

Article

Challenging Identity: Kierkegaard, Bias, and Intersectionality

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Abstract: Kierkegaard was deeply biased and his philosophy is marred by these biases. The argument of this article is that we need to address Kierkegaard's biases in order to bring out the relevance of his work on human identity in the 21st century. Rather than investigate a specific biased topic, I want to articulate the way in which Kierkegaard's biases present a serious problem for his account of identity, in particular with regard to his concepts of eternity and freedom. I spend the first part of this article examining problems in Kierkegaard's approach to identity before turning to the strengths of his work in the second part. I use Theodor W. Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard and Michael Theunissen's development of this critique to bring out both the weaknesses and the strengths of Kierkegaard's approach to the challenges of human identity.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; bias; intersectionality; identity; freedom; Adorno; Theunissen

1. Getting Kierkegaard Straight

There are many diverging opinions about Kierkegaard and his work. This is not surprising, considering the protean character of the authorship and the intricate interchange between writing and existence that characterizes Kierkegaard's production. As Joakim Garff has poignantly argued: "To identify and hold steady the authentic [*den egentlige*] Kierkegaard amongst the pseudonyms or in the upbuilding authorship is thus as reductionist as it is in vain. The authentic Kierkegaard is inscribed in the totality of his textual production and is thus an author who is underway to himself in his text" (Garff 1995, pp. 340–41).¹ Similarly, Michael Theunissen has argued that there is "not only one Kierkegaard, but many Kierkegaards. One can on the other hand claim that in a certain sense there are no Kierkegaard in that no Kierkegaard would exist [*Bestand hätte*] in himself separate from the tradition" (Theunissen 1996a, p. 26). And still, scholars continue to argue about the real Kierkegaard. For many, he is a Christian thinker whose work becomes meaningless if the Christian foundation is not guiding the reading of his texts (e.g., Kingo 1995; Evans 2009; Walsh 2009; Cappelen 2021); for others, his work is not necessarily bound to Christianity. Kierkegaard can be read as a moral philosopher who helps us to live with religious ideals in a modern world (e.g., Furtak 2005; Stokes 2010; Søltøft 2014; Strawser 2015). Others again read him primarily as an existential philosopher who may be a religious thinker, but whose authorship can be used without explicitly taking into account the religious dimensions of his texts (e.g., Sløk 1978; Theunissen 2005; Grøn 1997; Gonzales 1998; Hansen 2017). How can we get our understanding of Kierkegaard straight, that is, uncover a Kierkegaard not marred by interpretative biases? I would follow the argument by Garff and Theunissen that we cannot, while adding that this is a good thing. I consider it a strength of Kierkegaard's work rather than a weakness that it provokes various and often conflicting interpretations.

It seems impossible to decide when a reading is biased and when it is not, for what reason or reasons a reading would be biased, and not least what an unbiased reading of Kierkegaard would look like. Taking a cue from the prominent Shakespeare scholar Emma Smith's argument about Shakespeare's contemporary relevance, one could argue that one of the defining characteristics of Kierkegaard's texts is their "sheer and permissive gappiness" (Smith 2019, pp. 1–16). That is to say, readings of Kierkegaard's works cannot



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be straight in that they must navigate in and through the ambiguous, questioning, and sometimes inconsistent character of the texts. Kierkegaard's texts—just as Shakespeare's texts—are queer and thus constantly prompting reinterpretation, and I would argue that this very feature, this queer “gappiness”, is an important aspect of that which attracts us to his work and continues to make it relevant.

The question of bias understood as unconscious or unarticulated preferences and dislikes is fundamental both to our approach to Kierkegaard and to Kierkegaard's work itself. Becoming aware of, articulating, and acknowledging our own biases is a hermeneutical task when we try to make sense of and appropriate Kierkegaard's texts. With regard to Kierkegaard's work, I think that one can safely say that a principal concern of the authorship is to make us aware of biases in the form of camouflaged selfishness, hypocrisy, self-deceptions, unacknowledged envy, unconscious despair, and repressed anxieties. Biases wound our reflection, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, making us think and behave in ways that are deleterious to ourselves and others. Ricoeur is referring to Freud, whose work he considers an important factor in the deconstruction of our Enlightenment faith in human reason as pure and disinterested and thereby changing our conception of human nature from a fact into a question. He writes:

Thus I understand the Freudian metapsychology as an adventure of reflection, the dispossession of consciousness is its path, because the act of becoming conscious is its task. But it is a wounded Cogito [*un Cogito blessé*] that results from this adventure—a Cogito that posits itself but does not possess itself; a Cogito that sees its original truth only in and through the avowal of the inadequacy, illusion, and lying of actual consciousness. (Ricoeur 1977, p. 439)

Ricoeur famously regroups Freud with Marx and Nietzsche in what he calls “the school of suspicion”, united by their “common opposition to the phenomenology of the sacred, understood as a propaedeutic to the “revelation” of meaning” and by using their “destructive critique” in service of “the invention of an art of interpreting” (Ricoeur 1977, pp. 32, 33). The suspicion proposed by these thinkers is not merely aimed at the destruction of idols, traditional norms and values, and ossified conceptions of religion; it is a constructive endeavor to liberate human imagination as “the upsurge of the possible” (Ricoeur 1977, p. 36). It is surprising that Ricoeur does not include Kierkegaard in this school of suspicion, seeing that elsewhere in the same period he writes perceptively on Kierkegaard's thought (Ricoeur 1992a, 1992b). I would argue that Kierkegaard does indeed belong to this school of suspicion, as his negativistic method (Theunissen 1981; Grøn 1997)² and persistent deconstruction of traditional conceptions of the sacred throughout the authorship culminate with the attack on the church provoked by the pastor and theology professor Hans Lasse Martensen's sanctimonious elevation of Bishop Mynster as a “Truth-Witness” (Kierkegaard 1998a, pp. 3–7/SKS 14, pp. 123–26³; Kirmmse 1990, pp. 449–51; Garff 2005, pp. 727–40). Kierkegaard is a master at uncovering biases; yet, as we will see momentarily, his work on human identity is itself fraught with biases, as were the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. The most problematic of these biases concern fundamental aspects of human identity such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion. One might legitimately question whether in light of these biases of the authorship we can use Kierkegaard to think about and hopefully engage with contemporary challenges of human identity.

The argument of this article is that Kierkegaard's work has a great deal to contribute with regarding the challenges of human identity today. I will attempt to show how to approach Kierkegaard in such a way that we can put his texts to work on those topics that he himself had biased conceptions of. I will not investigate a specific biased topic, but rather articulate how Kierkegaard's biases present a serious problem for his account of identity. I will spend the first part of the article examining problems in Kierkegaard's approach to identity. My argument for doing this is that articulating the systematic significance of Kierkegaard's biases will allow us to better understand how Kierkegaard's approach to identity can contribute to work on human identity in the 21st century. In the next three sections, I unfold this argument using Theodor Adorno's seminal critique of Kierkegaard

along with Michael Theunissen's development of this critique and together with the analytical tool of intersectionality. This examination can be considered a kind of negative hermeneutics that allows us to better see and put to use the strengths of Kierkegaard's authorship.⁴ In the concluding two sections, I then outline how—despite his biases and the resulting systematic weaknesses—we can use Kierkegaard's work to engage in contemporary debates about the challenges of human identity. Both Adorno and Theunissen are particularly critical of Kierkegaard's abstract concept of freedom and his grounding of the human self in a religious notion of transcendence. I try to show how Kierkegaard's abstract or empty concept of freedom is, despite its weaknesses, one of the major strengths of Kierkegaard's approach to human identity. I use Kierkegaard's concept of existence to make sense of this seemingly paradoxical argument, showing how his queering of Christian faith allows for an existential conception of freedom that makes his work highly relevant for the discussion of human identity today.

2. Kierkegaard's Biases

In 1933 Adorno published his seminal *Kierkegaardbuch* (Adorno 1989). This was Adorno's first book, and it is the least dialectical book in his vast authorship. In fact, it is an unequivocal onslaught on Kierkegaard's work and on existential philosophy in general. On par with Georg Brandes' critical biography half a century before, in 1877 (Brandes 1877), Adorno's book seems to have been written in order to impede Kierkegaard's influence more than anything else.⁵ Just as Brandes notes that Kierkegaard's "lack of a sense for the historical development becomes a lack of a sense of reality in relation to his time" (Brandes 1877, pp. 215–16), Adorno famously argues that Kierkegaard's ethics is contentless. His argument is that this moral emptiness is caused by Kierkegaard's idealistic contempt for the material conditions of human life, and culminates in his conception of human existence as "objectless inwardness" (Adorno 1989, pp. 27–30). For Adorno, the primary problem with Kierkegaard's concept of existence is that it makes him insensitive to the concrete problems that a person faces in becoming a self as well as to the challenges of his contemporary environment. His complete lack of "class consciousness" and disregard of "socioeconomic interrelationships" makes him blind to the inherently oppressive structures of his own ethics (Adorno 1989, p. 49).

