in front of me, and becoming all-affirming and all-incorporating. Not only can our mind take in and embrace the space this way, but our heart can lovingly affirm space in this way. This simple activity, if practiced daily, can be

the first step towards a space-embracing and space affirming perspective. Breathing exercises which hollow ourselves are another way to experience spaciousness within us.

Before I go into the uniquely Buddhist path of cultivating this insight to energize compassionate action, I want to return to Guenther and Noddings, for discussing the possibility of overcoming the neglect of the feminine and finding such an insight. Is it possible to go beyond the ego's trauma and attitude of aversion towards the maternal space or one's ignorance of the necessity of the caring relation in our social and moral life? Guenther does not believe that mourning or melancholia are the only way to approach the loss of the maternal body, and sees that the unethicity of the aversion can be undone by forgiveness, which admits this loss or separation and sees that it must and can be transformed, by validating the sense of loss yet making new possibility available.³⁹ Guenther suggests that this healing process occurs by allowing one to recall and remember the unease of the separation, patiently listening to and forgiving one's suffering that results from the severing, yet opening them up to rebirth or the possibility of renewing life. One can thus be made to see birth as a gift, a gift of the Mother, thus making the Mother the Other of a moral relationship of reciprocity and responsibility.⁴⁰ But I would like to rephrase that a bit: by acknowledging the gift that birth is, we can come to see every other we are allowed to experience through our gifted life as a gift of the Mother, the maternal which allows birth and rebirth, the *achronous* space of infinite possibilities. Seeing the other as a possibility of the Mother, who gifted life and thereby the other, can bring/ cause inspiring responsibility instead of aversion towards every other. But also, the loss need not be as severe as Guenther points out. Perhaps this is a cultural thing, but I remember while growing up,

³⁹ Guenther 122

⁴⁰ Guenther 122

if I tried to assert the authority of my ego by throwing a tantrum, my kind mother would say, “don’t talk to me like that, don’t forget who created you.” So while we can heal others by helping one recall and forgive the loss of the relation and acknowledge the gift of life when one has forsaken to see it as one, we could also mitigate such a forgetting by gently reminding the children we raise what a gift their life is, teaching them gratitude and appreciation. I would like to note here that the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine of rebirth may have a similar moral connotation—some Buddhists have suggested that the key to enlightenment is to see all beings as our mother and to see ourselves as a mother to all beings. Everything is being recycled in space and we are all recycled from the same energy, we are borne as a new possibility in it by certain actions (karma), and can bear new possibilities with our actions (karma). By identifying with the energetic space we occupy, we see that we are a Mother to every other, and by seeing the origin of our current possibility, we see that every other has been our Mother. By forgiving ourselves we can forgive our bad karma, and by believing in the possibility of rebirth, or being pregnant with our future, we can deliver ourselves from suffering.

Noddings shows that it is also possible for each one of us to inculcate the caring that is basic to nature, and reasonable to acknowledge our indebtedness to it in our social and moral life. Noddings argues that “certain feelings, attitudes and memories” of care are natural, accessible to all human beings and be “claimed as universal,”⁴¹ and we can use these past or familiar experiences to develop an attitude that can build the caring relations that allow for and sustain our social and moral life. The caring attitude, Noddings writes, “is that attitude which expresses our earliest memories of being cared for and our growing store of memories of both caring and

⁴¹ Noddings, *Caring* 28.

being cared for,”⁴² which is universally accessible. The truth is that life would not have been possible without having been cared for. Because we are all humans, and the human realm is a realm of possibility and need, we only develop when our needs get receptive attention, are responded to, and shown concern for. And so being born and raised in this world, we will all have a memory of having been cared for, a memory of nature’s magnanimity. Natural caring may not manifest as the mother for those who may have no memory or too many bad memories of her, but it has manifest through various beings that cared for them and sustained their physical, emotional and mental existence. And such a memory is why the Buddhists believe the human birth is the best birth, and has the possibility to overcome all suffering and bad karma. We can heal ourselves as humans by recollecting, meditating upon, and cultivating the memory of being cared for; and by in-turn practicing such caring, we can inculcate merit or good karma, “the growing store of memories” that heals us furthermore from our suffering. Economists may suggest all sort of “resources” that go into creating us- health, wealth, education, etc. But it is this caring attitude which is the perfect resource, that which sustains all existence in nature. Thus the task or duty of all moral life- be it social or economic activities, is to “establish or restore natural caring relations”⁴³ Thus today, as the market governs most of our decisions, I echo Noddings’ concerns that we may need a “rescaling of human values that would elevate those professions (of caring-tasks) to a level consonant with their contribution to human welfare.”⁴⁴ We cannot ignore the need to develop receptive attention to, ability to respond to (responsibility), and caring concern for one another’s needs, as this need precedes all other needs, and is the foundational need of society.

⁴² Noddings, *Caring* 5.

