

## Article

# The Grammar and Socio-Political Implications of Kierkegaard's Christian Virtue of Meekness

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that in Kierkegaard's works, in his upbuilding discourses and late journal entries in particular, meekness or gentleness (Danish: *Sagtmodighed*) is presented as a distinctive moral and spiritual quality that exhibits a number of characteristics that are usually regarded as attributes of a virtue. Following a "grammatical approach" to what counts as a virtue, rather than a specifically Aristotelian-Thomistic interpretation, it is argued that Kierkegaard presents meekness as an encompassing attitude, a character trait, which can be acquired through imitation of exemplary persons, Christ, in particular, which aims for the good life, is conducive of the good, and is for the benefit of others and the self. It is demonstrated that according to Kierkegaard, meekness differs from other virtues such as courage and patience by its forgiving attitude towards the wrongdoer and nonviolent resistance to injustice and evil. As a virtue that disposes a person to nonviolent resistance, meekness has socio-political implications: injustice is uncovered and criticized for the benefit of "the poor". A meek person does not confirm the world in its evil, but criticizes it, albeit in a way that is appropriate to meekness, i.e., in a forgiving and nonviolent way.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard; virtue; meekness; justice; forgiveness; nonviolent resistance; socio-political criticism



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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been extensive debate about whether Kierkegaard can be seen as a virtue ethicist (Davenport and Rudd 2001; Walsh 2018; Roberts 2022). The answer to this question depends on what one considers a proper definition of virtue ethics. Rather than taking a particular understanding of virtue, particularly an Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding, as definitive, it is more adequate to take virtue ethics not as one univocal tradition that was established by Aristotle and completed by Aquinas, but as a tradition that, throughout history, developed in a wide variety of ways, yet shared a particular "grammar". This "grammatical approach" means that although the long and multifaced virtue ethics tradition reveals a variety of ways in which virtue has been understood, all of these views share a particular grammar of virtue, i.e., an internal conceptual order characteristic of virtue ethics language (Vos 2020). In this grammar, virtue is, first of all, somehow understood as a moral quality of character, stable disposition, attitude, *habitus*, or character trait that enables one to think, feel, and act rightly with respect to particular situations or experiences. Second, virtue and the virtues in interconnection are seen as, in one way or another, conducive of the good and contributing to the good, flourishing, or blessed life, as lived with and for others. Finally, it belongs to the virtue ethical grammar that virtue can somehow be acquired, by habituation and cultivation, and/or received as a divine gift; virtue is related to particular virtuous practices in which the virtues can be acquired.

In this paper, I argue that the way in which those spiritual and moral qualities that are usually called virtues are described in Kierkegaard's works, his upbuilding and Christian discourses, in particular, meets these three "grammatical rules". I will demonstrate this by analyzing one such virtuous quality in particular: meekness. Although it is not so common

in our time to see meekness as a term of praise or an excellence of character, but rather as a weakness or even a vice, Kierkegaard interprets meekness (or gentleness),<sup>1</sup> in line with the Christian tradition, as a virtuous moral and spiritual quality. First, I will show that we find both the vocabulary and grammar of virtue in Kierkegaard's works. Next, I will point out how meekness is described in Kierkegaard's upbuilding works as a distinctive spiritual and moral quality that has to do with experiences of evil and the wrong, injury, and suffering, and how it can be described as a virtue in which the (passive) endurance of patience and the (active) resistance of courage is combined. Then, I will show that meekness involves forgiveness on the one hand and nonviolent resistance to injustice on the other. Finally, it will be argued that meekness is a critical power with socio-political implications for the benefit of others, especially "the poor."

## 2. The Grammar of Virtue in Kierkegaard's Works

In Kierkegaard's works, we find a number of moral and spiritual qualities that have traditionally been regarded as virtues, such as courage, patience, mercy, humility, faith, hope, and love. However, Kierkegaard does not treat such virtues in a systematic way, ordering them in tables of classical and Christian virtues. We do not find a coherent virtue ethics framework in his works. Neither do we find precise descriptions or definitions of virtue and the virtues, nor does Kierkegaard refer very often to the virtue ethics tradition. Yet, Kierkegaard describes moral and spiritual qualities that show the characteristics of what traditionally have been regarded as virtues and, at times, uses the word "virtue". In his upbuilding discourses, Kierkegaard speaks of "virtue" (*Dyd*) as a word that is appropriate to the upbuilding purpose of these works and calls it a "sacred word" (EUD 370; SKS 5, 355).<sup>2</sup> He states that "It is true and always will be true that virtue is the highest sagacity" (EUD 380; SKS 5, 363) and speaks of "the beautiful virtue of conciliatory spirit" (EUD 380; SKS 5, 364). He refers to "the road of virtue", which cannot be located precisely but consists of "how it is walked" (UDVS 289; SKS 8, 384). It is wretched "to have an abundance of intentions and a poverty of action, to be rich in truths and poor in virtues" (EUD 350; SKS 5, 337). Although "virtue" does not function as a core concept in the discourses, Kierkegaard's use of it is basically in line with traditional virtue ethical language and shows that he follows the "grammar of virtue" by somehow understanding virtue as an encompassing character trait, attitude, or disposition.

Kierkegaard describes virtuous qualities as involving a range of human capacities: understanding, emotion, will, and imagination. These descriptions show important elements of the rich and complex psychology of virtue. As Roberts (2022, p. 99) has shown from a passage in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard follows the classical view that passions should be shaped by reason. Climacus refers to "Plutarch's splendid definition of virtue: 'ethical virtue has the passions for its material, reason for its form'" (CUP 161–162). Here, Climacus speaks about the need to attain moral perfection in the formation of the passions "with the aid of reason, rather than to devote oneself to 'the future of world history'" (CUP 161; SKS 7, 150). Character formation involves the formation of the passions by reason in its practical dimension. Virtue is not just a matter of habit, mood, or feeling, but has everything to do with an "idea", "reason", or a "state of mind". In the lengthy discourse, "Purity of Heart", Kierkegaard explains how feeling, knowledge, and will are interconnected in how the good and the good life are to be understood and lived. In relation to the good, there is, first of all, an "immediate feeling", which is "the vital force" that "is life", but this feeling must "be kept" in order not to lead to double-mindedness. It must "not be left to its own devices, but . . . be entrusted to the power of something higher that keeps it"; it needs "knowledge of the good", which provides an understanding of one's situation (UDVS 72; SKS 8, 179). Elsewhere, when he writes about courage, Kierkegaard speaks of a "state of mind", which shapes how a particular situation is perceived, in the case of courage: danger. Courage makes, so to say, the danger visible: "We cannot say: Whenever there is great danger there is always a person of courage, but instead say: Whenever there is a person of courage, there is sure to be great danger" (UDVS 243; SKS 8, 342–343). Knowledge

and understanding can deteriorate as well, as soon as they call a person away from actuality for the sake of obtaining an observer's point of view. Knowledge or understanding must "penetrate time", in a "deliberation" that will not lead to knowledge from the "distance of eternity", but to a real understanding of oneself in actuality (UDVS 73–74; SKS 8, 180–181). Therefore, ultimately, the will is needed as decisive capacity in one's dedication to the good and virtuous life, in order to will the good only "because it is the good" (EUD 380; SKS 5, 364). This reflects the traditional virtue ethical idea that virtue is not for the sake of something beyond it, but it is an aim in itself.

