KIERKEGAARD AS A THINKER OF DELEUZIAN IMMANENT ETHICS

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In this article, I present an interpretation of Kierkegaard's ethics in terms of Gilles Deleuze's distinction between immanent ethics and transcendent morality. I argue that Kierkegaard's skepticism towards moral prescription, his emphasis on the single individual as the basis of normative evaluation, and his view of Christianity as somehow "beyond" the scope of moral obligation are all functions of a Deleuzian conception of immanent ethics as a non-moralistic form of normativity. On this basis, I argue for two conclusions: first, that Kierkegaard's work is better understood through this framework than through either aretaic or deontological frameworks; and second, that Deleuzian ethics is better served by Kierkegaardian illustrations like patience and stillness, than by the tropes of destruction that are often associated with it.

Dans cet article, je présente une interprétation de l'éthique de Kierkegaard du point de vue de la distinction deleuzienne entre l'éthique immanente et la moralité transcendante. Dans cette perspective, je soutiens que le scepticisme de Kierkegaard quant à la prescription morale, sa conception d'un christianisme « en dehors » du champ de l'obligation morale, et l'accent qu'il fait porter sur le seul individu comme étant la base des évaluations normatives, sont tous fonction d'une conception deleuzienne de l'éthique immanente, en tant que forme amorale de la normativité. Sur cette base, j'affirme deux conséquences : la première, que l'œuvre kierkegaardienne est mieux comprise selon ce cadre que selon, d'une part, le cadre de l'éthique de la vertu, et d'autre part, le cadre déontologique. La deuxième, que l'éthique deleuzienne s'illustre mieux par les exemples kierkegaardiens, comme ceux de la patience et de la tranquillité, que par les tropes de la destruction auxquels elle est souvent associée.

In what follows, I want to draw on Deleuze's concept of an "immanent" ethics, in opposition to what he calls a "transcendent" morality, in order to show that many features of Kierkegaard's Christian or religious ethics satisfy the criteria of this account. This paper comprises three main elements: first, I look at two distinct moments in Deleuze's work to explicate and illustrate the concept of an immanent ethics. These are drawn from his 1970 *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* and 1969 *The Logic of Sense*. After establishing some of the main features of immanent ethics, I move on to Kierkegaard in order to give reasons for my claim that the concept of a "Christian" ethics ought to be understood in line with an immanent notion of normativity. Finally, I address an obvious concern with this account of presenting Kierkegaard as a thinker of immanent ethics—namely, his explicit invocation of transcendence as a distinguishing feature of Christianity. To this I provide a two-fold response: (1) I argue that the invocation of a principle of transcendence (*i.e.*, the transcendence of a God or transcendence as a "movement" beyond immanence) in fact functions *for the sake of* a distinction between immanent modes of existence. (2) I argue that the concept of transcendence that Kierkegaard invokes in these places (especially with respect to principles of movement or the paradoxicality of the incarnated Christ) in fact directs us towards the same sort of phenomena that Deleuze describes in terms of "immanence"—to wit, the irreducibly singular dimensions of concrete experience, which problematize rationalist pretentions towards a full comprehension of existence. I conclude by indicating some of the benefits of this reading of Kierkegaardian ethics: Kierkegaardians gain a vocabulary and a conceptuality for thinking about Kierkegaard's ethics outside of the framework of prescriptive morality; and Deleuzians gain more practicable principles of ethical behaviour beyond the "Romantic" principles of self-destruction and dissolution so often associated with Deleuze's work.

The Concept of an Immanent Ethics

In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze distinguishes immanent ethics from "transcendent" morality on the basis of three properties: first, by distinguishing their respective views on the nature of moral prohibition; second, by distinguishing their opposed understandings of evaluations of good and evil (as compared to the categories of "good" and "bad" emphasized under immanent ethics); and finally, by distinguishing their opposed conceptions of ethics as a "prescrip-

tive," rather than a "descriptive," science.[1] In what follows I will describe each of these in turn.

Deleuze begins his account of the differences between an immanent ethics and a transcendent morality by highlighting their differing conceptions of moral prohibition. From the perspective of transcendent morality, a prescription—*e.g.*, "Thou shalt not eat of the fruit…"—indicates a command requiring the obedience of a subject. An individual "ought not" eat of the fruit of the tree, whatever the basis of this prohibition, because it is immoral—in other words, the commandment expresses an imperative necessity. On the other hand, from the perspective of immanent ethics, a statement of the sort "thou shalt not eat of the fruit of the tree" does not express a *prohibition* against eating of the fruit, but rather indicates a negative relationship between the thing supposedly prohibited (eating of the fruit of the tree) and the consequences with respect to the specific constitution or essence of the individual in question (in this case Adam) to whom the prescription is expressed. Adam "ought not" eat of the fruit of the tree in this case because if he eats of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "[he] will surely die."[2] In other words, the "commandment" not to do something in this case does not indicate an *imperative* constraint on how one ought to act but rather indicates a matter of *fact* with respect to the well-being or essence of the individual to whom it is expressed.[3] An immanent conception of ethics, in this sense, does not present a different mode of expression than the discovery of fact, but rather indicates a fact in a way that—if it is *understood*—will result in some behaviour that corresponds to the activity supposedly "commanded" under the transcendent conception of morality. As Deleuze goes on to point