Adorno perceptively shows how Kierkegaard's ethical universality does not involve everybody, "blacks and female singers" (Adorno 1989, p. 49; translation slightly modified), for example, are left out, and systemic poverty is explained away as existentially irrelevant (Adorno 1989, pp. 49–50). Adorno provides a cogent summary of his critique that deserves to be quoted in full:

Society contracts to the circumference of free "neighbors", while precisely its necessities are shunted aside as "accidental" from the gates of philosophy. Freedom determines the self, which Kierkegaard conceives exclusively in its freedom, just as it determines society. If the material necessities of society are denied in the name of freedom, the necessities and reality of the instincts vanish from the self according to the same scheme. Kierkegaard's absolute self is mere spirit. The individual is not the sensuously developed person, and no property is accorded him beyond the bare necessities. Inwardness does not consist in its fullness, but is ruled over by an ascetic spiritualism. (Adorno 1989, p. 51)

Adorno's book is a gem of insights into Kierkegaard's work and reveals a profound knowledge of and familiarity with Kierkegaard's texts. The book has nonetheless been criticized for misrepresenting most aspects of Kierkegaard's thought. (Nordentoft 1973; Bukdahl 1981, pp. 100–23; Grøn 1997, pp. 83–84).⁶ I do not enter into this debate here. For the purposes of the present article, the principal value of the book is Adorno's articulation of serious problems in Kierkegaard's existential project that any Kierkegaard reader who wants to use Kierkegaard to engage with contemporary issues needs to deal with. Irrespective of whether Adorno is actually criticizing Kierkegaard or creating a straw man for his critique of existential philosophers more generally, such as Heidegger (Morgan 2003), or

whether he is rather criticizing latent problems in Kierkegaard's work that later become more explicit in Heidegger's existential ontology (Šajda 2012, pp. 30–35), Heiko Schulz' position on the matter remains adequate today: "Adorno's points of critique have not lost their provocative stimulation in the context of a discussion of the political as well as the social-ethical aspects and problems of Kierkegaard's work" (Schulz 1999, p. 232). Adorno's critique brings attention to Kierkegaard's lack of engagement with the concrete challenges that the individual faces as an embodied person situated in a society structured by socio-economic processes and political interests. It is an approach to human existence that promotes what Peter E. Gordon has called a "philosophy of bourgeois interiority" (Gordon 2016, p. 4). Approaching human identity from the comfortable living room at the *belle étage* does not take seriously enough the impact of identity markers such as gender, ability, citizenship, sexuality, age, race, normality, and class. It thus risks constructing an explicitly skewed account of human identity based on a combination of Christian, ethnocentric, patriarchal, and heteronormative biases, and a pervasive ignorance of the existential significance of social inequality.

I find it difficult, and not particularly interesting, to defend Kierkegaard on specific charges of misogyny, racism, ageism, classism, and not least religious bias. The authorship is saturated with offensive and stereotyping views on women, children, people of other races and religions, and poor and uneducated people, of which I will provide a few examples. In the *Concept of Anxiety*, we read that women and children are most beautiful when they sleep, whereas the beauty of a man is in his facial expression because this is where spirit manifest itself (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 65–66/SKS 4, pp. 369–70). In *Stages on Life's Way*, Quidam teaches us that reflection for a woman is like candy for a child; a little amount tempts, but too much and it loses its attraction (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 252/SKS 6, p. 252). Earlier in the same book, in "In Vino Veritas", Constantin tells us that while it would be shameful for a man to utter nonsense or do frivolous things, a woman has a "primordial privilege" to speak and act in nonsensical ways (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 51/SKS 6, p. 49). Less than a page later, Constantin manages to bring his misogyny to a new level by adding a distasteful drop of racism. Here we learn that the only reason Shakespeare could have conceived Othello as a tragedy is because Othello is a colored man. A homicide caused by jealousy is not tragic for a white man, merely ridiculous, because it is beneath his intellect and thus renders him a fool. Constantin's concluding argument is so ludicrous that it demands to be quoted in full for the sake of intellectual honesty on part of a person who gets paid for spreading the word of Kierkegaard:

That Shakespeare has interpreted Othello as tragic (even apart from the unfortunate catastrophe that Desdemona is innocent) can be explained, but also absolutely justified, only by Othello's being a colored man. For a colored man, dear drinking companions, who cannot be assumed to represent spirit [*Aand*], a colored man, dear drinking companions, who then becomes green in his face when he becomes angry (which is a physiological fact), a colored man can indeed become tragic by being deceived by a woman, just as the woman has the whole pathos of tragedy on her side when she is deceived by the man. A man who turns red in the face would perhaps be tragic, but a man of whom we dare demand spirit [*Aand*] either does not become jealous or in becoming that becomes comic, and most of all if he comes running with a dagger. (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 50/SKS 6, p. 50)

In addition to these problematic aspects of the authorship, it is no secret that Kierkegaard had rather discriminating and potentially harmful views on non-Christian people, in particular pagans and Jews. A long book has been written on Kierkegaard's antisemitism that is unpleasant to read (Tudvad 2010), and while Kierkegaard's views on poor and uneducated people are more well-meaning, they are painfully romanticized and harmfully stereotyping (Bukdahl 2001).

One can try to explain, if not justify, these cringe-inducing views with the pseudonyms, irony, the historical period, the dramatic context (e.g., Constantin is at a lively party

addressing his drinking companions), perhaps even with Danish *hygge*,⁷ however, as already stated I am not interested in defending Kierkegaard. I find it more interesting to try to reflect upon the systematic impact of such biases on his account of human identity. This is what Adorno did in his book, and I want to follow Adorno's lead in looking at the way in which Kierkegaard's biases are connected with what Michael Theunissen has convincingly argued to be a serious weakness in his concept of freedom. Contrary to Adorno, though, I do think that Kierkegaard's existential approach to identity has something important to offer that we can use in the attempt to make sense of human identity today. My approach to Kierkegaard, as was Theunissen's approach from which it takes its cue, is more dialectical than Adorno's unilateral critique. As mentioned, I believe that acknowledging the limits of Kierkegaard's account allows us to better understand and put to use the strengths of his analysis of the challenges that every one of us struggles with in trying to become ourselves. One way of articulating these limits is to put Kierkegaard's approach in contact with an intersectional approach to identity.

3. Intersectionality

Intersectionality has become a buzzword both inside and outside of academia over the past decade. It is a central instrument in the toolbox of identity politics, and it has both been welcomed as a much needed theoretical and practical approach in the fight against systemic discrimination and biases, and attracted harsh criticism for being an "assemblage of negatives" that "leads to absurdity and contradiction at every turn" (Scruton 2019) and for having "zero utility in the world" (Gray 2019). The theoretical coining of the concept began in the early 1990s, especially with the pioneering work of Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1991), although intersectional work already played a significant role in the social movement activism of the 1960s and 1970s (Roth 2021). The concept of intersectionality was coined to deal with a systematic flaw in identity politics, conceived as the fight for political and social rights for individuals whose collective identities are marginalized, oppressed, or ignored in a given political system (Heyes 2020). As Crenshaw argues:

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race or class. (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1242)

Bringing awareness to and securing analytical space for the explanatory importance of differences in our collective identities is the primary agenda of intersectionality. The principal theoretical aim of intersectionality is the examination of interlocking systems of oppression, and an important aspect of this examination is to make sense of and work with the ways collective identities are vulnerable to biases and unacknowledged forms of discrimination. An intersectional analysis understands identity markers such as race, sexuality, class, gender, nationality, citizenship, age, ethnicity, and ability as inherently interrelated and mutually shaping each other. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge put it in their recent introduction to the concept:

Intersectionality recognizes that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, and yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific ways that we experience this bias. For example, men and women of different races can experience sexism differently, and so on. Intersectionality highlights these aspects of individual experience that we may not notice. (Collins and Bilge 2020)

The authors continue to explain intersectionality as a critical tool that can be used in various ways and for various purposes, and that an intersectional analysis normally is characterized by six core ideas. It is animated by concrete situations of (1) social injustice, and aims at producing (2) more socially just societies. This intersectional work towards

social justice examines (3) intersecting power relations in a (4) social context, with a focus on (5) relationality and (6) complexity. In an intersectional approach to a social problem, truth is not disconnected from social justice concerns, which means that the critical inquiry undertaken by an intersectional analysis cannot and is not meant to be solved theoretically; it necessarily involves practical engagement with the concrete issues that sparked the intersectional analysis in the first place. The focus on relationality and complexity means that an intersectional analysis is rarely, if ever, completed. Investigating one issue leads to another, and the demand of complexity requires that an intersectional approach constantly tries to expose and examine how forms of systematic oppression intersect to impede the flourishing of a human life. One of the fundamental arguments of intersectionality, and the argument that I think is most relevant in relation to Kierkegaard's approach to identity, is that there are always interlocking factors of unacknowledged biases and hidden discriminations that impair an individual's freedom to become herself, that is, who she is, who she feels like, or who she wants to be.