Furthermore, in Kierkegaard's treatment of those qualities that can be regarded as virtues, these qualities contribute to the good life with and for others. Although we do not find an explicit eudemonistic framework in Kierkegaard's works, it can be argued that the anthropological concept in which the human being has a potentiality to develop into a deeper self, which underlies Kierkegaard's works, can be interpreted in teleological terms (Vos 2020, pp. 111–14). Kierkegaard relates the qualities that can be interpreted as virtues to the good and the good life. A good example is the virtue of courage: "whenever there is good, courage is also present there; whatever happens to the good, courage is always on the side of the good. The good is always courageous, only evil is cowardly and afraid" (UDVS 239; SKS 8, 339). Other examples are "unselfish love" and "self-control", which are "necessary in order to know the good, what is truly great and noble", and at the same time, these virtues teach a person "what significance it [the good] has for him" (EUD 360; SKS 5, 346). More specifically, in Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses, the way of life to which the edification of the reader is aimed, is often described as being directed towards an (eternal) happiness (*Salighed*). This good "beyond all measure" (UDVS 312; SKS 8, 405) can be interpreted as telos, the ultimate end of the good life, *coram Deo*. This good life is with and for others, and the virtues we find in Kierkegaard's work are not just useful and agreeable to oneself, but also to others. The three theological virtues to which Kierkegaard refers in *Christian Discourses*, for instance, contribute to the common good. In faith, hope, and love, qualified as "goods of the spirit", one acquires something from which others benefit: "The one who seeks or possesses these goods does not therefore do well only for himself but does a good deed for all; he is working for all, his striving to acquire these goods is in itself immediately enriching for others" (CD 117; SKS 10, 128).

Finally, virtues can be learned by practicing them in the ethical-religious life and in the imitation of Christ and others. Patience, for instance, is described as a quality of a person, who can grow gradually in this quality by habituation, which reflects something of the Aristotelian circularity of the virtue that enables one to do virtuous things and doing virtuous things which enables one to acquire the virtue: "The person who grows in patience does indeed grow and develop. What is it that grows in him? It is patience. Consequently, patience grows in him, and how does it grow? Through patience" (EUD 169; SKS 5, 168). In fact, the upbuilding task itself can be regarded as a form of character cultivation (Vos 2020, pp. 120–23). Kierkegaard's upbuilding works and other texts can be read as explorations of various traits of character and as formations or deformations of character (Roberts 2022). Christian virtues are learned in the *imitatio Christi* and from other exemplars. In *Practice in Christianity*, Christ is considered the paradigm or exemplar (*Paradigmet, Forbilledet*), which manifests the ideal Christian existence and requires imitation (PC 233–257; SKS 12, 227–253). Imagining Christ as an exemplar is a demand on me: I should be as the exemplar is. This distinguishes imitation from admiration:

An imitator *is* or strives *to be* what he admires, and an admirer keeps himself personally detached, consciously or unconsciously does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired. (PC 241; SKS 12, 234)

Christ shows what it means to exist as a human being and to live the good life. The imitation of Christ does not mean to copy his particular actions, but to realize the authentically Christian existence in one's own life, existing *in the way* he existed, i.e., to embody the virtues that Christ embodied, such as love, humility, patience, etc.; "if he is unconditionally and

eternally the prototype, then let us learn from him as he himself requests”, as Kierkegaard says in his upbuilding discourses (UDVS 232; SKS 8, 333). One can learn the virtues from other exemplars as well, as is indicated in *Practice in Christianity*: “If I know a man whom I must esteem because of his unselfishness, self-sacrifice, magnanimity, etc., then I am not to admire but am supposed to be like him” (PC 242; SKS 12, 235).

In this line of thought, meekness (*Sagtmodighed*), on which I focus in this paper, is described as a virtuous quality, as a character trait, disposition, or *habitus* of a person, which contributes to the good life with and for others and can be habituated in the imitation of Christ. Kierkegaard’s most important exposition of meekness is found in the second discourse of “The Gospel of Sufferings”, part three of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (UDVS 230–247; SKS 8, 331–346): “How Can the Burden Be Light?”<sup>3</sup> In this discourse, he speaks of meekness in relation to how “burdens” are carried, deriving this language from Matthew 11:30: “My yoke is beneficial, and my burden is light”, which is the discourse’s theme. Although he does not use the term “virtue” or “character” in this discourse, Kierkegaard speaks of a “meek person” who has “the freedom of spirit” to act in a particular way (UDVS 242; SKS 8, 342). In other words, meekness is an encompassing moral quality of a person (character), consisting in a specific way of seeing, thinking, feeling, and acting. Moreover, meekness is a quality that relates to specific situations, namely experiences of injury, injustice, and being wronged by others. Furthermore, meekness can be learned, in particular, through practices and by following the example of exemplars, particularly Christ. Meekness is seen as a virtue that should be cultivated in the “imitation of Christ”: “it is to meekness that Christ summons his followers: Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly of heart [Matthew 11, 29] . . . As the prototype was, so also ought the follower to be” (UDVS 240; SKS 8, 340). Finally, meekness contributes to the good and the good life. In an early discourse, Kierkegaard writes that “the good is a gift for which meekness waits” (EUD 139; SKS 5, 141), and in the discourse, “How Can the Burden Be Light?”, meekness is clearly described as aiming for the good of the other, as can be learned from Christ, who “has the time and willingness and sympathy and self-sacrifice to concern himself unceasingly with others, to help others . . .” (UDVS 240; SKS 8, 340).

