Sacrificing Gender: Kierkegaard and the Traumatic Self

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Abstract

Kierkegaard's authorship is saturated with gender biases. And yet, the ossified conceptions of gender that we find in Kierkegaard's writings are destabilized by his ethical ideal of humanity as a radical equality. This paper will examine the argument that the sacrifice of gender plays a vital function in Kierkegaard's account of human selfhood. Selfhood is not possible without sacrifice. To exist as a human self is to sacrifice one's own conceptions of the existential differences that make each and every one of us the unique individual that we are. We are gendered beings, and we cannot escape the traumatic ambiguity of intimacy and alienation endemic to our gendered existence. We have to sacrifice our gendered conceptions of being human in light of a demand for a radical equality beyond gender differences. This sacrifice of gender is an ethical demand that we can never fulfill because of our gendered existence.

Keywords


1 Introduction

Gender plays an ambiguous role in Søren Kierkegaard's authorship. Kierkegaard insists on essential gender differences, and most of the time he uncritically adopts the gender biases of his time. And yet, throughout the authorship these biases are countered by an insistence on a radical, non-gendered Christian neighborly love for all persons irrespective of their individual differences.
This ambiguity – and at times explicit conflict – between biased and oppressive conceptions of human existence and a radical ethical demand of human equality is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s conception of human selfhood.¹

We cannot escape what we are in that we cannot completely liberate ourselves from our cultural, bodily, and cognitive conditions. It is in this sense that, for Kierkegaard, we have to become the concrete self that we are. We are inherently biased – or, with Kierkegaard’s words, sinful – creatures and trying to ignore or hoping to educate away our biases is not only ethically problematic, but also psychologically damaging. It is ethically problematic because we thereby construct normative guidelines for human behavior that disregard the cultural, bodily, and cognitive conditions that make us the human beings that we are. It is psychologically damaging because following such idealized normative guidelines make us suffer or despair (as Kierkegaard calls it) in that we are trying to become something that we are not Kierkegaard’s existential account of selfhood insists on acknowledging the finite limits that constitute the beings that we are. On the other hand, though, we cannot simply exist as the biased self that we are. For Kierkegaard, we are not only in despair when we want to be someone that we are not, but also when we want to be the self that we are.² We have to become ourselves by liberating ourselves from the finite conditions that constitute our biased self. We cannot, as mentioned, liberate ourselves from these limits by disregarding or educating ourselves out of them. We have to sacrifice ourselves to become ourselves meaning that to become ourselves we need to “die away [afdøe]”³ from the finite selves that we are. In other words, we can only become who we are by sacrificing the intimate parts of ourselves that make us the biased self that we are. Self-sacrifice is integral to Kierkegaard’s radical reformulation of the Christian commandment of neighbor love: we must learn to love that which we do not love. Only through this work of love can we become the self that we are by learning to love our enemies as we love ourselves, that is, learning to love equally.⁴

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¹ As Sylvia Walsh writes: “Indeed, all the problems that plague the interpretation of Kierkegaard generally are heightened and intensified when his writings are scrutinized on the related topics of woman and gender, for on no other topic does the reader encounter more ambiguity and ambivalence, agreement and disagreement, consistency and contradiction in the authorship” (Walsh, Issues that Divide, p. 192). A lot has been written – not surprisingly especially in the last decades of the 20th century when Kierkegaard studies were at a historical peak – about Kierkegaard’s ambiguous view of women. For a good overview of the debate, see Léon/Walsh, Feminist interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard.

² Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 13 et seq.

³ Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 6 (translation modified).

⁴ Kierkegaard, Works of Love, p. 18 et seq.
Kierkegaard deals with many aspects of the existential challenge of selfhood, and his account of selfhood is fascinating and relevant today because he is a master of uncovering the contradictions, biases, self-deceptions, and hypocrisies involved in our attempt to become ourselves. He is, however, not attentive to the biases that condition his own theory. These biases concern important intersectional aspects of human identity such as gender, religion, sexuality, class, and race. I have no intention of defending Kierkegaard. He was a child of his time, and as such his works are saturated with biases and explicit prejudices that can be painful to read today. I do believe, though, that his existential analyses of human selfhood are stronger than his biased conceptions of human identity. We can use Kierkegaard against Kierkegaard to construct viable contemporary perspectives on issues that Kierkegaard himself had rather biased conceptions of. This paper does not pretend to be a contribution to Kierkegaard research narrowly defined as either exegetical, historical or systematic examinations of Kierkegaard’s authorship. Rather, the paper is an attempt to think with Kierkegaard, that is, to critically redeploy or reformulate central aspects of his existential approach to human selfhood in such a way that this approach becomes relevant for debates about human identity today.