⁴³ Noddings, *MF* 29.

⁴⁴ Noddings, *MF* 29.

So must the ego go or stay? Well, as long as we are alive, we will have a provisional identity. This provisional entity, our social, relational constitution, will help us get around with our life. To deny the provisional entity or the gift that has been given by the feminine- of body, of language, of mind- is to also disrespect it and assert the ego in a certain sense. But our identification with body, speech (intellect/ thinking mind) or mind (sensate memory and imagination) cannot be a strong one. There is not only infinite possibility to be reborn and to recreate the ego, but the ego is also only a dress. It must be worn loosely, playfully, and something that we are free to slip out of, a costume in a play we can take off when we have performed our role. The *dakinis* try to teach us this time and again with their mischievous pranks that rob monks, nuns and lay persons of their attachments. The centre of our identity must ultimately be a self-less one, an emptiness or spaciousness. The insight that can develop this selflessness is the insight we seek. It is in contemplating and incorporating the perspective of the *dakinis*, the feminine as *playfulness*, in incorporating the purposelessness or aesthetic delight of play, beauty and the ephemerality of nature, that our self can truly become “loosely defined”, un-rigid, and un-grasping. Nature does this easily, like the lion cubs playing in the sun. Isn't the entire play of life, in the dynamic flow and manifestation of energetic space and its over time, in its consecutive active upturns and passive downturns, in the unity of the maternal and paternal in a child, and in the desire to separate and combine- like strands of DNA, so utterly, queer? Playing along with this playfulness is what we also need to cultivate. Everyone who has been a child must have had some memory of playfulness. To bring that memory, cultivate it and incorporate that attitude towards things is key, humoring ourselves and others when things get too dismal, serious, or disappointing. Why I tend to be wary of identity politics is precisely because the fixation on one's identity lacks a certain playfulness, the ability to humor ourselves,

glorifying what is merely one's dress or costume. We can rightfully question being forced into roles that are not consistent with the role our actions (karma) of mind, body and speech are able to perform. Our identities are only provisionally real- we use them to get around in the world, and they can help us get into the caring relationships-space that sustains us, but to use them is not to let them use us. They are also not set in stone- by encapsulating the suffering, privileges or oppressions of the past in ourselves as an identity, the one who suffers most is us; we limit the possibility of bearing and being pregnant with our own destiny.

But at the same time, along with the playful attitude we must have towards our provisional identities, we cannot also forget the seriousness of the task at hand, which is to end the suffering of all beings with compassionate action energized by the insight of selflessness. The essential task that the Buddhist dharma makes our duty is to unite compassion with insight in action, in the self and all other beings. It is not a duty to a principle, or a complete forsaking of duty in a language of "entitlements and rights." No, it is a duty towards a task, towards the actions and relationships that sustain existence, nurture us, and bear the possibility of our liberation from suffering. Our duty is thus towards the feminine, towards revaluing and re-relating to the feminine we have come to neglect, to incorporate into life what we demarcated from, to energize our compassionate action by being reborn into and inhabiting a space free of defilements, an existence free of suffering. The wisdom of spaciousness and selflessness also makes us responsible to achieve this task not just in our own consciousness but in the consciousness of others. How so? Shantideva⁴⁵ makes a beautiful point -

I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering (a defilement of space), just like my own suffering...When happiness is equally dear to others and myself, what is so special (about the ego) that I strive after happiness for myself alone? When fear and

⁴⁵ Perrett 42-43.

suffering are equally abhorrent to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I protect myself but not others?...since one who experiences suffering does not exist, to whom will that suffering belong? All sufferings are without an owner, because they are not different. They should be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any restriction made in this case? Why should suffering be prevented? Because everyone agrees. If it must be warded off, then all of it must be warded off; and if not, then this goes for oneself as it does for everyone else.

Given that we realize there is nothing special or more truthful about our own provisional identity or self, and that we are really contained in the self-less spaciousness that is our ground, then if one is to heal from suffering, one must cure all the suffering there is, as there is no “our” suffering versus “their suffering.” Even if people don’t agree that suffering should be prevented, Shantideva's point is that if we do take up the task of warding it off “for ourselves,” our insight into selflessness must make us ward it off *in toto*. Thus, to truly heal, the task at hand that is our duty is described by him beautifully in this verse-

*For as long as space exists,
And sentient beings endure,
May I too remain,
To dispel the misery of the world*⁴⁶

So what are some ways in which we take on this duty to the feminine, how do we take the task of undoing and removing the suffering caused by the defilements of space? I would like to think of our duty to the feminine as to be both her warrior and her servant. I talked about how cultivating forgiveness, gratitude, care and playfulness, by meditating upon memories, emotions and thoughts which invoke such an attitude, were basic to grounding ourselves in the maternal, nourishing, infinite space of existence and allowing us to develop the insight of spaciousness and selflessness- that every being is our mother and we are every being’s mother. But to bring this insight about in the world, we must not be hasty, aggressive or indecisive. Instead we must rest

⁴⁶ Rinpoche 365.

in an “unconditional confidence” and “trust” in the purity of this perception, have a steadfast mind that inculcates a sharp awareness yet appreciative perception of the play of all phenomena experienced, and a bravery that means “not making room for any doubt” in the possibility of realizing the feminine in ourselves and others,⁴⁷ allowing us to be fully dedicated to this task.