In sum, meekness, as described in Kierkegaard’s upbuilding works, can be interpreted as a Christian virtue and follows the basic “grammar of virtue”. What are, according to Kierkegaard, the more specific characteristics of this virtue?

### 3. Meekness: A Distinguished Virtuous Quality

The discourse, “How Can the Burden Be Light?”, in which meekness is central and on which I focus now to obtain a first idea of Kierkegaard’s understanding of meekness, centers around the following question: “But how can the burden be light if the suffering is heavy?” (UDVS 233; SKS 8, 333). In this theme, Kierkegaard typically employs what he elsewhere calls “inverted dialectic” (JN 4, 292–293; SKS 20, 293; NB4:11) or “dialectic of reversal” (JN 4, 116; SKS 20, 116; NB:194) to set out how, in a Christian sense, the positive is characterized by the negative. This inverted dialectic is distinguished from an “immediate” or “straightforward” understanding. “In the straightforward sense, to lose is to lose; in the inverted sense, to lose is to gain”, just as “the butterfly *gains* by *losing* the caterpillar’s chrysalis”, as Kierkegaard adds in the margin to this entry (JN 4, 293; SKS 20, 293; NB4:11). In the discourse, Kierkegaard explores the paradox that the burden can be light if the suffering is heavy. Note that the inverted dialectic is paradoxical in nature: what is heavy is transformed into or seen as something that is light or can be handled lightly, but that which is carried lightly or is made light is still acknowledged as heavy. Meekness is precisely the “paradoxical” virtuous quality that enables a person to carry a heavy burden lightly.

Kierkegaard further clarifies the specific nature of meekness by distinguishing it from other related qualities, which are traditionally seen as virtues, including courage (*Mod*), high-mindedness or magnanimity (*Høimod*), and patience (*Talmod*); these are qualities that Kierkegaard describes in relation to experiences of the wrong and evil as well. Courage is the quality of character that is typically related to situations of danger. As Kierkegaard



states, courage “never turns its back on danger but always faces it, takes pride in itself and yet is very flexible when it is a matter of fitting beautifully in the intense connection with the diversity of the good” (UDVS 239; SKS 8, 339). Because of its connection to the good, courage enables us to bravely defy danger, to resist evil, and to overcome the dangerous evil that threatens us. As such, courage is a strong virtue, whether we think of the bravery of the ancient warrior or the courage of the Christian martyr who stays faithful to the truth, even if this requires one to give up one’s life. Whereas courage resists evil by striking back or staying strong, the “gentle courage” (*sagte Mod*) of meekness rather opposes evil through a soft resistance: “It is not wonderful with iron strength to deal harshly with what is the hardest of all, but it is wonderful to have iron strength and be able to deal gently with what is weakest of all, or deal lightly with what is heavy” (UDVS 240; SKS 8, 339).

Next to courage, Kierkegaard contrasts meekness with *Høimod*, “high-mindedness”, as the Hongs translate it, or “magnanimity”, as it could be translated. In relation to evil, the virtue of magnanimity puts itself above the evil; it “proudly lifts itself above grievances” (UDVS 239–240; SKS 8, 339), as Kierkegaard puts it. One could say that magnanimity, too, is a quality that presupposes a strong position of the character that possesses it, which is precisely how Aristotle famously describes this virtue (*megaloψychia*): “Well, a person is considered magnanimous if he thinks that he is worthy of great things, provided that he *is* worthy of them” (Aristotle 2004, p. 93; 1123b1-2). If this virtue is related to the wrong that others do, magnanimity resists it by rising far above it. Magnanimity is a virtue, but in principle, it starts from a superior position over the other. Aristotle follows the logic of honor, i.e., being magnanimous is a virtue because it is appropriate to the person of honor. We could say that this virtue affirms inequality in human relationships. In contrast, the virtue of meekness, as Kierkegaard understands it, does not place itself above the situation or others, but makes light what is heavy and, as such, makes differences less:

High-mindedness [*Høimod*, magnanimity] also bears the wrong, but as it lifts itself above the wrong it actually makes the wrong seem greater than it is. . . . Only meekness makes the wrong less, because if one does not take something for what it is, and this something is wrong, injury, insult, then one indeed makes the wrong less. (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344)

In this interesting comparison with magnanimity/high-mindedness, we see that meekness somehow lessens the wrong of the other by not taking it “for what it is”. In this thought, it is implied both that the wrong is made less (not taking it as what it is) and that it is still wrong (what it is). This reveals that meekness has a transformative power, which makes one see the wrong in a different way, different from “what it is”, without denying that a wrong is committed. I will come back to this, but first, I will continue the comparison of meekness with another virtue: patience.

Patience is the virtue that is the closest to meekness, for patience, too, enables one to endure suffering caused by evil or a wrong act that has been committed. Whereas “courage goes freely into the suffering that could be avoided . . . patience makes itself free in the unavoidable suffering” (UDVS 119; SKS 8, 220), as Kierkegaard describes this virtue elsewhere in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Here, Kierkegaard speaks explicitly of patience as a virtue: patience is “a category of freedom”, making literally “a virtue (*Dyd*) of necessity”; a patient person “is deriving a category of freedom (virtue) from what is defined as necessity” (UDVS 119; SKS 8, 221), namely the unavoidable. However, although patience enables a person to endure the unavoidable evil from which one suffers, it also lets it exist: “Patience also bears the wrong, but it does not make the wrong less than it is” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344). Patience is more passive than meekness is; it is a virtue of endurance. In contrast, meekness somehow actively transforms what is happening, which is expressed repeatedly in the discourse that it makes a heavy burden light. Meekness combines the gentleness of patience and the strength of courage and magnanimity.

There is courage (*Mod*), which bravely defies dangers; there is high-mindedness (*Høimod*), which proudly lifts itself above grievances; there is patience (*Taalmod*), which patiently bears sufferings; but the gentle courage (*sagte Mod*) that carries

the heavy burden lightly is still the most wonderful compound. (UDVS 239–240; SKS 8, 339)

Patience accepts evil as an inevitable fact and endures it, but also lets it exist. Courage can be aimed at the visible victory of evil, for example, by striking back. Magnanimity fights evil by rising far above it, and it is accompanied by a certain pride. But the “gentle courage” of meekness makes one resist evil in a soft but active way, i.e., it bears “burdens” lightly and somehow “makes the wrong less”. It combines the passive endurance of patience and the active resistance of courage.