In what follows, I will try to show how sacrifice plays a foundational role in Kierkegaard’s existential approach to human selfhood, and how gender is a critical aspect of this sacrificial character of selfhood. Our gender and our gendered perspectives on ourselves, other people, and the world is one of the most intimate aspects of our selfhood, and also one of the most formidable biases that we struggle with in becoming – and allowing others to become – a self. My argument is that a Kierkegaardian approach to the question of selfhood and gender shows that we need to sacrifice our gendered conceptions of gender to become the gendered self that we are and to allow other people to become the gendered self that they are. This sacrifice of gender is a work of love that does not disregard gender or the existential challenges of being gendered, but which nonetheless requires us to acknowledge that only through a radical non-gendered love can we “hide a multitude of sins” that restrict our conception of gender to the biases of our finite understanding of what a human being is.

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5 See Rosfort, Challenging Identity.
6 See Gron, Subjektivitet og negativitet, p. 10 and Gron, Thinking with Kierkegaard.
The pseudonym Victor Eremita opens Kierkegaard’s first book, *Either-Or*, with a laceration of thought that will mark the authorship to come: “It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer”. To exist, for Kierkegaard, is to live a life haunted by the doubt that human life is not what it seems. We live immersed in a palpably conditioned reality into which we have been born without our consent, and with physical features and temperamental dispositions that we have not chosen. As such, we are what we are, and yet we are not at ease with ourselves, but haunted by a spectral doubt, which “like a fleeting shape” has “drifted through your mind now and then. A doubt such as this comes and goes, and no one knows whence it comes or whither it goes”. Later in the authorship, Kierkegaard argues that this haunting doubt stems from a “wound of negativity” that the self inflicts upon herself by striving towards and trying to live with infinity in a finite life. Contrary to a Cartesian doubt that finds ontological rest in the idea of God, thinking of God provides no rest for a Kierkegaardian doubt. While for Descartes the self lives between two ontologically distinct worlds and can find a reflective peace in the immaterial world of mathematical ideas, a Kierkegaardian self cannot – and should not – escape the finite world. It is thus a self constantly wounded by its desire for an infinity that is at odds with the life that it tries to live. While Levinas later calls this “a metaphysical desire for otherness beyond satisfaction”, for Kierkegaard this desire is faith, which is “the highest passion in a human being”, because it is a passion for something that cannot find satisfaction in this life. Because we are bound to and by the necessities of this life, our desire for infinity does not point beyond this life, but lacerates our finite cares and concerns by making us anxious about what to do with that which we care about in this life.

Kierkegaard does not simply state that our lives are haunted by doubt and that this existential doubt is connected with a desire for infinity that wounds our finite existence. He develops his account of human selfhood through meticulous phenomenological examinations of self-experience, which begin with the basic experience that, as Arne Grøns puts it, “[w]e are given to ourselves,

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8 Kierkegaard, *Either-Or*, p. 3.  
9 Kierkegaard, *Either-Or*, p. 3.  
12 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 121 (translation modified).  
yet we do not simply understand ourselves”.14 Self-understanding is challenging because of the inherently ambiguous character of human experience. Our experiential reality is saturated with an inescapable “sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy”15 that Kierkegaard famously examines with the concept of anxiety. In its most radical form, we can feel repulsed by that which we want, and attracted to that which repulses us. On a more humdrum everyday level, anxiety manifests itself as a mood or atmosphere of uncertainty about what we feel, think, and do. It is an experiential destabilization of our existential engagement with the world. Heidegger famously argues that anxiety disturbs our engagement in the world because in anxiety “[t]he discovered innerworldly totality of relevance of what is at hand and what is objectively present is as such completely without importance. It collapses into itself” revealing an “innerworldly nothing and nowhere”.16 Both Heidegger and Kierkegaard identify anxiety as the experience of freedom, but while Heidegger interprets anxiety as an experiential call to a more authentic finite existence in-the-world, Kierkegaard understands anxiety to be the experience of freedom as a laceration of finite facticity, or, as the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson has called it, freedom as “the ontological openness” of the human person.17