[1] The basic principles of Deleuze's "immanent" theory of ethics can be found in Daniel Smith, "The Place of Ethics in Deleuze's Philosophy: Three Questions of Immanence" and "Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics," both found in Smith's *Essays on Deleuze*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). Tamsin Lorraine pursues a theory of immanent ethics in *Deleuze and Guattari's Immanent Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), which I discuss below.

[2] Gen. 2:17.

[3] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, (tr.) R. Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 22. See also his 1956–57 lectures in Gilles Deleuze, *What is Grounding?*, (tr.) A. Kleinherenbrink (Grand Rapids: &&& Publishing, 2015), 61. Here Deleuze asserts of Spinoza, "The moral law is ultimately nothing but a badly understood natural law (cf. Adam and the apple: an indigestion)." In the following paragraph, he asserts a continuity between Spinoza and Kierkegaard: "With Kierkegaard this philosophy will be able to call itself a veritable philosophy of the absurd."

out, a behaviour-guiding statement of fact will *appear* to the individual as a commandment if she fails to understand the relation of necessity expressed in the prohibition, between the activity and the harm to the individual that follows from it. In other words, we *act* as though we are obligated morally (almost as if under the sway of a superstition) when we do not understand why we *will not* do what we will not do. Speaking of the geometrical principle of the "rule of three" as an illustration of this idea, Deleuze points out that, for example, one would treat a mathematical technique for solving an equation as a kind of magical rule ("do such-and-such in order to obtain the correct answer") *only if* one did not actually understand the relationship between the method described and the answer to the equation. Seeking to solve an equation and understanding how the various figures of the equation are actually related to one another will lead an individual to solve it properly straight away, under the assumption that one has an interest in achieving the end contained in solving the equation. This is to say, by analogy, that under an "immanent" conception of ethics the relationship between proposition and behaviour is in no way one of obligation or obedience but rather a matter of practical necessity, except where one fails to understand the truth of the relationship between one's well-being and the behaviours thus described.

Corresponding to this difference between moral prohibition and self-conscious necessity, there is a distinction between respective conceptions of the values of "good and evil" under a transcendent morality, and "good and bad" under an immanent ethics. Because the injunction "not to eat…" (for example) expresses a quality of the relationship between Adam's essence as a human and the object he desires, the appellation of "good" in this case refers not to the *person* obeying or disobeying in the sense of a morally obedient or righteous individual, nor even to an action (as prohibited or permitted) properly speaking, but rather to the *object* in question whose conjunction with the body results in an outcome in harmony with the essence in question:

> The good is when a body directly compounds its relation with ours, and, with all or part of its power, increases ours…. The bad is when a body decomposes our body's relation, although it still combines with our parts, but in ways that do not correspond to our essence, as when a poison breaks down the blood.[4]

[4] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 22.

In other words, "good" and "bad," under the conception of immanent ethics, are understood as partial and relative evaluations of an object or activity in terms of its agreement or disagreement with a particular mode of being or essence. It is only *derivatively* in relation to this conception of good and bad that an individual can be called good,

> (or free, rational, or strong) who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby increase his power. [Or an] individual will be called *bad*, or servile, or weak, or foolish, who lives haphazardly, who is content to undergo the effects of his encounters, but wails and accuses every time the effect undergone does not agree with him and reveals his own impotence.[5]

This is to say that, under an immanent conception of ethics, evaluations of goodness and badness are descriptive nominations primarily of certain objects in terms of their beneficial or harmful properties, but *secondarily*, of diverse *ways of existing* as either *tending towards* or *tending away from* the kinds of beneficial or salutary actions that will increase an individual's power of acting. Ethics in this sense functions as a "symptomatology" of whether and how well a mode of existence is organized towards this increase or decrease of its power of acting: a given "mode of existence" may grasp a fortuitous experience as necessary and inevitable, for example, if it is inclined to appropriate what happens in a way that contributes to its own feelings of well-being; it may grasp such an experience as uncontrollable if it is more than willing to despair over the possibility of remaining happy over the longer course of a lifetime. A whole set of evaluative questions arise, here, not for the sake of guiding moral *judgment* about the goodness or badness of the individual in question, but rather *interpretively*, "clinically" (in Deleuze), for the sake of understanding the *types* or *modes* of existence tending towards their own happiness and power or, on the contrary, towards their own disappointment and despair.[6]

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[5] *Ibid*., 23.