In this interpretation of meekness, Kierkegaard is both traditional—in referring to traditional understandings—and original—in describing this virtue as paradoxical and inverted dialectical in nature. Although not very explicitly, he follows the traditional approach in which a passion or emotion is formed in accordance with reason or in which the virtue is contrasted to the excesses of a particular emotion, which is anger in the case of meekness. Aristotle, for instance, calls the optimal attitude, with regard to feelings of anger, *praotès* (Aristotle 2004, pp. 100–1; 1125b26), translated by some as “good temper”, and translated by others as “gentleness” or “patience” as the middle ground between the excesses of irascibility or hot-temperedness and passivity or spinelessness. However, in Aristotle’s logic of honor, gentleness or meekness is very different from the Christian logic of charity and “turning the other cheek” (Comte-Sponville 2003, p. 190). Whereas Aristotle is ill at ease with this virtue and acknowledges that it tends to err in the direction of a deficiency, because one can be angry at the right things and with the right people at the right time, Thomas Aquinas values meekness as a real Christian virtue, which “properly mitigates the passion of anger” (Aquinas 1947, p. 4182; II-II q 157, 1); it suppresses the passion for revenge by harnessing anger for a Christian response to overcoming injustices and other hardships. Eighteenth-century moralists such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume speak of meekness as contrasting to anger, resentment, rage, revenge, wrath, and cruelty; a meek person is typically not prone to resent others and is not quickly provoked (Pettigrove 2012). Meekness, as a moderation of anger or as a contrast to excessive anger, as common in tradition, is reflected in Kierkegaard’s discourse. Rather than responding by anger to the wrong that is committed or to the sufferings that are experienced, the meek person shows an attitude of calmness and forgivingness in which the wrong is not taken “as what it is”. On the other hand, Kierkegaard’s treatment is original in that he defines this virtue in terms of an “inverted dialectic”, as carrying what is heavy lightly and as making the wrong less. In the next sections, I will investigate what these qualities of meekness may mean more concretely, by pointing out the connotations of forgiveness and nonviolent resistance that are included in Kierkegaard’s account of meekness.

#### 4. Meekness as Disposition to Forgive

Meekness’s connotations of forgiveness and nonviolent resistance become apparent in Kierkegaard’s reference to the Biblical text of Matthew 5:39 in the discourse, “How Can the Burden Be Light?": “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344). According to Kierkegaard, it is typically part of the virtue of meekness in that it opposes evil by turning “the left cheek”:

Imagine this happening for your eyes. At the moment the first blow is struck, is it not true that your attention stops at the wrong, and you see it in the person of high-mindedness, and you see it in the person of patience. But the person of meekness calmly turns the left cheek, you are kept from becoming aware—he bears the wrong so lightly that you almost become less indignant with the perpetrator. (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344)

Rather than making a case of one’s own right, or pleading one’s innocence, a meek person bears the wrong to the extent that the perpetration of the perpetrator becomes less visible, “as if the guilty party’s fault became less” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 345).

Meekness is described here as a virtue that has to do with forgiveness. Kierkegaard refers to Christ as the prototype, the exemplary meek person *par excellence*:

his meekness concealed the world's guilt. He did not assert his rights; he did not plead his innocence. He did not talk about how they were sinning against him; he did not point out their scandalous guilt with a single word. Even in his last moment he said: Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. (UDVS 244; SKS 8, 343–344)

Meekness disposes a person to forgiveness in a radical sense: “to forgive your enemy is not meekness, but to forgive seventy times seven times—that is meekness” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344).

Now it seems that meekness disposes a person to unconditional forgiveness, ceasing to see the wrong of the other, and even completely concealing the guilt of the wrongdoer. Is this not highly problematic? How, then, does meekness as a virtue that disposes a person to forgiveness relate to justice? Should the injustice of the wrong not be acknowledged? It seems that the way Kierkegaard describes meekness here involves forgiveness of the wrongdoer to such an extent that the wrong and the injustice are no longer recognized. However, I do not think this is the whole picture of how Kierkegaard understands meekness. Several elements in the upbuilding discourse as well as later comments on meekness in Kierkegaard's *Notebooks* correct the view that meekness consists merely of forgivingly concealing the wrongdoer's guilt and the injustice committed.

In the first place, in Kierkegaard's discourse, the expressions about what happens when a meek person turns the other cheek are more subtle than they might seem at first glance. Importantly, in the quotations above, he writes that one becomes “almost less indignant” with the perpetrator and states that it is “as if” the guilty party's fault becomes less (the emphases are mine). These formulations show that, on the one hand, the guilt is concealed and, in that sense, it is not seen—it is “forgiven”; but on the other hand, there is still a difference between the guilty one and the unguilty one, between the perpetrator and the victim. Or to put it in the words of the metaphor of the burden that is carried, just because the burden is carried lightly, this does not mean that it is no longer heavy in any respect: “Meekness walks so quietly that no one becomes aware of the heavy weight” (UDVS 243; SKS 8, 343). This suggests that the heavy weight of the wrong is still there, but *nevertheless* is treated *as if* it is light, to such an extent that for a meek person, it has become light. The inverted dialectics Kierkegaard uses here means that what is said should not be interpreted in “straightforward” terms. It is dialectical in the sense that it paradoxically affirms two contrasting elements at the same time.

Second, the discourse emphasizes that the forgiving attitude of a meek person is a quality that is not only beneficial to the other but also to that person. As Kierkegaard says, a meek person almost “needs to forgive his enemy” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344). Forgiveness is not just for the benefit of the other, the “enemy”, but also for the one who forgives. In the discourse, it is not explained why exactly this is the case, but it is not difficult to imagine: rather than being captured by feelings of hate, resentment, revenge, etc., it is beneficial to the meek person to lovingly forgive the wrongdoer. Therefore, the discourse praises this attitude as a “glorious quality” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 345).