Kierkegaard concisely – and enigmatically – defines the human self as spirit, and as such as freedom.18 Anxiety is the experience of “freedom’s possibility”,19 and because possibility is not reality “anxiety and nothing always correspond to each other”.20 Anxiety is the experiential fact that I am not simply what I am. Although I experience myself as a self, my anxiety reveals that I am not at ease with myself because in self-experience I relate myself to the self that I am and thus I can want not to be the self that I am. This does not imply that human freedom is arbitrary. Human freedom is “responsible and oriented”21 because it is situated in the world and thus responds to our facticity. An arbitrary freedom, a liberum arbitrium, is for Kierkegaard “a bad creature of thought”22 because it spins in a cognitive void instead of engaging with the finite challenges that human freedom always finds itself confronted with.

14  Gron, Self-Givenness and Self-Understanding, p. 90.
15  Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 42.
16  Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, p. 186 (my translation).
17  Pareyson, Esistenza e persona, pp. 228–230 (my translation).
19  Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 74 (translation modified).
20  Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 96.
21  Pareyson, Esistenza e persona, p. 230.
22  Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 49 (translation modified).
ontological openness of anxiety is a nothingness experienced in and through our finite cares and concerns. Anxiety is not directed at anything in particular, but is an experiential uneasiness that affects our experience of ourselves, the world, and other people.

Kierkegaard, as we have seen, also calls this anxious experience “the wound of negativity” arguing that while “the others let the wound close and become positive – deceived”\(^\text{23}\) the “subjective existing thinker who has the infinite in his soul”\(^\text{24}\) will always suffer. He “does indeed miss something; he does not derive positive, cozy joy from life”\(^\text{25}\) because of the restlessness of freedom:

To be continually in the process of becoming in this way is the deceitfulness of the infinite in existence. It could bring a sensuous person to despair, for one continually feels an urge to have something finished, but this urge is of evil and must be renounced. The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain.\(^\text{26}\)

The experience of freedom is traumatic. Not because of an anxiety about grounding existence in some kind of finite authenticity, as Heidegger argues,\(^\text{27}\) but because of an anxious striving towards that which I am not. It is a trauma that I inflict upon myself because I either do not want to be the self I am or because I want to be the self that I am.\(^\text{28}\) In both cases, I am too enclosed in myself and busy with trying to heal my existential wound by consolidating my being in the world. The otherness of my existence makes itself known in and through the “ontological openness” in my anxious experience of freedom. Appropriating this otherness, that is, integrating it into my existence requires that I sacrifice constitutive aspects of my self-understanding.

\(^{23}\) Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 85.

\(^{24}\) Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 84.

\(^{25}\) Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 85.

\(^{26}\) Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 86.

\(^{27}\) Anxiety “throws Dasein back upon that about which it is anxious, its authentic ability to be-in-the-world. Anxiety isolates Dasein to its most genuine being-in-the-world, which as understanding essentially projects itself upon possibilities” (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 187; my translation); for a careful interpretation of Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety as an “existential solipsism”, see Pocai, *Heideggers Theorie der Befindlichkeit*, pp. 73–89.

\(^{28}\) Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 13 et seq.
3 The Otherness of Gender

While for Kierkegaard one becomes a self, one is nonetheless born either a woman or a man. Gender is an ossified feature of his otherwise dynamic account of selfhood. Kierkegaard writes in the wake of the scientific “invention of the sexes” in the eighteenth century, and it is therefore not surprising that his otherwise multivocal writings are structured around a binary opposition of male and female. In the early work *The Concept of Anxiety*, which provides the anthropological foundation for the rest of the authorship, Kierkegaard lets the pseudonymous author Vigilius Haufniensis ground gender difference in biology claiming that “[t]hat the woman is more sensuous than the man appears at once in her bodily organization”. Haufniensis leaves the scientific justification of this claim to “physiology”, but he does not hesitate to speculate about the existential implications of the gendered foundation of human identity. He argues, for instance, that esthetically speaking the ideal aspect of a woman is beauty, while her ethical ideal is procreation. The allegedly biological origin of gender differences determines the existential possibilities of the characters that populate Kierkegaard’s writings. His conception of a *natural* relationship between men and women remains unperturbed throughout the authorship and does not differ substantively from the oppressive hierarchical structure that dominated his time. When he chides the women for lacking consistency, disqualifies them from a proper existence because they are merely company for the man and are only able to become free through the man, compares them to children, or lament their essentially dishonest and cunning nature, Kierkegaard’s gender biases are not different from those found in other 19th century misogynist classics such as Charles Darwin’s *The Decent of Man* or Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*.