In the next section, I will—with the help of Michael Theunissen's work on Kierkegaard—try to articulate how Kierkegaard's account of human selfhood does not take the existential impact of biases seriously enough, and that this limit to his analysis of human selfhood presents severe problems for his approach to human identity.

4. Becoming Oneself

It is well-known that Kierkegaard was not fond of the political upheaval of his time (Nordentoft 1973; Kirmmse 1990, pp. 409–22; Westphal 1991, pp. 29–42; Garff 2005, pp. 486–90). He opens the appendix to *The Point of View* with a complaint that probably resonates with many people who try to make sense of intersectionality and 21st century identity politics: “In these times everything is politics” (Kierkegaard 1998b, p. 103/SKS 16, p. 83). The argument that Kierkegaard subsequently unfolds is not, however, one that we usually find in the debate about identity politics today. Kierkegaard argues that turning everything into politics is problematic because it is politically impossible to think through, let alone realize, the fundamental Christian idea of treating human beings as individuals who are essentially equal (*Menneske-lighed*) (Kierkegaard 1998b, pp. 103–4/SKS 16, pp. 83–84). Politics is of and about a world of individual differences, and as such it cannot escape the inequalities that unmistakably characterize human existence. The sheer amount of worldly differences makes it impossible to know what the times actually demand. Everyone wants something different. It is much easier, Kierkegaard argues, to know that what the times need are eternal demands, not fluctuating earthly ones. In fact, “the religious is eternity's clarified [*forklarede*] rendition of the most beautiful dream of politics”, and the religious is actually what “a politician, provided he actually loves being a human being and loves humankind, has thought in his most blissful moment, even if he will find the religious too lofty and too ideal to be practical” (Kierkegaard 1998b, p. 103/SKS 16, p. 83; translation modified). The problem with politics is that politicians try to realize their ideals in and through the concrete challenges of worldly differences. The world is constituted by different people, and these individual differences inescapably lead to inequalities that cannot be resolved with a politics constructed upon differences. Kierkegaard's point of view is therefore unambiguous: the religious is “worlds apart from (*toto coelo*)” politics, because politics remains in the earthly world of differences, while the religious “wants to transfigure and then to lift the earthly to heaven” (Kierkegaard 1998b, p. 103/SKS 16, p. 83). His specific critique of politics contains several points that are critical for my argument in what follows, and I therefore quote the passage in full:

No politics has been able, no politics is able, no worldliness has been able, no worldliness is able to think through or to realize to the ultimate consequences this idea: human equality [*Menneske-Lighed*]. To achieve perfect equality in the medium of “world-likeness” [*Verds-Lighed*], that is, in the medium that by nature is difference [*Forskellighed*], and to achieve it in a “world-like” [*verds-ligt*], that is, differentiating way, is eternally impossible, as one can see by the categories. If

perfect equality [*Lighed*] should be achieved, then “worldliness” would have to be completely eradicated, and when perfect equality is achieved, “worldliness” [*Verdslighed*] ceases to be. But is it not, then, like an obsession, that worldliness has gotten the idea of wanting to force perfect equality and to force it in a worldly way—in worldliness! Ultimately only the essentially religious can with the help of eternity effect human equality, the godly, the essential, the not-worldly, the true, the only possible human equality; and this is also why—be it said to its glorification—the essentially religious is the true humanity [*det Religiøse den sande Menneskelighed*]. (Kierkegaard 1998b, pp. 103–4/SKS 16, pp. 83–84; translation modified)

Kierkegaard constructs his argument in this passage upon the ambiguity of the Danish word for humanity, “*menneskelighed*”. The first part, “*menneske*”, unequivocally means “human”, while the latter part, “*lighed*”, can mean both “likeness” and “equality”. Kierkegaard’s recourse to eternity and his argument that “true humanity” is essentially religious, is central to Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s idealistic disregard for the material necessities of an embodied human self situated in a specific socioeconomic context. Kierkegaard’s equation of self, spirit, and freedom throughout the authorship, and his final systematized account in *The Sickness unto Death* (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 13, 29/SKS 11, pp. 129, 145) promotes, according to Adorno, a gnostic concept of freedom that arrives at eternity through “a merciless mythical calculus with the loss of the living person” (Adorno 1989, p. 111; translation modified). I believe, and argue later, that Kierkegaard’s concept of freedom is more dialectically complex than Adorno gives him credit for; in the concluding section, I try to show that it is exactly in the ambiguity of humanity, *Menneskelighed* as both likeness and equality, that we find the contemporary relevance of Kierkegaard’s account of identity. I nevertheless agree with Adorno that Kierkegaard’s normative conception of our “true, positive freedom” (Kierkegaard 1987b, p. 174/SKS 3, p. 169; see also Grøn 2019) risks producing a conception of human identity that neglects the internal and external limits of human autonomy in the name of eternal equality.

Kierkegaard’s concept of freedom is dialectical in that it incorporates passivity into the voluntary aspects of subjectivity in terms of history, temporality, the body, and divine commands (e.g., Grøn 2013; Evans 2004, pp. 180–202); however, his normative ideal of “true, positive freedom” presupposes that we are capable of exerting our freedom to become ourselves in our engagement with the world. Failing this normative demand of freedom, we make ourselves unfree, and thus expose ourselves to the terrible forms of despair that Kierkegaard masterfully analyzes in his works. The concept of eternity that Kierkegaard contraposes to the political obsession with timely demands becomes a tool that allegedly allows us to work ourselves free of the worldly differences that impair our autonomy. This is what Adorno dismissively calls Kierkegaard’s “theology of sacrifice” (Adorno 1989, p. 108). It is a theology that makes his concept of existence mythical in its sacrifice of worldly hope for the sake of the hope of eternity that can return the human being to its primordial place with God (Adorno 1989, pp. 108–10). In other words, Kierkegaard’s concept of existence is inherently mythical because the insistence on resting “transparently in the power that posited it” (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 14/SKS 11, p. 130; translation modified) produces an abstract account of an autonomous self unmarred by the plight of worldly differences (Adorno 1989, pp. 73–78).

Michael Theunissen develops Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard, which despite (or perhaps because of) its incisiveness can border on the lapidary.⁸ Theunissen uses Kierkegaard’s concept of despair to provide a much more detailed analysis of Kierkegaard’s idealistic concept of freedom than the one found in Adorno, arguing that Kierkegaard essentially disregards the passivity involved in human suffering by maintaining that “a despair worthy of its name is only an act” (Theunissen 2005, p. 69). His argument is that Kierkegaard’s account of selfhood, particularly in *The Sickness Unto Death*, holds that a human being can only be a self by actively becoming a self. As is well-known, for Kierkegaard despair is the most excruciating form of human suffering because in despair a human being struggles

with herself. There are three basic forms of despair: not knowing to have a self, which is inauthentic despair, and two forms of authentic despair, namely, not wanting to be herself (despair of weakness) or wanting to be herself (despair of defiance) (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 13, 29/SKS 11, pp. 129, 145). Theunissen argues that while Kierkegaard claims that the two forms of authentic despair can be mutually reduced to each other,⁹ he nonetheless privileges the despair of defiance (Theunissen 2005, p. 13). This priority of the despair of defiance reveals the basic theological foundation of Kierkegaard's account of selfhood. We do not want to accept the self that we have been created to be, and we ultimately despair because we want to be something else than what God wants us to be. Theunissen therefore claims, "To will to be rid of oneself is the end in the sense that it is simultaneously the whole. It is what all despair ultimately amounts to. For we want to get rid of ourselves even when we want to be what we are not" (Theunissen 2005, p. 20).