Thirdly, forgiving is not the same as forgetting. In the discourse, Kierkegaard explains that meekness is rooted in and related to the forgiveness of sins that one receives from God. The one who, in meekness, forgives, lives from the forgiveness of sins received as a gift from God. Kierkegaard explains this again in terms of heavy burdens that are carried lightly. Divine forgiveness implies that the heavy burden of the consciousness of sin is taken away, and the light burden of the consciousness of forgiveness is given instead. As a consequence, “forgiveness is also a burden that must be carried, even though a light burden” (UDVS 246; SKS 8, 345). If one does not carry this light burden, then one takes forgiveness in vain, or makes grace cheap, as Bonhoeffer would call it, following Kierkegaard. In this consciousness of forgiveness, one knows that one is forgiven, which still implies a certain consciousness of what is forgiven: sin. Yet, it is no longer just sin, or guilt, or the wrong, but *forgiven* sin and *forgiven* guilt. Importantly, this clarifies that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. Kierkegaard contrasts a person of faith with a

light-minded person who wants to forget everything, because everything is forgiven and forgotten, and with a heavy-minded person who does not want to let anything be forgotten and continually remembers the guilt but forgets the forgiveness. “But faith says: everything is forgotten, but remember that it is forgiven”. Therefore, the “believer must not forget” it, but “steadfastly recollect that it is forgiven”; as a consequence, “forgiveness cannot be forgotten”, one should “remember that it is forgiven. It is not forgotten, but is forgotten in forgiveness” (UDVS 247; SKS 8, 346).<sup>4</sup>

This applies to divine forgiveness, which differs from human forgiveness to which the virtue of meekness disposes one. It is only God who wipes out sins completely, as John Lippitt argues, while our forgiveness is only ancillary: “I forgive because I recognize that I have been forgiven by God. I therefore forgive you, both out of gratitude to God for forgiving me and in recognition of the fact that God forgives you” (Lippitt 2020, p. 102). The difference between divine and human forgiveness is that a meek person cannot wipe out the wrong of the other completely. Human forgiveness does not erase the misdeeds, making the past completely disappear. The one who lives from forgiveness and receives it as a gift still remembers the misdeeds, namely as misdeeds that are forgiven. If that is the light burden that is carried by the one who lives from divine forgiveness, this should also apply to the wrongdoer who receives and accepts the forgiveness from a forgiving meek person. Yet, this should not be misinterpreted as a *precondition* for forgiving meekness, as we will see.

Fourth, in the discourse and elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s works, it becomes clear that meekness is related to other virtues and should not be absolutized as the only virtue necessary for the Christian life in relation to evil and the wrong. The fact that meekness can do what other virtues such as courage, patience, and magnanimity cannot do does not mean that these and other virtues are not important anymore. This holds, in particular, for justice. The distinction between what is just and unjust, and what is good and wrong, is not only presupposed in the virtue of meekness, as has already been explained, but also emphasized in counterbalance to meekness. In one of his journal entries from 1850 (JN 7, 158; SKS 23, 155; NB16:92), Kierkegaard reflects on the “danger” of meekness, which precisely has to do with the risk of concealing the wrong. Referring to Augustine, he observes that even Christ did not fulfill the commandment stating “when someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the left one toward him”. Christ responded to the servants that struck him on the cheek by saying, “If I have spoken wrongly, prove it; but if I have spoken the truth, why do you strike me?” (JN 7, 158; SKS 23, 155; NB16:92, loosely cited from John 18: 22–23). According to Kierkegaard, Augustine is right when he says that with this conduct, Christ prevents “an additional injustice” (JN 7, 158; SKS 23, 155; NB16:92). Justice matters to such an extent that it keeps meekness in check. The two virtues require each other, which points to some limited unity of the virtues view. This is indeed what Kierkegaard suggests in the remainder of this entry:

Here is something I have often considered in connection with *meekness*: that when carried through unconditionally, in its very gentleness—which indeed lessens the guilt (see my discourses “The Gospel of Sufferings”)—there is the double danger: first, that it can almost reinforce the guilty person in thinking that his guilt is nothing, and, second, that the *meekness* itself can be too severe because of its gentleness, for if someone made him aware of his guilt, he might perhaps stop doing it. For that matter, the leniency of absolute meekness could in fact almost be cruelty, an almost ironical deception. All conditions of the spirit are so wonderfully dialectical that, depending on one’s point of departure, if one sets out to carry something through to its absolute limits, one can end up with exact the opposite outcome. (JN 7, 158; SKS 23, 155; NB16:92)

More explicitly than in the discourse on meekness, where it is already recognized that forgiving is not the same as forgetting and that the wrong is both taken and not taken as what it is, in this entry, Kierkegaard emphasizes that it is important that guilt is acknowledged, and that it is not “nothing”. The difference is that whereas in the discourse, it is said that



the guilt, in some sense, is “concealed” in meekness and that it becomes “less”, in this entry, it appears that injustice should *not* be concealed but rather revealed, in the sense that the wrongdoer comes to recognize what is wrong and stops doing it. The “unconditionality” that characterizes forgiveness that is included in the virtue of meekness may contribute to the continuation of injustice and wrongdoing if it is interpreted in the wrong way. If injustice is concealed in forgiving meekness, injustice is not really criticized, opposed, or stopped.

How is this comment in the journal entry to be interpreted in relation to the discourse? Does Kierkegaard correct his former view here? I do not think that this is a real break with his former understanding. Rather, it is an explication of what is already implied in how the discourse speaks of forgiving meekness in a dialectical way. In the journal entry, Kierkegaard still argues that meekness “indeed lessens the guilt”. This indicates that he still thinks that (forgiving) meekness is able to somehow make the guilt of the other less, i.e., taking it *as if* it is not guilt. However, in the journal entry, he sees the risk of the “unconditionality” and “absoluteness” of forgiving meekness, which does not mean that he now makes forgiveness conditional, as has often been suggested about forgiveness in order to limit its seemingly problematic nature, and that the wrongdoer should first show remorse and regret or should *ask* for forgiveness *before* there can be forgiveness. It is unlikely that Kierkegaard would have this in mind. It is not in line with his overall approach of the biblical command to turn the other cheek as an unconditional attitude. To give but one additional example, in *Works of Love*, forgiveness means “to forgive already when the other perhaps has not had the slightest thought of seeking forgiveness” (WL 336; SKS 9, 331). As Lippitt rightly argues, Kierkegaard holds a view of unconditional forgiveness. However, this does not mean that guilt is wiped out. Rather, the forgiving person “*willfully refuses to see the sin*” (Lippitt 2020, p. 73), even if the other does not show remorse. According to Lippitt, this can be understood if we see forgiveness as a work of love, as Kierkegaard sees it in *Works of Love*. The other is seen lovingly, i.e., in the hope that the other who has committed wrong can transform: “rather than condoning or excusing serious defects, he [Kierkegaard] expresses a faith and hope in *the power of love to transform them*” (Lippitt 2020, p. 96). In this “invitational forgiveness”, the other is not reduced to simply the wrongdoer or perpetrator, but they are seen as a person who is open to or can return to the good. The meaning of “hiding sins” or “concealing guilt” is not that the wrongdoing has been wiped out as if it had never existed—as it was said, only God can carry this out—but rather a refusal to focus on the wrong to determine one’s overall view of the wrongdoer (Lippitt 2020, pp. 100–1).