This is the wisdom that Trungpa’s “warrior” of the dharma possesses- to incorporate the gentleness of the feminine with the fearlessness of the masculine in the face of death.

Warriorship is not a matter of aggression but bravery, and its essence is to “refuse to give up on anyone or anything.”⁴⁸ Because you are not limited to a notion of self in time but see yourself existing in infinite space, when you are a warrior, you are in no frantic hurry to push goodness onto others, thus patient in extending gentleness and faith to others, and gently challenging others to go beyond themselves.⁴⁹ To *embody* warriorship in oneself is to become an authentic being that is simply a cosmic mirror, such that every being that comes into contact is overwhelmed by such genuineness, provoked to go beyond their selfishness.⁵⁰

But to truly become and sustain our genuine presence that “unites heaven and earth,” we not only need the discipline and conviction of the warrior, but must avoid falling prey to the arrogance of being such a presence, developing the humility of a servant. We must be the humblest of the humble, seeing ourselves as servants of peace, as Rinpoche⁵¹ puts it. To learn how to be reborn as a “transformed being to help others is really to help the world in the most powerful way possible”. Upon realizing the insight of selflessness, we must return to devote our wisdom and compassion to the service of the whole world, becomes servants of peace “clothed

⁴⁷ Trungpa 175.

⁴⁸ Trungpa 33.

⁴⁹ Trungpa 178.

⁵⁰ Trungpa 178.

⁵¹ Rinpoche 364

in the armor of perseverance.” This is the bodhisattva vow, consciously channeling wisdom and compassion at every level and situation in society- as lawyers, doctors, engineers, politicians, artists, teachers, everywhere. We do this by seeing ourselves as “instruments of peace,” as the famous words by St Francis⁵² suggests. To be a servant is to respond to every need and address every situation of suffering, taking on the project to heal suffering *in toto* by doing the necessary.

And so sister, we fight the good fight, refuse to give up on anyone or anything, by situating our fight not in time but in space. This is not a struggle, an effort that has “lasted this long”, but a task performed with great patience and steadfastness, like the warrior. The warrior’s force overcomes the barricades and demarcations of space by undoing the defilements with the gentleness and playfulness of the feminine, being the flowing river of love and compassion that smoothes and moulds everything that comes into contact with it. And by truly realizing the insight of the selflessness in this space of existence, we identify with the fundamental source of happiness and the great Feminine, the nurturing energy, the maternal space or womb that bears infinite possibility for birth and rebirth. Our identity with this feminine makes us the servants of the task of freeing the feminine, being humble in our liberation of beings from their defiled spaces and into the feminine. It is to cultivate both this warriorship and servitude that I have taken some time off the field. I needed to meditate upon the feminine time and again to cultivate its virtue, and to realize the insight of selflessness in my actions of body, speech and mind, therein destroying my ego so I am one with the feminine. In a poignant speech reflecting on recent events, Valarie Kaur suggested, “what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb but

⁵² Rinpoche 365- “Lord make me an instrument of thy peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope...grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying that we are born to eternal life”

the darkness of the womb?"⁵³ But to that, I say, only corpses see the darkness of the tomb. All darkness, from the perspective of space, energy, life: is the darkness of the womb. We must see ourselves being delivered to a new life by the world, by the mother, reborn to a new possibility liberated from suffering. And the necessary insight to become a warrior and servant of the task of realizing the feminine is to know how to give birth- to labor, to breathe, and to push.

Yours Lovingly,

Rabten Jamyang

⁵³ Valarie Kaur, video- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCenwgheIBs>

A Concluding Caption

Death. Love. Duty.

Between aesthetic love and ethical duty, [the eye of] death is the liberating middle term.

Between the dread of death and duty to the other, love [of the neighbor] is the consoling middle term.

Between the insight of selflessness and the compassion of the warrior, the duty [to the feminine] is the energizing middle term.

Death understands the sickness. Love is the cure. Duty masters the healing process.

Death sees sincerely. Love redeems persistently. Duty heals infinitely.

Death liberates (reason). Love consoles (passions). Duty energizes (action)

Death liberates. Love consoles. Duty energizes.

The Trinity is everywhere.

Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, Nirmanakaya- Buddha Bodies of Reality, Perfect Resource, and Emanation.

The Father, Son/Prophet and Holy Spirit. Time, Gravity, Space. Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti.

Death. Love. Duty.

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