As for Adorno before him, Theunissen is deeply skeptical of this theological grounding of the human self, and his book is an attempt to "correct"¹⁰ Kierkegaard's theory in such a way that Kierkegaard becomes "more rational" (Theunissen 1996b). While it is not Theunissen's intention to simply eradicate the theological elements of Kierkegaard's account of the self, he will only accept Kierkegaard's theology "insofar as it has been secured argumentatively" (Theunissen 1996b, p. 64). Correcting Kierkegaard's theological mistakes strengthens the valid theology present in Kierkegaard's work, which is a theology "purified of its quasi-Platonic two-world doctrine" (Theunissen 2005, p. 83). We should not do away with God, Theunissen argues, but "anchor him deeper in the foundation of the theory" (Theunissen 2005, p. 83) by destroying Kierkegaard's metaphysical conception of the eternal as dualistically opposed to the temporal. This will bring out a different theology, namely "the theology of not being in despair and of being in despair" (Theunissen 1996b, p. 89). This is a theology that is not metaphysically imposed on a human being, and which grows out of human experience, especially temporal experience (Theunissen 1991, pp. 339–55).¹¹

Theunissen believes that the metaphysical vestiges in Kierkegaard's conception of human selfhood and his idealistic understanding of despair as basically not wanting to be the self that we are created to be has little relevance in a contemporary secular context (Theunissen 2005, p. 83). We must use Kierkegaard against Kierkegaard, employing his analysis of despair to bring out the "unorthodox idea of God" that permeates the authorship. We can no longer simply posit God as the onto(theo)logical foundation for human existence or use God as a metaphysical guarantee for the separation of the religious and the worldly, which Kierkegaard has the tendency to do throughout the authorship. Rather, we must follow the argumentative thread in Kierkegaard's analysis of human despair that arrives at a conception of God as the eternal for which everything is possible. This non-metaphysical theology of temporality is actually present in Kierkegaard's work, though it is overshadowed by the metaphysical elements of his Christianity and idealistic heritage (Theunissen 2005, pp. 116–18; Theunissen 1996b, pp. 88–90).

Theunissen develops Adorno's unambiguous critique into a more dialectical critique that tries to "correct" problematic aspects of Kierkegaard's conception of human selfhood by articulating the implicit strengths of his theory. There are many complex and controversial aspects of Theunissen's "correction" of Kierkegaard's concept of selfhood, and his critique of Kierkegaard has garnered commentaries of its own.¹² What is important in the present context is the way in which Theunissen's critique of Kierkegaard's metaphysical conception of Christianity provides dialectical substance to Adorno's rather terse critique of Kierkegaard's theology of sacrifice. Theunissen argues that the problem with Kierkegaard's idealism stems from the vestiges of a metaphysical conception of God as removed from this world, the return to which thus requires an almost platonic sacrifice of the world and worldly concerns. This means that Kierkegaard's understanding of human despair ultimately becomes "cruel" and "inhuman" because of the "tyrannical" prohibition of despair (Theunissen 1996b, p. 78). Despair is sin, as Anti-Climacus promptly states in the second part of *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 75–131/SKS 11, pp. 189–

242), which means that to despair is a revolt against God. We thus sin when we despair. Theunissen convincingly shows that Kierkegaard's theological conception of despair ends up making us entirely responsible for our despair. While we are of course allowed to suffer, we must not despair, because to despair is to have lost our faith in God, and in the religious fact that for God everything is possible. Kierkegaard makes selfhood identical with faith, Theunissen argues (Theunissen 1991, pp. 352–55), which means that it is our fault if we lose our faith in ourselves and plunge into despair because we do not want to be the self that God has created us to be. Theunissen finds this account of human despair both problematic and outright harmful, because it explicitly ignores the passivity constitutive in human despair.

In contrast to Kierkegaard, Theunissen argues that we despair not because of something we want, but because of something that happens to us (what Theunissen calls "Widerfahrnis"). While we can find traces of this basic passivity of human despair in Kierkegaard's analysis, his "official account" of despair does not incorporate this primordial passivity:

[H]is language testifies to a defined originality, the originality of an experience which as such is something that happens to oneself [*eine Widerfahrnis ist*]. Kierkegaard's official account does not descend to this origin. A despair to which something bad has happened and which for that reason also happens itself is more original than one that merges into the execution of one's own existence [*Dasein*] and is more original than the most original mode of this deficiency, in despair not to will to be oneself. (Theunissen 2005, pp. 48–49; translation modified)

Of particular interest here is Theunissen's argument that while Kierkegaard's language registers the inescapable passivity of suffering, his "official" account goes in another direction. As mentioned earlier, Theunissen discloses this basic passivity through an examination of what he calls Kierkegaard's "negativism" or "negativistic method". He argues convincingly that Kierkegaard never posits a normative ideal of what it means to be a healthy human self, instead adopting an approach that learns "from the sick self what a healthy self is" (Theunissen 1981, p. 389). The human self is not *something* or *someone*—a law-abiding citizen, a good Christian, a decent person—that it has to become; it is a single individual who tries to become herself, struggling with that which she is not or does not want to be. While I return to this negative approach to human identity in the concluding section, what is important in this context is to note that it is this dialectical awareness that makes Theunissen's critique more than merely a development of Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard. He does not simply reject Kierkegaard's account of human selfhood; rather, he tries to correct it in such a way that Kierkegaard's metaphysical presuppositions, that is, his ontotheological conception of God and his idealistic conception of freedom, do not smother the strengths of the existential analysis of human identity present in the authorship.

In the next two sections, I try to show that if we address and take seriously Kierkegaard's biases and the problems of his account of human identity, his authorship can provide important resources for working with the challenges of human identity today.

5. From Eternity over Politics and Back to Existence

In this third decade of the 21st century identity has become more challenging than ever, and the distance from Kierkegaard's conception of eternal equality to lived equality has grown dramatically. We have become aware that there are more ways of being human than were ever dreamt of in Western philosophy and theology. This increasing recognition of human beings in their diverse identities has revealed the precarious nature of our conception of reality and the inherently oppressive character of many of our time-hallowed norms and values. It has become obvious that only by challenging our conception of reality can we give a voice to those whose identity has not been allowed to exist in this reality. Judith Butler cogently captures this dialectic between reality and unreality:

To intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality, and to use, as it were, one's

unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim. I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification. (Butler 2004, p. 21)

This rattling of the norms and values of human identity encourages us to rethink our understanding of what it means to be human, thereby expanding our understanding of reality. Intersectionality teaches us that with increased recognition of different identities become visible interlocking systems of unacknowledged biases that limit a person's existential possibilities. Too many people suffer from not being able to exist as the individual persons that they experience themselves to be. Our understanding of human identity remains fraught with, among others, religious, social, economic, sexual, gender, and class biases that impoverish our shared reality. We exclude people in the name of equality because our conceptions of what make human beings equal are blind to the existential differences that make humans human. We learn from intersectionality that it is not enough to merely analyze and reflect upon the ways these biases impair a person's autonomy; we need to engage in an activist struggle to do something about them. In other words, we need politics to understand the challenges of human identity. Identity politics in some form is necessary, and we need to take seriously the lessons from identity politics in our work with Kierkegaard's existential account of human identity.

Intersectionality pushes us "to think constructively as Kierkegaardians about where we find ourselves in the world today," as argued by J. Aaron Simmons in an excellent recent article about how Kierkegaard can contribute to contemporary identity politics. (Simmons 2021, p. 2). While I agree that we should put Kierkegaard to use with regard to contemporary issues, I do not think that we should do this as Kierkegaardians in the way that Simmons does in his article. Simmons's article is a defense of Kierkegaard against the Adornian critique that Kierkegaard disregards "embodied historical existence" (Simmons 2021, p. 5). Simmons is right that Kierkegaard may not suffer from "identity blindness" or reject all alliances as products of "the worldly logic of self-love"; however, as I have argued in this article, his account of human identity is deeply biased and works with a seriously flawed conception of freedom that does not pay sufficient attention to the way history, society, biology, and other people influence and limit our autonomy. Moreover, I do not find convincing Simmons' argument for Kierkegaard's ontotheological separation of the eternal and the worldly in terms of, on the one hand, an intersectional understanding of identity "as a structural reality" and, on the other, a Kierkegaardian understanding of identity "as a religious reality". I think—along with Adorno and Theunissen—that it is exactly these vestiges of dualisms in Kierkegaard's authorship that we can use intersectionality and identity politics to address critically. Dichotomies such as "religious" and "worldliness", "body" and "soul", "time" and "eternity", "woman" and "man", "god" and "human", which are fundamental to Kierkegaard's thought about human identity, need to be deconstructed or at least rattled in order to bring out the biases of the theological, philosophical, and sociocultural traditions in which Kierkegaard's authorship is situated. It is no longer possible to believe that we can become the self that we are created to be simply by anchoring our existence in a religiously founded "religious reality". Life has changed dramatically since Kierkegaard thought about what it means to be human, and we cannot find shelter from this secular development in Kierkegaard's works. If we try to find the true Kierkegaard only to show that his theories are right on all or most accounts, we risk losing the actual contemporary relevance of Kierkegaard's works. Rather, we must make Kierkegaard more rational, as Theunissen argues (Theunissen 1996b), or at least be willing to use contemporary approaches to human identity such as intersectionality to become aware of and deal with the biases that haunt Kierkegaard's authorship. Acknowledging and bringing out the biases that limit Kierkegaard's authorship allows us to find arguments in his texts that work against these very biases.