In sum, forgiving meekness hopes for the good of the other. Forgiving love, which characterizes meekness, cannot wipe out the wrong of the other, but it can treat the other as a person who is not identical with the wrong and still has the potentiality for the good. In other words, the words of the journal entry, the wrongdoer becomes aware of their guilt and stops committing the wrongdoing, which comes as *a result of* the forgiveness that the meek person shows, rather than as a precondition before forgiveness can be given. These dynamics of forgiveness are precisely indicated in the journal entry. Kierkegaard speaks of the “dialectical” nature of categories such as meekness. Meekness should not become “absolutized” to a simple, one-dimensional category, but include the paradox that the guilt of the wrongdoer, although it is indeed guilt and “not nothing”, is taken as if it is not guilt. It hopes that the wrongdoer acknowledges that the wrong that has been committed is indeed wrong and that one needs to (re)turn to the good. It hopes for a “moral transformation of the wrongdoer” (Lippitt 2020, p. 118).

Yet, it must be acknowledged that Kierkegaard’s treatment of meekness still faces some problems, in particular with regard to the tension between meekness requiring unconditional forgiveness and justice. If justice requires that each person receives their due, and if what is due to the perpetrator is punishment, then meekness robs the person of their due by failing to punish. Kierkegaard does not really solve this problem in his treatment of

meekness. However, we can say that he acknowledges that meekness should not be seen as “absolute” and that justice may require something that is in tension with meekness.

### 5. Meekness as Disposition to Resist Nonviolently

The idea that meekness includes a dialectic of both making the wrongdoer aware of the wrong and forgivingly hoping for a transformation in the wrongdoer becomes all the more apparent when we see how meekness is characterized by what we could call “nonviolent resistance”. Kierkegaard’s reference to “turning the left cheek” already suggests that the virtue of meekness has nonviolent connotations. Although, as far as I know, Kierkegaard does not use the term “nonviolence” anywhere, he explains the meaning of the Biblical words in nonviolent terms, in which the active and the passive come together: “Not to strike back is not meekness; nor is it meekness to put up with being wronged and accept this for what it is. But it is meekness to turn the left cheek” (UDVS 245; SKS 8, 344). In other words, meekness is not passively accepting the wrong, insult, or injury, but an active attitude that somehow hopes to bring the wrongdoer to the recognition of what is wrong. We could say that a meek person “is fighting *conciliatingly* for the good to be victorious in the unloving person . . . because the loving one is fighting on the side of the enemy for his benefit” (WL 335; SKS 9, 332).

In any case, meekness means that violent deeds are not met with violent responses; it is the opposite of force or violence. Already in an early upbuilding discourse of 1843 on one of his favorite Biblical texts, James 1:17–22, Kierkegaard characterizes meekness as the opposite of using force: the one who receives the Word “with meekness”, does not “take God’s kingdom by force” but comprehends the things of heaven, “for ‘meekness discovers hidden things’ (Sirach [4:18])” (EUD 139; SKS 5, 141). The idea that in a Christian view, violence should not be met with violence but rather be endured in a nonviolent way is also present in the Christian discourse, “How Can the Burden Be Light?”, and in the journal entries, as we have discussed. It is even more explicitly present in a journal entry from 1851:

Force (*Magt*) may never be used, that is Xnty’s [Christianity’s] view. Rather, one is to suffer, enduring the injustice while also witnessing to the truth, until the other party can no longer endure committing injustice and renounces it of his own accord. (JN 8, 265; SKS 24, 265–266; NB23:123)

This description comes remarkably close to what can be regarded as nonviolent resistance to violence. Violence is not met with violence. Yet, the endured injustice is not just passively accepted. Rather, the truth about it is revealed, and the injustice is criticized, in order to make those who commit injustice aware of what they are doing in the hope that they will stop doing it. Or, to put it even more strongly, the nonviolent resistance to which meekness disposes a person has the faith that evil will not “hold out”. The passive element of enduring and the active element of witnessing come together in the words “suffering struggle” that Kierkegaard uses in the next part of the journal entry, which he explains in metaphorical terms:

The suffering struggle also has a paralyzing effect, as it were. Just as a hypnotist induces the hypnotized person to sleep, with one limb after another losing its vitality, so does this suffering endurance paralyze injustice: no evil can hold out against it. (JN 8, 265; SKS 24, 265–266; NB23:123)

Here, we see the same dialectic that we discovered as qualifying the forgiveness to which meekness disposes a person. By refraining from the use of force in response to the wrong and by turning the other cheek, a meek person both reveals the differences between the good and the wrong, between justice and injustice, between the innocent and the guilty, and at the same time, in meekness, the meek person refrains from seeing the wrongdoer as being identical with the wrong. While enduring the suffering of what is wrong, without striking back, the injustice is paralyzed. It cannot continue because there is no justification for it.

This is not something that can be enforced on the wrongdoer. In the remainder of the journal entry, Kierkegaard therefore emphasizes that the endurance of suffering requires patience. The risk is that one impatiently looks for a shortcut to fight injustice, which always has a great appeal, but “which itself is only all too closely related to injustice: the use of force” (JN 8, 265; SKS 24, 265–266; NB23:123). By using force to protect oneself against injustice, one would show “essentially the same worldliness and essentially the same injustice” as the party that commits the initial injustice (JN 8, 265; SKS 24, 265–266; NB23:123). Although this entry does not refer to meekness, one could say that this is precisely what characterizes the meekness of the one who “turns the other cheek”: it resists injustice by actively enduring it in the hope that this is how the violent evil can be stopped. The nonviolent response of the meek person who turns the other cheek exposes the injustice that is committed, but not as an aim in itself; the aim is to show the alternative to violent injustice: justice.

If we connect the journal entry with what we found about meekness in the discourse, we obtain an informative image of the dynamics of the gentle power of nonviolent resistance against injustice to which meekness disposes a person. The journal entry contains virtue ethical elements: rather than impatience, the virtue of patience is required. In light of the discourse on meekness, we could defend that, in fact, it is about the virtue of meekness rather than patience. For, as we have seen, the difference is that patience lets the injustice exist, whereas meekness, interpreted as a disposition to active nonviolent resistance, uncovers the injustice and wrong committed in a gentle, meek way, i.e., in hope for the good of the wrongdoer.