As mentioned in the beginning, much has been written about Kierkegaard’s gender biases, and while some defend and others denounce his misogynism and essentialist views on gender, most agree that the authorship is pervaded by a deep-seated ambiguity about the existential importance of gender. This is not the place to engage with this debate. For the purpose of this paper, suffice
it to note that I disagree with the prominent feminist reader of Kierkegaard, Wanda Warren Berry, when she argues that Kierkegaard’s essentialist conception of gender is in contradiction with his view of human existence.\textsuperscript{37} I agree with Berry that Kierkegaard is an essentialist with regard to gender, and I do not find convincing attempts to exonerate Kierkegaard from this essentialism.\textsuperscript{38} I do not think, however, that his essentialism contradicts his dynamic account of human selfhood as anxious freedom. On the contrary, our freedom is anxious because of the ineradicable conflict between finite, essential aspects of our existence and the infinite restlessness of our freedom.

For Kierkegaard, gender is a critical aspect of the existential trauma of becoming a self that was examined in the previous section. From the early trauma of weaning that introduces the terrible chasm of separation into the life of the child,\textsuperscript{39} conflict dominates human existence. Growing up the child becomes herself only by destroying the symbiotic relationship with the parent: “If the mother clasps the child, if she hugs it close in her arms that she with her closeness can protect it completely against every danger, in the possibility of being insolent [formaste sig] it is still infinitely far away from her. It is a tremendous distance, a tremendous remoteness”.\textsuperscript{40} In adolescence, the alienating intimacy of sexual desire reveals that there also exists a tremendous remoteness within the person herself. She begins to experience an otherness in herself that she cannot appropriate by herself. As we have seen, the human self is spirit, and the spirit “perceives the sexual as the foreign and as the comic”, because “the sexual is the expression for the tremendous contradiction (Widerspruch) that the immortal spirit is determined as genus. The contradiction expresses itself in the profound shame [Schaam] that conceals this contradiction and does not dare to understand it”.\textsuperscript{41} Sexuality is the experience of alienating remoteness and comic intimacy because of the awareness of being something that we are not. We cannot disavow our sexuality nor can we entirely appropriate it because it elicits a sensuous desire for an otherness that we cannot satisfy ourselves. Sexuality is the uttermost extreme of our sensuousness,\textsuperscript{42} and the more

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\bibitem{37} Berry, \textit{Judge William Judging Woman}, pp. 53–57.
\bibitem{39} Kierkegaard, \textit{Fear and Trembling}, pp. 10–14.
\bibitem{40} Kierkegaard, \textit{Christian Discourses}, p. 62 et seq.
\bibitem{41} Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, p. 69.
\bibitem{42} Kierkegaard here uncritically adopts the bias of his time that the woman is more anxious than the man because she is more sensuous due to her capacity to conceive,
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sensuousness, the more anxiety.\textsuperscript{43} Shame becomes an individual and social escape from dealing with this anxiety by distancing the individual from their sexuality, but a central existential task for a human being is to confront herself with the otherness in herself that makes her anxious. They is a gendered being who must become themselves through a sexuality that they cannot understand nor appropriate. Sexuality awakens anxiety because it is a constant challenge to our freedom by conditioning our choices through sensuous desires that we do not choose.

Human freedom is anxious because the “ontological openness” of existence is molded by the finite conditions of the human self, and gender is one of the most vital aspects of this finitude. We can only become the self that we are by engaging with the experiential manifestations of the otherness of our gendered being. Kierkegaard understands this otherness of gender through the biased prism of his time that, shaped by (pseudo)science and patriarchal heteronormativity, portrays the existential challenges of men and women dramatically different. We need to be keenly aware of the detrimental ways these biased gender differences play out in the authorship, so that we can counter this problematic trajectory in Kierkegaard’s thought with the liberating potential that is also present in his existential account of human selfhood.

One place to find this potential is in Kierkegaard’s argument for sacrificing the existential differences that make us the concrete individuals that we are. Our gender is one such existential difference that binds our freedom to a finitude that we cannot escape. We are not simply free to choose who we are. Because of our gender we already are a self before we become a self. In becoming\textit{who} we are we cannot escape\textit{what} we are. Our gender is an essential dimension of our identity that we struggle with in our endeavor to understand and become ourselves. We cannot appropriate and thus understand our gender, and we cannot be rid of it because it is an integral part of who we are. As such, gender is a constant cause of anxiety, and “[i]n the impotence of anxiety, the individual succumbs, and precisely for that reason he is both guilty and innocent.”\textsuperscript{44}

cf. Kierkegaard,\textit{ The Concept of Anxiety}, p. 64 et seq., see also Laqueur,\textit{ Making Sex}, pp. 207–227 and Kent,\textit{ Gender and History}, p. 16 et seq.