Worldly differences do limit human autonomy. We do not ourselves issue or completely control the norms and values that render possible, guide, and limit our choices. In this sense, Adorno is right. Kierkegaard's conception of freedom is severely limited, and it does not pay sufficient attention to the biological, social, and political factors that condition human autonomy. Kierkegaard's conviction that "Xnty [Christianity] is political indifferentism: concerned with what is higher, it teaches subservience to all authority" (Kierkegaard 2015, p. 165/SKS 24, p. 167) reflects a blind spot in his existential approach to human identity. The twentieth century has taught us to be suspicious of such authoritarian demands, and Adorno has played a notable role in making us aware of the dangers of authority. In the wake of World War II, he writes in *Minima Moralia*:

It is the signature of our age that no one, without exception, can now determine his own life within even a moderately comprehensible framework, as was possible earlier in the assessment of market relationships. In principle everyone, however powerful, is an object [. . .] The objective end of humanity [*Humanität*] is only another expression for the same thing. It signifies the individual as individual, in representing the species of humanity [*Gattungswesen*], has lost the autonomy through which he might realize the species. (Adorno 2005, pp. 37–38; translation modified)

Kierkegaard's "theology of sacrifice", with its insistence on averting our eyes from the existential differences responsible for worldly inequality and instead opting for an eternity that makes us truly human, risks becoming a reactionary countermovement to the necessary deconstruction of traditional ideals of human equality. These ideals express norms and values concerning rationality, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, and class that in the name of an abstract conception of equality continue to oppress and discriminate innumerable human beings whose existence differs from the established norms of how to be human and live a human life. Kierkegaard's argument that everyone is capable of living a good life by faithfully becoming the self that they have been created to be has emptied "the normative representation of the human being", turning the self in the tautology "I am what I am" (Theunissen 1996a, p. 26). In this way, Theunissen argues, Kierkegaard "does not broaden our horizon, but drives us into a narrow confinement" (Theunissen 1996a, p. 26). Kierkegaard does indeed risk confining our understanding of human existence to an abstract product by insisting on a subservient religiousness that, through an act of faith, can bring about "the perfect equality" that is our "true humanity" (Kierkegaard 1998b, pp. 103–4/SKS 16, pp. 83–84).

Like his idealist predecessors, Kierkegaard's work is an attempt to reconfigure the theological tradition by incorporating the Enlightenment critique of religion into his approach to Christianity. His most original contribution to this collective endeavor to make Christianity philosophically respectable is the existential transformation of key concepts of the Christian theological tradition such as love, hope, faith, and sin (Theunissen 1979b, pp. 496–98). While there are significant strengths to the existential transformation, as I will return to in a moment, there are problems with this Enlightenment heritage in Kierkegaard's thought. One of the principal issues is exactly the abstractness of his guiding concepts. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the abstract character of our Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and reason are dangerous because they cleanse existence of the individual differences that make human beings the concrete beings that they are:

Knowledge does not consist in mere perception, classification, and calculation but precisely in the determining negation of whatever is immediate [*des je Unmittelbaren*]. Instead of such negation, mathematical formalism, whose medium, number, is the most abstract form of the immediate, arrests thought at mere immediacy. The actual is validated, knowledge confines itself to repeating it, thought makes itself mere tautology. The more completely the machinery of thought subjugates being [*das Seiende*], the more blindly it is satisfied with reproducing it. Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape [. . .] In the enlightened world, mythology has permeated the

sphere of the profane. Existence [*Dasein*], thoroughly cleansed of demons and their conceptual descendants, takes on, in its gleaming naturalness, the numinous character which former ages attributed to demons. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 20–21)

There are clear traces of Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard in his and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment, primarily the complaints of mythology and abstractness. It is, however, difficult not to notice the explicit Kierkegaardian flavor of this quote and of the quote above from *Minima Moralia*. Apart from their affective tone and rhetorical devices, there is a manifest conceptual heritage from Kierkegaard. In the first quote, Adorno paraphrases the argument of Vigilius Haufniensis that a human being is an individual and, as an individual, she is both herself and the whole species, "and in such a way that the whole species [*Slægt*] participates in the individual and the individual in the whole species" (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 28/SKS 4, p. 335; translation modified). In the second quote, Horkheimer and Adorno develop Climacus' persistent critique of abstract knowledge in the *Postscript* when he, to take just one example, argues that the proclaimed immediate foundation of philosophical systems is a pernicious illusion because of the dialectics of all beginnings: "The beginning of the system that begins with the immediate is then itself achieved through reflection" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 112/SKS 7, p. 108). As already mentioned, it has not gone unnoticed by interpreters of Adorno's work that despite his criticism of Kierkegaard's thought, Kierkegaard exerted a lasting impact upon Adorno's own work.¹³ What is of greatest interest in the present context is that Adorno uses Kierkegaardian resources to criticize elements that he rightly criticizes in Kierkegaard's authorship. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the mercurial character of Kierkegaard's work, which was brought out in the beginning of this article. What is perhaps more surprising is that it is exactly in the tensions and potential conflicts at work within Kierkegaard's authorship that we can find the contemporary relevance of Kierkegaard's work with human identity.

One of the most productive tensions in the authorship concerns the relationship between activity and passivity in the account of human selfhood. Theunissen is right in pointing out that Kierkegaard has a tendency to prioritize activity by emphasizing our responsibility for suffering and that he grounds this responsibility in what seems an inhumane conception of freedom, or at least a conception of freedom that seems impossible to realize for the sinful human beings that we are. To become a self, we have to acknowledge that in front of God we are always wrong and let this acknowledgment of our sinful incapacity lead us to faith in God. We should abandon our all too human worries and concerns and instead follow the example of Christ, who made himself known to the world not by the lavish garments of a king, but through his extraordinary lack of concern for all those things that normally worry human beings. In fact, we should go further and embrace the paradox constitutive of faith to the extent that we follow Luke 14:26 by hating the ones we love, thereby transforming our very conception of what is human and inhuman through the power of faith (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 72–75/SKS 4, pp. 63–67). When considering whether it is actually possible for a human being to follow Christ in completely abandoning her cares, concerns, and worries, Climacus is unequivocal:

The question is this: May a human being express the same thing?—for otherwise the god has not realized the essentially human. Yes, if he is capable of it, he may also do it. If he can become so absorbed in the service of the spirit that it never occurs to him to provide for food and drink, if he is sure that the lack will not divert him, that the hardship will not disorder his body and make him regret that he did not first of all understand the lessons of childhood before wanting to understand more—yes, then he truly may do it, and his greatness is even more glorious than the quiet assurance of the lily. (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 57/SKS 4, p. 259)

There is a tension between acknowledging our existential fragility and an insistence on a strong—and in some regards merciless—conception of freedom in Kierkegaard's account of human identity. His account of human identity in the major works on selfhood

and subjectivity explicitly acknowledges our inescapable fragility. As several examples of this among many others: The very opening sentence of *Either-Or* stresses the existential incompatibility of the inner and the outer (Kierkegaard 1987a, p. 3/SKS 2, p. 11); *The Concept of Anxiety* brings out the restless ambiguity of anxiety (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 61–62/SKS 4, pp. 365–66); the *Postscript* insists on keeping the existential “wound of negativity” open (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 85/SKS 7, p. 84); and *The Sickness Unto Death* explores the relational character of human selfhood (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 13–14, 29–42/SKS 11, pp. 129–30, 145–57). As human beings we are constantly torn between heterogeneous factors, such as finitude and infinitude, body and soul, possibility and necessity; in order to live our lives without despairing, we constantly need to keep ourselves together, so to speak, or “to become concrete”, as Anti-Climacus argues (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 30/SKS 11, p. 146). Existential fragility is thus constitutive of Kierkegaard’s analysis of being human, and yet it seems to stand in stark opposition to Kierkegaard’s strong normative conception of “our true, positive freedom” which demands that we become who we are (Kierkegaard 1987b, p. 174/SKS 3, p. 169).