This whole characterization of meekness as disposing oneself to nonviolent resistance raises the question of whether, according to Kierkegaard, the use of force is never justified. As Comte-Sponville rightly says in his treatise on the virtues, “nonviolence, if taken to the extreme, would prohibit us from fighting effectively against criminal or barbarous violence, not just when it is aimed at us but also when it targets the defenseless and the innocent” (Comte-Sponville 2003, pp. 190–91). There is no space for an in-depth analysis of Kierkegaard’s view of legal authority and the government’s monopoly on the use of force, but two things can be noted.

First, as we have seen, Kierkegaard avoids treating virtuous qualities as absolute or unconditional. As has always been emphasized in the virtue ethics tradition, the virtues are interconnected: there is no courage without justice, there is no temperance without prudence, and similarly, there is no meekness without justice or prudence. Kierkegaard takes meekness that disposes one to nonviolent resistance as a virtue, and not as an absolute principle or a categorical rule of pacifism. Nonviolence cannot be absolute because it would then take the place of justice. What meekness actually means for how one should act depends on the concrete situation in which one is involved. It asks for prudence.

Second, in Kierkegaard’s work, we do not find a categorical rejection of using force, nor does Kierkegaard say that a state should not have an army or that a Christian should not join the army. In a note immediately after the entry on the “danger” of meekness cited above, he endorses Augustine’s view on whether a Christian is permitted to undergo military service completely:

Augustine has a superb response to the question of whether a Christian dares be a soldier; he believes there is nothing standing in the way of this and says non *benefacere* prohibit *militia*, sed *malitia* [it is not war that forbids to do good, but malice]. In addition he appeals to the fact that [John] the Baptist, did not say to soldiers, Throw your weapons away, but rather, Do no violence or injustice to anyone, and be content with your wages. (JN 7, 159; SKS 23, 156; NB16:93)

Elsewhere, he says, “I love my native land (it is true that I have not gone to war, but I believe I have served it in another way . . .)” (JN 5, 101; SKS 21, 97; NB 7:41), which suggests that serving the country by going to war might be a proper way of loving one’s country. In general, Kierkegaard holds a conservative view and supports the monarchy rather than the democratic movements of 1848. “Now, what is my position? Do I attack ‘the government’?”

No, no. But I do say: You are not governing ... the government simply does not use its power as it should" (JN 8, 335–336; SKS 24, 333; NB24:28). Wende (2021) concludes that Kierkegaard endorses the monarchical and authoritative state and only attacks the established order when Christianity's truth is at risk, i.e., when religion and politics are confused in a disastrous way. State authority obviously includes the power to use force to combat evil or to protect the nation—Kierkegaard does not criticize this anywhere.

In sum, what matters to a meek person is that one does good and aims for justice. What this requires concretely depends on the context. The fact that Kierkegaard emphasizes meekness in terms of nonviolent resistance to injustice indeed has to do with the specific socio-political context he addresses, i.e., the confusion of politics and religion, as I will clarify in the final section.

## 6. Socio-Political Implications

As a form of protest, resistance, or opposition to injustice, meekness has socio-political implications, which increasingly become apparent in Kierkegaard's later works.

In the discourse, "How Can the Burden Be Light?", the emphasis is on meekness as an inner quality by which we can carry the heavy burdens of poverty, suffering, and worries about what one "is going to have to live on tomorrow" (UDVS 241; SKS 8, 341). Meekness, first of all, "turns the eyes inward" (UDVS 242; SKS 8, 341). This can be explained from the example of slavery, which Kierkegaard mentions in the discourse. To a slave, meekness means that they treat the

question that is justifiably called the decisive question, the question of freedom, the question that for a born slave surely must be called a question of life and death, to be or not to be—this death-dealing or life-giving question the meek person treats as lightly as if it did not pertain to him, and yet in turn so lightly that in a way it does pertain to him, he says: It does not trouble me to be born a slave, but if I can become free, then I will rather choose that. (UDVS 242; SKS 8, 342)

Here, it seems that meekness is only an inner quality, without consequences for social justice: a slave "is not concerned about freedom and only if it is offered chooses to be free" (UDVS 242; SKS 8, 342). However, in the discourse, I think Kierkegaard is pointing to the importance of the inner quality of meekness as *starting point*. This does not mean that no social reform *follows* from the gospel. It means that it is not its first aim: "Christ did not come *in order to* abolish slavery, even though that will follow and does result from it" (UDVS 242; SKS 8, 342). What, first of all, is needed is the inner quality of freedom, which the virtue of meekness gives. As Kierkegaard says in a journal entry, "It is not exactly stated that meekness serves to bring about our peace, but one may say: if you are meek, then you have peace, even if the whole world was at war and at war with you" (JN 5, 332; SKS 21, 321; NB10:126). Yet, what *follows* from the gospel is indeed the abolition of slavery. For sure, the discourse does not make much of active social reform. This changes in Kierkegaard's later works, where we find articulations of more active social reform.

Whereas in general, the discourse is not very explicit about the socio-political consequences that follow from the nonviolent, loving resistance of meekness, in his later thought, in particular, in numerous journal entries and in his attack on Christendom in *The Moment*, Kierkegaard becomes increasingly aware of the injustice of the Christian culture and the State Church, in which "the poor" have become the victims and in which the gospel is not preached for them, as it was meant originally in Christianity. As a result, socio-political criticism and reform come into view. The "Attack" was "a decisively political form of activism" (Lappano 2018, p. 40). Kierkegaard underscores, so to say, that the Christian faith has a real "preference for the poor" (Gustavo Gutiérrez) and sympathizes with "the oppressed" and the "marginalized" (Lappano 2018, p. 40):

... if Christianity has any special affinity for anyone, if it can be said to belong especially to anyone, then it can be said to belong especially to those who suffer: the poor, the sick, the lepers, the mentally ill and similar people, sinners, criminals—

and look what Christendom has done to them, see how they get removed from life so as not to create a disturbance. (JN 6, 242; SKS 22, 240; NB12:159)

According to Kierkegaard, the clergy seizes Christianity, its consolation, and compassion, “and those unfortunates who ought especially to have benefited from it, they are shoved aside” (JN 6, 242; SKS 22, 240; NB12:159). In another journal entry, he states that “The gospel no longer essentially benefits the poor; no, it has even become (although people are not always aware of this) an atrocious injustice to those who suffer . . . In this way the gospel has been thoroughly falsified” (JN 9, 33; SKS 25, 36; NB26:30). Rather than a call to live a life in imitation of Christ in which a believer takes up the cross in self-denial, Christianity has become a means to have a pleasant and wealthy life. Now that the proclamation of the gospel has proven to be beneficial to the rich and the powerful, we are exactly back to what Christianity wanted to combat. The rich and the powerful not only keep everything, but their success also becomes the mark of their piety, which is the sign of their relationship to God.