\textsuperscript{43} Kierkegaard,\textit{ The Concept of Anxiety}, p. 72.

\textsuperscript{44} Kierkegaard,\textit{ The Concept of Anxiety}, p. 73 / SKS 4, p. 377.
One of the most remarkable features of Kierkegaard's account of selfhood is his insistence on the complexity of responsibility. The ambiguity of anxiety is at the core of the complex character of responsibility, and gender and sexuality play a vital role in this complexity because of the otherness that they reveal at the heart of human freedom. It is of paramount importance for Kierkegaard that we do not—as it has often been done in the history of Christianity—simply conflate sensuousness and sexuality with sin and sinfulness.\textsuperscript{45} We are not responsible for our gender or for our sexual drives, and as such neither sensuousness nor sexuality are sinful in themselves, but sin is that which makes both sensuousness and sexuality sinful.\textsuperscript{46} This rather enigmatic argument of course demands that we clarify the concept of sin in Kierkegaard's authorship. This would require another paper or probably a book length treatment, since sin is defined and used in various ways throughout the authorship.\textsuperscript{47} For the purposes of my argument, it should be enough to note that sin for Kierkegaard is fundamental to the existential challenge of becoming a self. In the late major work, \textit{Sickness Unto Death}, he defines sin as the despair of, in front of God, not wanting to be oneself or wanting to be oneself,\textsuperscript{48} and in the early work \textit{The Concept of Anxiety} he agrees with the traditional understanding of sin as selfishness. In other words, sin is to be understood through the way the self relates to herself in her relation to other people and to God. Kierkegaard argues that while sin has correctly been explained as selfishness, it often goes unnoticed that this explanation is scientifically and philosophically empty, because selfishness concerns an individual who cannot be explained with scientific categories or philosophical concepts: “For selfishness is precisely the particular, and what this signifies only the individual can know as the single individual, because when it is viewed under universal categories it may signify everything in such a way that it signifies nothing at all”.\textsuperscript{49} Sin is so inherently tied to our individual ways of living our life that we can only hope to make sense of sin through an examination of our own particular selfishness. Reformulating Kierkegaard's argument, we could say that we can only avoid sin by trying to become a self without becoming selfish. Sin makes sensuousness and sexuality sinful through the way the individual relates herself to her sexuality and

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\item \textsuperscript{45} Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, pp. 47, 49, 59, 65, 68, 73, 76, 80.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, p. 73.
\item \textsuperscript{47} For a concise overview of the concept in the authorship, see Stan, \textit{Sin}.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Kierkegaard, \textit{The Sickness Unto Death}, p. 77.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, pp. 77–80.
\end{itemize}
sensuousness in becoming the gendered self that she is. We cannot and should not escape our sexuality or our gendered sensuousness. In this sense, we are born with sexually determined gender differences, and we struggle with a gendered sexuality in becoming ourselves. And yet, becoming a self requires that we sacrifice the selfish inclinations of those very differences that make us the concrete individual self that we are.

A characteristic aspect of gender differences is that we see, categorize, and treat people according to their gender. As such, gender is one of the most significant of our identity markers. Gender structures our self-awareness and our intentional relation to the world and especially to other people through pre-reflective aspects of our experience that according to Kierkegaard are determined by our sexual differences. These sexual differences attune our gendered conception of the world with desires, sensations, emotions, feelings, mood, atmospheres, and emotional qualities that affect our relation to ourselves, other people, and the world. Kierkegaard’s work gains its poetic intensity and phenomenological vigor from its attention to and examinations of these affective resonances of human experience and reflection. However, the affective aspect is not a mere ornament of Kierkegaard’s thought, but vital to his existential transformation of traditional philosophical and theological accounts of what it means to be human. Kierkegaard’s account of human selfhood works in and through the affective nuances of existential challenges.