This tension can be explained by the dialectics at work in Kierkegaard’s conception of freedom. For Kierkegaard, human freedom is dialectical in the sense that the strength of our freedom is our weakness as well. Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard examines a peculiar characteristic of being human, namely, that we can want to be what we cannot become. We are complex beings who are created to be free, and yet, as Ricoeur argues, “to will is not to create” (Ricoeur 1966, p. 486). Our humanity is constituted by the limits of our embodied and situated existence. To exist is to challenge these limits while accepting that we can never completely escape them: “Daring and patience never ceases to alternate in the very heart of willing. Freedom is not a pure act. It is, in each of its moments, activity and receptivity. It constitutes itself in receiving what it does not produce: values, capacities, and sheer nature” (Ricoeur 1966, p. 484). Kierkegaard provides some of the most acute explorations of this dialectical concept of freedom in his work on human identity. The problem is that while his existential transformation of basic Christian concepts is among the most relevant aspects of his work today, at times he remains stuck in the very same metaphysics that he tries to extricate himself from. His abstract conception of freedom is, as Theunissen has shown us, a case in point. I would nonetheless argue that it is in the abstractness of his concept of freedom that we find the philosophical strength of his analysis. Theunissen’s critique of his normative emptying of our understanding of what makes us human can be turned into a strength if we use his emphasis on the tautology of selfhood that I am what I am as an argument for a persistent critique of normative conceptions of human nature (Grøn 1997, pp. 25–28).

Ricoeur connects this aspect of Kierkegaard’s work with Kant’s famous *Critiques*, arguing that Kierkegaard “inaugurates a new manner of doing philosophy that we could call a critique of existential possibilities” (Ricoeur 1992b, p. 45). Following Ricoeur’s lead, we can argue that it is Kierkegaard’s critique of traditional conceptions of human existence, Christian as well as non-Christian, that liberates new possibilities for becoming the individual human being that each and every one of us is. In this sense, the conceptual emptiness that both Adorno and Theunissen criticize can be reinterpreted as a strength, and potentially one of the most innovative aspects of his approach to human identity. Kierkegaard’s phenomenological exploration of the figures of human despair and his analysis of the existential impact of suffering constantly challenge our conception of human reality. He criticizes our concepts of love, joy, anger, sadness, anxiety, pleasure, patience, anxiety, and other fundamental existential phenomena, draining them of the normative biases that have shaped and continue to shape our approach to these phenomena. The resulting conceptual emptiness allows for the normative transformation that Butler argues for in the beginning of this section, namely, to let those identities that are considered “unreal” unsettle our conception of reality and thereby open the norms of how to live a human life up to resignification.

In the final section, I will try to make sense of this seemingly paradoxical argument that it is exactly in Kierkegaard's abstract conception of freedom and the consequent emptying basic existential concepts of their normative content that we find his relevance for our discussion of human identity today. A key element in this endeavor is his influential, albeit, rather neglected concept of existence.

6. Queering the Concept of Faith

Around the middle of Adorno's book on Kierkegaard, he perceptively singles out the concept of existence as the element of Kierkegaard's authorship that remains most urgently relevant in the midst of the antiquated dogmatics and abstract speculations that populate the authorship. He writes:

Kierkegaard's formulation of the problem of truth is most compelling when, without dogmatic thesis and speculative antithesis, it is addressed to existence [*Dasein*] in the form in which it defines the circumference of his philosophical experience: when it is addressed to individual existence [*einzel menschliche Existenz*]. The ontological question, as the question of the "meaning of existence" is today read out of Kierkegaard more than any other [...] For Kierkegaard, the question of the "meaning" of existence [*Dasein*] is not that of what existence properly is, but rather what gives existence—meaningless in itself—a meaning [...] Kierkegaard's concept of existence [*Existenzbegriff*] does not coincide with mere existence, but with an existence that, dynamic in itself, obtains a transcendent meaning that is supposedly qualitatively different from existence. (Adorno 1989, pp. 68–69; translation modified)

As he is wont to do, Adorno turns what appears to be a compliment into a brusque rejection, criticizing Kierkegaard's concept of existence for being wrong on almost all accounts. What is important here is Adorno's argument for the importance of the concept of existence, and particularly his distinction between mere existence [*Dasein*], which according to Adorno is meaningless in itself, and individual existence [*Existenz*], which is qualitatively different from the first in terms of possessing a transcendent meaning. To Adorno's secular mindset, Kierkegaard's idea of religious transcendence instilling the life of the individual with meaning is escapist at best and outright oppressive at worst. We have seen that Theunissen shares Adorno's skepticism towards Kierkegaard's ontotheological dualisms, but Theunissen does not reject Kierkegaard's conception of religious transcendence. Rather, his argument, as mentioned above, is that in the secularized context of today we can only make sense of Kierkegaard's concept of religious transcendence by examining his analyses of the experiential challenges of despair that the self struggles with in becoming herself.

Here, my argument is inspired by Theunissen's development of Adorno's critique into his aforementioned negativistic reading of Kierkegaard that refrains from establishing normative ideals—be those metaphysical, religious, bourgeois or pragmatic—about how to be a successful human self, focusing instead on the existential problems of becoming the self that one actually is. Theunissen's argument is that if we dig below the metaphysical dualisms that structure Kierkegaard's "official" account of the human self, we will find a surprisingly modern account of human identity that deconstructs a substantial notion of human identity by means of a processual account of the self: "Being oneself is in its concrete connotation a holding together, both uniting and extremizing at once, of factors of a relation that man, in being himself, reveals himself to be, a holding together having the form of a process without substratum" (Theunissen 1981, p. 415). I find this negativistic reading of Kierkegaard's account of human identity both accurate with respect to Kierkegaard's mature theory of human selfhood (e.g., Theunissen 1993; Grøn 1997, 2003) and highly relevant with respect to discussions of human identity today. Nevertheless, I do not agree with Theunissen that we need to dig below the "official" account to find this relational account of human identity. I believe that if we follow Adorno's advice and look more carefully at Kierkegaard's concept of existence, the strength of Kierkegaard's account of identity stands out more clearly and as more existentially relevant than is the

case with Theunissen's (and Adorno's own) more Hegelian approach to the authorship. Moreover, this existential development of Theunissen's negative reading has the benefit of bringing together the two strains of my argument in this article by showing how the peculiar textual "gappiness" of Kierkegaard's authorship is intrinsically linked with his philosophical conception of human identity.

Kierkegaard does not provide us with solid ethical guidelines for how to live a good life or religious practices that will allow us to become true Christians. This is certainly not to say that we cannot find exciting moral arguments for how to live a good life or upbuilding analyses of religious and Christian virtues in Kierkegaard's work. We can definitely find such resources and more in the authorship. My point is, and has been through this article, that the "gappiness" of the authorship prevents us from settling on "one" correct reading of Kierkegaard's texts, and even actively deconstructs substantial accounts of human identity with its interplay of existential perspectives on how to live a human life. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard's texts are queer. They do not tell a uniform tale of human identity, rather exploring multifarious ways of being human. I do not believe that this is a forced reading of Kierkegaard that awkwardly tries to fit his thought into our contemporary discussions of human identity. On the contrary, I would argue that this approach takes seriously the existential character of his texts, which through complex dialogues present us with a fragile conception of human identity: We are who we are through that which we are not. Human identity is a problem that we struggle with throughout our lives. We are not simply who we are, that is, we cannot find relief in a substantial selfhood—in a kind of authentic self—that can function as a foundation for our life. Rather, we can only hope to become ourselves by relating ourselves to ourselves through that which we are not, i.e., other people, the world, and God. It is this fragile structure of human identity that Kierkegaard brings out with his concept of existence and with his existential transformation of the Christian foundation of his thought.