But then the old cruelty returns: that the unfortunate, the poor—that it is their own fault; that it is because they are not pious and true Xns [Christians]. Thus they should not only have suffering, but guilt as well, and the rich not only pleasure, but piety as well. (JN 9, 34; SKS 25, 37; NB26:30)

Because of the injustice carried out on “the poor”, socio-political criticism is necessary. Yet, this does not result in a “reformation manifesto”, as [Backhouse \(2018\)](#) rightly states.

Kierkegaard particularly criticizes the mixing of the political and religious spheres in the conglomeration of the church and state in nineteenth-century Denmark. The confusion of the Danish State Church is that the political criteria of power, quantity, and efficiency are applied to Christianity. However,

Christianity is . . . not of the view that the Christian should remain in civil society in order to be morally ennobled—no, on the contrary: it prophesies to him that it means that he will come to suffer. And then the state was supposed to be calculated to develop hum. [human] beings morally, to be the proper medium for virtue, the place in which one can properly become virtuous! In truth, it is just as dubious a place for that purpose as if one were to claim that the best place for a watchmaker or for someone who is to engrave something, is aboard a ship in heavy seas. (JN 10, 280; SKS 26, 274; NB33:34)

The virtues must be cultivated in a way that is appropriate to what they are: moral and religious qualities. The “dying of the world”, which marks the authentically Christian life, as a breaking with concepts in which power, wealth, and prestige are the highest good, creates a sensitivity for the injustice in the world.

More specifically, Kierkegaard criticizes injustice created by the “privileged classes”, which have their own priests as “coconspirators” (JN 7, 316; SKS 23, 310; NB18:84). The clergy identify themselves in a “cultural Christianity” with the elite and thereby drop the poor. In a critical analysis of bishop Mynster’s sermons, Kierkegaard remarks the following:

It is presented so movingly: How happily the poor are able to live, free of all burdens of wealth. Now, is this a discourse designed to provide consolation to the poor? No, it is a turn of phrase that is exceedingly welcome to the rich, because then they do not need to give anything. (JN 7, 316; SKS 23, 310; NB18:84)

Such an injustice needs to be criticized, as Kierkegaard emphasizes increasingly in his later works. However, this should be carried out in the right form, i.e., in the form of nonviolent resistance to which the Christian virtue of meekness disposes one. The truth cannot be enforced on people. Truth, by definition, takes the form of humility, as Kierkegaard expresses in an early note: “When a truth is victorious with the help of 10,000 grumbling ppl. [people]—assuming also that what is victorious in this way is the kind of truth that is victorious in form and method—a far greater untruth conquers” (JN 4, 347; SKS 20, 347; NB4:120). Therefore, it is necessary to remain faithful to meekness and oppose socio-



political injustice in the form of nonviolent resistance and in a loving way, i.e., in the hope that those who commit injustices will come to see the injustice and converse.

In a journal entry from 1848 in which Kierkegaard refers to his discourse, “How Can the Burden Be Light?” he already points out that meekness is related to the criticism of what is wrong in the world:

This, too, is part of the world’s shabbiness: that when a person bears suffering in Christian self-denial, all those who out of cowardice and cunning refrained from coming to his aid take credit for it, as if they had nothing for which to reproach themselves. As I have shown, meekness makes the guilt of other people less, but it does not follow from this that the meek person does not see all their cowardice and wretchedness very well. And from a Christian point of view care must also be taken that the wrong be uncovered. Otherwise, of course, a meek person merely confirms the world in its evil, and the world could never find a better concealment than the meekness of the meek. (JN 5, 174–175; SKS 21, 167–168; NB8:50)

A meek person has the courage to expose evil and to uncover the wrong, but they do so in the manner of meekness, albeit this can be provocative or subversive. Meekness denounces injustice in its own way, i.e., not by striking back, but through nonviolent resistance, which uncovers the wrongs without giving up the wrongdoers. Nonviolent meekness unmasks violence and injustice with the help of love.

As the discourse already indicates, what matters here is character: “The task becomes something different through its relation to the person who accomplishes it. . . . The same wrong that is borne by an ambivalent individual becomes visibly larger when the righteous person bears it” (UDVS 243; SKS 8, 342–343). From a Christian perspective, social justice cannot be accomplished by unjust means, or by using force or revolutionary power, but only in the form of meekness. For, “the Christian will always be recognizable by meekness” (UDVS 246; SKS 8, 346).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Both *Kierkegaard’s Writings* (Kierkegaard 1978–2000) and *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks* (Kierkegaard 2007–2020) translate the Danish *Sagtmodighed* as “meekness,” which I follow in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to Kierkegaard’s works by using standard abbreviations, first to the English translations, either *Kierkegaard’s Works* (Kierkegaard 1978–2000) or *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks* (Kierkegaard 2007–2020), followed by a reference to the now-standard Danish edition, designated as SKS (Kierkegaard 1997–2013), followed by the volume number and page. In the case of references to the notebooks, I will also indicate the specific original entry in Kierkegaard’s own notebooks by using NB, followed by the volume number and the number of the entry. I refer to the volumes from *Kierkegaard’s Works* (Kierkegaard 1978–2000) with the following abbreviations: EUD: *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*; CUP: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; UDVS: *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*; WL: *Works of Love*; CD: *Christian Discourses*; PC: *Practice in Christianity*. JN refers to *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks* (Kierkegaard 2007–2020).

<sup>3</sup> The discourse is without a title, but given the theme, I will refer to it as “How Can the Burden Be Light?”

<sup>4</sup> The relationship between forgiveness and forgetting, particularly in *Works of Love*, is subject to debate. See Lippitt (2020), Ch. 6. Volf’s (2006, chp. 8) claim that, according to Kierkegaard, love can effectively forget wrongs that were committed, in the sense that the wrongs no longer “come to mind”, spawned fierce debates, particularly with feminist authors.

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