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50 It is of course not only Kierkegaard who works with a gendered structure of human experience. Major philosophers closer to our own time have also insisted on ineradicable gender differences. Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal inquiry into the female world is structured upon an argument similar to the one found in Kierkegaard: “In truth, to go for a walk with one’s eyes open is enough to note that humanity is divided into two categories of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that they exist with clear evidence” (Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, p. 13). For a careful analysis of Beauvoir’s argument and a defense of a non-biological reading of the sexual differences in Beauvoir, cf. Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, pp. 53–79. Heinämaa herself has developed an interesting transcendental phenomenological argument for how sexual differences structures our perception (Heinämaa, *A Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*). Drawing primarily on Husserl’s analysis of the passive synthesis of sensation, Heinämaa argues that sexual differences are not ontological differences but pre-ontological differences in that they structure experience into two pre-reflective kinds of objectivity, that is, a male and a female objectivity (Heinämaa, *A Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, p. 149). Also Merleau-Ponty works with a bodily grounded account of perception that emphasizes the involuntary, pre-reflective intentionality of the body, e.g. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménoologie de la perception*, p. 592.

51 Theunissen, *Das Menschenbild*, p. 497.
of human identity, that is, the innumerable ways in which our desire, ambition, envy, tiredness, forgiveness, anger, love, satisfaction, patience, joy, anxiety, despair and other basic human sensations, feelings, and emotions challenge our existence in the world. Gender differences constitute an urgent existential challenge. Gender is both an intimate and an alienating part of my selfhood. I cannot simply discard or choose my gender in becoming the self that I am. I am gendered, and yet I am not simply my gender. I can never be at ease with my gender because it represents, as we have seen, an otherness that I anxiously have to appropriate. That is to say, to become myself I have to find a way to live with my gender and with my gendered conception of the world. Gender is therefore both an experiential fact and a normative challenge for the human self.

It is here that Kierkegaard’s radical ethical demand for human equality can provide a surprising take on the existential challenge of gender. Kierkegaard was as mentioned a child of his age and therefore never explicitly deals with the ethical challenge of gender in his authorship. He simply did not see the existential urgency of gender as an ethical problem. In this sense, his conception of human selfhood is still anchored in a pre-modern seabed. What he did have a keen eye for, though, is the way selfishness saturates the existential differences that make us the individuals that we are. Kierkegaard’s conception of human nature is as cynical as it is simple: We are selfish beings. I want to live a good life, and I have a natural inclination towards satisfying my own needs and wants before attending to those of other people. His ethical proposal is as radical as it is simple: to “die away [at afdøe]” from our selfish nature by means of a radical love that does not see existential differences. This is a radical love because it not only loves the neighbor, but also the enemy: “The distinction friend or enemy is a difference in the object of love, but love for the neighbor has the object that is without difference”. A radical love is a demanded loved because it goes against our preferences, that is, our desires and ideas about a good life. It is a love that aims to root out the selfish character of love, and as such it is “self-denial’s love, and self-denial simply drives out all preferential love just as it drives out all self-love – otherwise self-denial would also make distinctions and would nourish a preference for preferential love”.

It is a love that works towards a conception of humanity as equality without differences. Kierkegaard here plays on the ambiguity of the Danish word for humanity “menneskelighed”, the first part of which “menneske” is unambiguously “human”, whereas the latter part “lighed” can mean both “sameness” and

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52 Kierkegaard, Works of Love, p. 67 et seq.
“equality”.54 We identify with people that are like us and thus exclude people who are different from us. This inclination towards “sameness” is an existential fact that challenges my life with other people. Living with other people necessarily confronts me with existential differences or ways of living that I do not like or that I am even repulsed by. It is impossible for me to extricate myself from such dislikes or repulsions because I experience other people through my own existential differences. The only way to counter my existential differences is with the demand of a radical love for human “equality”:

Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal equality in loving, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference. This needs no elaborate development. Equality is simply not to make distinctions, and eternal equality is unconditionally not to make the slightest distinction, unlimitedly not to make the slightest distinction. Preference, on the other hand, is to make distinctions; passionate preference is unqualifiedly to make distinctions.55