Adorno's distinction between mere existence and existence is difficult to capture in English. The German word for mere existence, "Dasein", is perhaps more accurately rendered with "being there", which is equivalent to the Danish word "Tilværelse". Adorno is right to insist on the importance of this distinction for Kierkegaard's concept of human selfhood, because for Kierkegaard to be a self is not merely being in the world (the critical reference to Heidegger is explicit in Adorno's text), it is to actively engage in the world as the single individual that one is. Johannes Climacus can therefore write in the *Postscript*—Kierkegaard's major treatise on the concept of existence—that to exist as a human being is "not to be [være] in the same sense as a potato is, but not in the same sense as the idea is, either. Human existence has an idea within itself but nevertheless is not an idea-existence" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 331/SKS 7, p. 302). We are neither things (mere being) nor ideas (pure thinking). We are concrete living beings, whose existential task it is to turn our *mere* being in the world into our *own* being in the world. This is not to say that we are not things nor ideas. We are both, and human existence is thus "a somewhat intermediary state, something that is suitable for an intermediate being such as a human being is" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 329/SKS 7, p. 301).

With the publication of the *Postscript* in 1846, existence becomes a technical concept for Kierkegaard that enables him to reflect systematically upon the qualitative difference between mere being and existence, that is, between an objective explanation of human nature and the subjective experience of being human. While we can describe and scientifically investigate a human life and what it objectively means to be a human being as opposed to, say, being a potato or a macaque monkey, such a scientific approach is never able to articulate what it actually means to exist as the concrete individual human being that I am. Climacus therefore argues that "to exist signifies first and foremost to be a particular individual, and this is why thinking must disregard existence, because the particular cannot be thought, but only the universal" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 326/SKS 7, p. 298). We cannot think existence because existence is always particular and concrete, and as such escapes the

impersonal conceptual efforts of language and thought. Vigilius Haufniensis argues along the same lines in *The Concept of Anxiety*, written several years earlier:

The most concrete content that consciousness can have is consciousness of itself, of the individual himself—not the pure self-consciousness, but the self-consciousness that is so concrete that no author, not even the richest in words [*ikke den ordrigeste*], has ever been able to describe a single such self-consciousness, although every single human being is such a one. (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 143/SKS 4, p. 443; translation modified)

In the *Postscript*, Climacus brings this insistence on existential concreteness to the extreme by arguing that “the individual’s own ethical reality [*egen etiske Virkelighed*] is the only reality” (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 327/SKS 7, p. 298). Here, “ethical reality” refers to the individual’s experiential reality in the sense of how it feels to be the single individual that they are. Climacus is well aware that this conception of reality can be criticized, which both Adorno and Theunissen do, for being the expression of an “acosmism” that wants to make sense of the individual in isolation from the embodied and socially situated dimensions of an actual human life. Climacus nevertheless insists that this is a misunderstanding of his concept of existence. His extensive argument against this critique deserves to be quoted in full:

That it will so appear to a busy thinker who must explain everything, a hasty pate who traverses the whole world, demonstrates only that he has a very poor idea of what the ethical means for the subject. If ethics deprived such a busy thinker of the whole world and let him keep his own self, he would very likely think: “Is this anything? Such a trifling thing is not worth keeping. Let it go along with all the rest”—then, then it is acosmism. But why does a busy thinker like that talk and think so disrespectfully of himself? Indeed, if the intention were that he should give up the whole world and be satisfied with another person’s ethical actuality, well, then he would be in the right to make light of the exchange. But to the individual his own ethical actuality ought to mean, ethically, even more than heaven and earth and everything found therein, more than world history’s six thousand years, and more than astrology, veterinary science, together with everything the times demand, which esthetically and intellectually is a prodigious narrow-mindedness. If it is not so, it is worst for the individual himself, because then he has nothing at all, no reality at all, because to everything else he has at the very most only a relation of possibility. (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 341/SKS 7, pp. 312–13; translation modified)

This quote captures the heart of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence as well as the gist of his existential transformation of the philosophical and theological traditions that his work comes out of. The dispute about getting Kierkegaard straight with which I opened this article, that is, whether his work is philosophical, religious, or ethical, misses exactly this fundamentally existential character of the authorship. Kierkegaard’s work is about the single individual who escapes our philosophical, religious, ethical, scientific, and political endeavors to make sense of human reality and of what it means to be human. It is this existential insistence on subjectivity as the irreducible experiential features of human reality and on the irreplaceable individual character of a human life that makes his work singular in the Western philosophical and theological tradition. Conceptual attempts, be they scientific, philosophical, or religious, at making sense of human life shipwreck on the reality of the individual, or as Anti-Climacus argues in *Practice in Christianity*, on “the suffering of reality or the reality of suffering” (Kierkegaard 1991, p. 188/SKS 11, p. 188; translation modified). Our ideas about human nature are always imaginary. The Danish (and German) word for imagination that Anti-Climacus examines in his work is “Indbildning-skraft”, which in addition to its basic meaning of creating images refers to our ability to “fool ourselves” by means of these images. This ambiguity is always present in our attempt to cognitively make sense of human life. The problem with our imagined ideas of a human

life is, according to Anti-Climacus, that they are perfect. We cannot do other than idealize human life when we try to imagine what it means to be human. Therefore, we should not think “that the perfection exists in something more perfect but that the perfection exists in something infinitely less perfect. And this is precisely the imperfection of the imagined image [*Ufuldkommenheden ved Indbildningsbilledet*]*—that the imperfection is not depicted*”. (Kierkegaard 1991, p. 188/SKS 11, p. 188; translation modified). We always come up short when trying to describe, let alone explain, a human life, because the perfection of our identity is to be found in its imperfection, that is, in the fact that our identity is always underway or in the process of becoming. This is particularly evident with the ethical reality of suffering. The experiential reality of actually living through concrete suffering ultimately escapes our conceptual attempts to imagine suffering. We can therefore argue that the ethical reality of human suffering challenges our imagined understanding of reality. If the concrete ethical reality of individual suffering is not granted the status of reality then, as Climacus argues above, the individual is denied their reality.

If we follow this existential thread in Kierkegaard’s approach to human identity, we can see how he turns the tables on his critics by arguing that they are actually the ones who are abstract and “acosmic” in their insistence on the political and sociological dimensions of human identity. In their effort to bring out the structural dimensions of human identity, they miss the lived experience of being human. When Adorno therefore criticizes Kierkegaard’s “theology of sacrifice” for reducing human existence to “objectless inwardness”, he is, one could argue, missing the radical point of Kierkegaard’s notion of existence. Existence *is* “objectless”. It is always an individual existence, with an inwardness or ethical reality that cannot be made into an object and must always be approached as an irreducible singularity. This existential singularity is the existential difference that make up humanity, our “Menneskelighed” in the ambiguous sense mentioned in the long passage from *The Point of View* quoted at the beginning of Section 4. Humanity is both a description of what it is to be human and an ethical task. On the one hand, human equality (*Menneske-Lighed*) is a description of the existential differences that make us individuals, and thus similar to each other in and through our differences. On the other hand, it is our ethical task as humans to secure “the true humanity” (*den sande Menneskelighed*) through an equality in and through, not despite those differences.¹⁴ Thus, one can argue that Theunissen misses the point when he criticizes Kierkegaard for disregarding the passivity of human selfhood with “the tyranny” of his “ethical prohibition to despair” (Theunissen 1996b, p. 78). It can be argued that Kierkegaard’s point is not to neglect the inescapable passivity of human despair and the consequent limits to our freedom, but rather to insist on our responsibility to not let our own or other people’s suffering turn into paralyzing hopelessness (e.g., Grøn 1996, 1997). I would argue that it is in this ethical demand to secure an existential freedom to become oneself that we can make sense of the foundational religious dimension of Kierkegaard’s work without resorting to the ontotheological dualisms that Theunissen warns us about.

To secure the individual’s right to make sense of their suffering therefore requires that we go beyond our conceptions of what is reasonable or what makes sense philosophically or scientifically. We must not despair in the face of meaninglessness of reality or what Adorno calls mere existence (*Dasein*); we must constantly work towards securing the irreplaceable reality of the individual who struggles to make sense of their, her, or his existence. To secure this existential freedom of the individual to live a meaningful life requires, according to Kierkegaard, that we empty our understanding of freedom of philosophical, theological, ethical, and political preconceptions that may limit the possibilities of the individual to find their unique expression of freedom. It is this constant effort to find individual meaning in objective meaninglessness that Kierkegaard, with Johannes de silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, calls faith, because “faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 55/SKS 4, p. 149). Only through faith can we escape despair. Faith will not cancel our suffering, rather, with faith and through faith we can find a way to make sense of our suffering and thereby, hopefully, make an unbearable

suffering bearable. Faith is the expression of the belief that it is the individual who counts, and Climacus can therefore write that “the religious categories” are “precisely in the sphere of subjectivity” (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 66/SKS 7, p. 68).