This demand of a radical love is not simply a divine command that is imposed upon me. It is a way of seeing or interpreting the “ontological openness” in my being as a demand of infinite love. As Kierkegaard argues: “There is a place in the innermost of human being; from this place flows the life of love […] Love’s hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is an unfathomable connectedness with all existence.”56 It is a radical love because it is at the root – the radix – of our being. The self exists in and through this hidden radical love and to become a self is to make this radical love visible in and through our relation to the other person. This work of love requires sacrifices because it is “self-denial’s love”. It is not a love that denies or wants to eradicate the individual existence of a self for the sake of the common good. Nor is it a love that wants to disregard those very differences that make us the irreplaceable selves that we are. Rather, it is a love that sacrifices the selfishness involved in those differences, that is, the selfish inclinations that are an inescapable part of my existential differences. It is certainly not an easy task because those differences make me the particular self that I am, and it is exactly my anxiety that makes me experience the complexity of this task. Sacrificing my selfishness means sacrificing that which makes me who I am, and as such

56  Kierkegaard, Works of Love, p. 8 et seq.
I feel an instinctive repulsion towards this radical love that makes me who I am by allowing for the otherness that I am.

It is important not to misunderstand Kierkegaard’s notion of sacrifice. Like all of Kierkegaard’s notions it is a dialectical notion meaning that it is constituted by the experiential ambiguity that we saw Kierkegaard exploring with his concept of anxiety. Sacrificing ourselves is not the opposite of affirming ourselves, but self-denial is dialectically entangled with self-affirmation in such a way that we are affirming ourselves by sacrificing ourselves. The complexity of this dialectics is testified by Kierkegaard’s insistence on the beauty and existential necessity of erotic love, his aforementioned insistence on not conflating sensuousness with sin, and his critique of earlier Christian conceptions of sacrifice in the form of the sacrifice of worldly pleasure. Concerning this last point, Johannes Climacus argues in the Postscript:

We must not enter the monastery; we may go out to the amusement park—but, please note, we certainly must first keep in mind the relationship with God by way of the religious middle thought, that a human being is capable of nothing at all. This is what makes life so extremely strenuous; and this is what makes it possible that perhaps all human beings may in truth be the truly religious, because hidden inwardness is true religiousness, the hidden inwardness in the religious person who even uses all his skill in order that no one will detect anything in him. True religiousness, just as God’s omnipresence is distinguishable by invisibility, that is, is not to be seen. The god to whom one can point is an idol, and the religiousness to which one can point is an imperfect kind of religiousness.

Kierkegaard’s notion of sacrifice acknowledges that religious sacrifice in modernity is difficult because the religious and the worldly is more difficult to separate than in earlier times. Working towards a radical equality requires a love that involves self-denial and a “dying away” from ourselves. We need to sacrifice our natural, all to natural self-centered conceptions of basic existential phenomena of life such as love, sexuality, gender, class, religion, hope, joy, and happiness. This does not mean, though, that we should simply sacrifice these phenomena. We should not turn away from the life we are living, but rather live this life to the fullest degree. It is, as Kierkegaard never tires of repeating, our task to become this concrete individual that we actually are. It is exactly this dialectical entanglement of self-denial and self-affirmation that makes the

57 See, for example, Kierkegaard, Works of Love, p. 267.
58 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 474 (translation modified).
notion of sacrifice so difficult not only in Kierkegaard’s works, but in modernity in general. There is no other world to turn to, and for Kierkegaard this means that our existential sacrifice becomes “so extremely strenuous” in that we are – in every moment of every day – faced with the ethical task of becoming a self without becoming selfish. We need to affirm ourselves acknowledging that we are capable of nothing if we do not believe in a love that knows no difference and whose aim is a radical equality that we cannot achieve without sacrificing the self that we want to be.

Gender is one of the most significant existential differences that I have to sacrifice in becoming myself. Few other of my existential differences are a more intimate aspect of my self-experience and thus more ineradicably entangled with my selfishness. My sexuality and sexualized conceptions of gender permeate my experience and understanding of gender meaning that as a gendered being I am involuntarily biased by my sexual desires and sensuous feelings of attraction. Sacrificing these biases is experienced as a sacrifice of gender because my experience of gender is so intractably connected with sexual biases. To sacrifice gender is not and cannot be to cultivate an ungendered love. On the contrary, it is a radical love that sacrifices my sexual biases to make room for the individual otherness of gender differences that make me and other people the gendered selves that we are.

Biography

René Rosfort is trained in philosophy and theology. He got his PhD in 2008 from Centre for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen. For the past decade, he has worked at the Søren Kirkegaard Research Centre first as a postdoc and then eventually as an associate professor. His research interests revolve around human identity and are primarily concerned with philosophical and theological ethics, phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychopathology, and naturalism. Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and Paul Ricoeur are his primary theoretical points of reference.

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