This inherently subjective character of Kierkegaard’s concept of faith is perhaps the most radical aspect of his existential transformation of the Christian tradition in which his work is situated. Faith is the expression of the paradox that our “true humanity” is our equality in and through our existential differences. The existential task of faith is that we can only become the self that we are, that is, become truly human, by working towards this equality in difference. This is why faith, according to Climacus, is “self-active [*selvvirksom*], relates itself to the improbable and the paradox, is self-active in discovering it and in holding it fast at every moment—in order to be able to believe [*at troe*]” (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 233/SKS 7, p. 212). Faith is “self-active” in the sense that the self must *want* to believe in and through the passivity of suffering that life has a meaning despite the unbearable character of suffering. This activity of faith is not easy. On the contrary, it is perhaps the most difficult of all human endeavors, because in faith the individual struggles with themselves and their unbearable suffering. Anti-Climacus articulates this difficulty of faith with his usual radicality: “At this point, then, salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible! This is the battle of *faith* [*Troens kamp*], battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation” (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 38/SKS 11, p. 154).

It is this insistence on subjectivity that makes Kierkegaard’s existential transformation of religion radical. He not only allows for faith to transform human subjectivity, he also allows for human subjectivity to transform faith. By situating the question of religion in the sphere of subjectivity, he makes the individual both the subject and object of faith. Faith is possibility in impossibility, or meaning in unbearable suffering, only as far as it respects the individuality of our endeavor to believe. Faith must, in other words, be refracted through the existential differences that constitute human reality. Consequently, our concept of faith must become fluid and relational rather than substantial and dogmatic. The religious traditions of faith must be constantly deconstructed through our existential differences and reconfigured to secure an equality that is sensitive to and learns from those very differences. I argue that Kierkegaard’s existential transformation of religion amounts to what we can, without exaggeration, call a queering of the concept of faith. For Kierkegaard in his provincial Copenhagen, this queering of the traditional Lutheran conception of faith entailed a vigorous deconstructing of what Kierkegaard saw as the stale and inauthentic expressions of official Christendom in order to pave the way for an authentic Christianity. Today, we need to be willing to continue this radical existential transformation of religion by queering our concept(s) of faith in such a way that we deconstruct biased norms and values that have been and are believed to be constitutive of Christian faith in order to allow for new and constantly evolving expressions of a lived and authentic Christian faith. As mentioned earlier, I read Kierkegaard as an enlightenment thinker. On par with his idealistic predecessors, he worked towards making Christianity philosophically existentially acceptable. I see his existential queering of the concept of faith as a foundational element in this endeavor. I also happen to believe that an existential queering of our concept of faith is the only philosophically acceptable and existentially defensible concept of faith available today. As I have tried to show in the second part of this article, I believe that Kierkegaard’s texts are particularly useful for this queering of our concept of faith despite the serious problems with those texts that I examined in the first part of the article.

To bring out this important resource in Kierkegaard’s account of human identity, we need to return to the argument that I began with, namely, that the “gappiness” of Kierkegaard’s texts is that which makes his work relevant today. Kierkegaard’s contemporary relevance requires that we follow the advice that Arne Grøn issued more than two decades ago: we need to be willing to break free of the Kierkegaardian universe by reading Kierkegaard against himself (Grøn 1997, p. 10). Fortunately, this not a difficult

task. The “gappiness” of his texts—their ambiguous, questioning, indirect, and sometimes inconsistent character—invites such a hermeneutical approach. I think that the best way to work with Kierkegaard’s biases is to read his texts, both the published works and the journals, notebooks, and papers that together bring out the full ambiguity and marvelous cacophony of the authorship. I believe that we can use intersectionality and other critical perspectives on human identity to bring out the existential relevance of Kierkegaard’s texts. In fact, one could argue that while Kierkegaard might have been a biased, over-privileged white man limited by the ossified and hidebound norms of two centuries ago, his texts, on the other hand, celebrate the expression of existential diversity that many struggle for today.

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Notes

- ¹ If the reference is a work not written in English and no translation has been indicated, the translation is by the author.
- ² I will return to this method in more detail later in the article.
- ³ In addition to referring to the standard English translation of Kierkegaard’s works, I refer to the standard Danish critical edition of Kierkegaard’s works in 55 volumes (Kierkegaard 1997–2012), for which I use the abbreviation SKS followed by the number of the volume and the page number.
- ⁴ I thank Ingolf U. Dalferth for making me aware that this method could be characterized as a negative hermeneutics.
- ⁵ See Georg Brandes’ famous letter to Nietzsche dated 11 January 1888, in which Brandes lauds Kierkegaard for being “one of the most perceptive psychologists that exists at all [*einer der tiefsten Psychologen, die es überhaupt giebt*]” and characterizes his own book on Kierkegaard as “a kind of polemic pamphlet [*eine Art von Streitschrift*] written in order to impede his influence” (Brandes 1966, p. 448).
- ⁶ Other interpreters have argued that despite Adorno’s apparently devastating critique, Kierkegaard nonetheless remains indispensable for Adorno’s own work (e.g., Deuser 1980; Damgaard 2020; Morgan 2003; Gordon 2016, pp. 158–93). For a careful review of Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard, see (Šajda 2012).
- ⁷ “Hygge” is difficult to translate, and is arguably best rendered as “coziness”; according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is “regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture” (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/hygge>; accessed on 18 May 2022). Over the past thirty years, Danish “hygge” has been criticized for harbouring at times, implicit and at times explicit racist tendencies in the form of ironic and supposedly “innocent” humorous remarks about people who differ from the typically ethnic dane. This is akin to structural racism, and is so widespread that it has found its way into the Danish vocabulary as “hyggeracisme”, that is, “cozy racism” (<https://ordnet.dk/ddo/ordbog?query=hyggeracisme>; accessed on 18 May 2022). For more about “hygge”, see (<https://denmark.dk/people-and-culture/hygge>; accessed on 18 May 2022).
- ⁸ Theunissen rightfully argues, as many of the interpreters mentioned above have done before and after him, that despite Adorno’s apparently devastating critique of Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard’s “existential-dialectic [*existenzdialektische*] arguments against Hegel” play a significant role both for Adorno’s own work and for critical Marxists such as Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Ernst Bloch in their attempt to produce alternatives to the established forms of thought and society (Theunissen 1979a, pp. 76–77). We shall see that although Theunissen is very critical of central elements of Kierkegaard’s thought, he is more explicit than Adorno about the Kierkegaardian heritage in his own thinking. One reason for this is properly that he has a more developed sense for the dialectical character of Kierkegaard’s existential thought than did Adorno. Moreover, Theunissen argues that many of Adorno’s critical arguments against Kierkegaard become motives in Adorno’s own subsequent work, to the extent that Adorno’s “negative dialectics” and foundational concept of the “non-identical [*Nichtidentische*]” can be read as reformulations of key elements of Kierkegaard’s thought (Theunissen 1979a, p. 78); for a similar argument, see (Gordon 2016, pp. 159–93).
- ⁹ “Yes, this second form of despair (in despair to will to be oneself) is so far from designating merely a distinctive kind of despair that, on the contrary, all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in it” (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 14/SKS 11, p. 130) and “To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair. Therefore, the other

form of despair, in despair to will to be oneself, can be traced back to the first, in despair not to will to be oneself, just as we previously resolved the form, in despair not to will to be oneself, into the form, in despair to will to be oneself" (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 20/SKS 11, pp. 135–36).

10 It is peculiar that the translation of Theunissen's book omits the subtitle of the German original (Theunissen 1993), which is "Corrections to Kierkegaard".

11 For a philosophically and theologically challenging development of this Kierkegaardian theology of temporal experience, see Theunissen's (2000) magnum opus.

12 For an informative discussion of Theunissen's work on Kierkegaard, see Stefan Egenberger (2012). Moreover, the first volume of *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook* in 1996 actually dedicated one third of the volume to a discussion of Theunissen's "correction" of Kierkegaard, with contributions from Alastair Hannay, Arne Grøn, Hermann Deuser, and Niels Jørgen Cappelørn (Yearbook 1996, pp. 15–163); see (Hanson 2006).

13 See notes 6 and 9 above.

14 See pages 6–7.

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