[6] On the concept of a "clinical" evaluation of types, see Deleuze's *Essays Critical and Clinical*, and particularly Daniel Smith's long essay discussing the relationship between Deleuze's "clinical" project and the literary (*i.e.*, "critical") studies that Deleuze pursues. Daniel Smith, "'A Life of Pure Immanence': Deleuze's 'Critique et Clinique' Project," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, (tr.) D. Smith and M. Greco (New York: Verso, 1998), xi–liii. For Deleuze, the literary (see in particular

Finally, and related to the latter distinction between moral conceptions of "good and evil" as opposed to ethical conceptions of good and bad, Deleuze draws a distinction between transcendent morality as primarily *prescriptive* in character, as producing a canon for the judgment of individuals, giving guidelines as to how one *ought* to behave (and therefore how one *ought* to be judged), and immanent conceptions of ethics as primarily *descriptive* in nature. Coincident with the claim that the *prescriptive* character of a moral commandment in fact disappears proportionately with an increase in understanding in an individual, Deleuze points out that the conception of a morality as essentially providing a canon for judging individuals fundamentally misunderstands the nature of normative ethical reflection.[7] According to Deleuze, immanent ethics and transcendent morality differ in this respect on account of the way in which normative "clinical" evaluations function as *descriptive* judgments about the ways in which individuals do or do not realize their greatest potential, and not as tools for demanding or requiring of the reader how she ought to behave in any particular way described according to these evaluations. As I establish in what follows, this latter claim—that ethics is more properly understood as a *descriptive* rather than a *prescriptive* science—fits nicely with Deleuze's choice of Stoicism as an illustration of just this way of thinking. This is because, as Victor Goldschmidt notes in his book on Stoic ethics, "in Stoicism…moral norms are formulated not…in the 'optative'"—that is, as providing rules which the reader can and should "opt" to follow—"but rather in the 'indicative,'" in the sense that they are matters of *fact* which can be integrated into one's behaviour though *understanding* how they function, rather than through moral choice.[8] For now, it is sufficient to understand how this distinction between descriptive and prescriptive disciplines fits more generally into the nature of Deleuze's ethical thought. Rather than presenting so many diverse modes of existence *advocated for* as part of his work, Deleuze presents norma-

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his early *Coldness and Cruelty*) is inextricably linked to ethics as a clinical discipline.

[7] See Anthony Uhlmann, "Deleuze, Ethics, Ethology, Art," in *Deleuze and Ethics*, (ed.) N. Jun and D. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011). Uhlmann points out Deleuze's preference for the term "ethology," indicating a kind of science of how animals (including humans) occupy their habitats, over the more prescriptive-sounding "ethics."

[8] Victor Goldschmidt, *Le Système Stoïcien et l'idée de temps* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1953), 68–69; my translation. Deleuze cites Goldschmidt in Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, (tr.) M. Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 348.

tively relevant interpretations of the *ways of being* of diverse forms of identity in such a way that ultimately either do or do not solicit the realization of these modes of behaviour in the reader. One is, at most, *affected* by Deleuze's work on ethical topics—not *commanded* by them.

Having now laid out these features of a "Deleuzian" immanent ethics, I want to look more closely at one particular illustration of this ethics that appears in Deleuze's 1969 book *The Logic of Sense*, where Deleuze brings together a Stoic reflection on ethics and his own more metaphysical thinking, specifically regarding the nature of propositional "sense." Here Deleuze explains how Stoicism as a form of immanent ethics serves to motivate a particular way of behaving "ethically" oneself, without the intercession of either specific commandments or a strong conception of moral obligation. In this there is a precursor to important elements of Kierkegaard's account of Christianity as a particular way of being that allows the fullest expression of one's possibilities for living and acting. Kierkegaard emerges as a kind of immanent ethicist in a way that is not dissimilar to Deleuze's version of Stoic ethics in *The Logic of Sense*.

Stoic Ethics as "Willing What Happens"

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze articulates his "immanent" conception of ethics in terms of the paradoxical, "descriptive" ethics of Stoicism. Here, Deleuze begins by drawing several distinctions between the philosophical orientations of Stoic and non-Stoic schools of thought, highlighting the practical consequences to which these distinctions lead in terms of Stoic versus non-Stoic ethical principles. Deleuze first highlights the difference between what he calls an "ironic" orientation towards the world, in which the concrete is criticized in the name of the ideal, and a "humorous" mindset, according to which one "descends" towards the concrete as a means of undermining the abstract principles on which certain philosophical claims are grounded. According to Deleuze, Socrates's inquiry in the *Euthyphro*, for example, is ironic: Euthyphro claims to be acting piously, and can even—arguably correctly—point to cases and illustrations of the principle of piety, but he cannot for all that give an account of the ideal or form that guides his actions in each of these cases.[9] On the other hand, Diogenes the Cynic (perhaps unsurprisingly) serves as a representative of the humorous mindset: when he walks back and

[9] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 137–38.

forth in front of the Eleatics as a reply to their paradoxes,[10] he undermines their principles of reasoning by appealing to a concreteness that outstrips mere abstract reflection. Deleuze refers to this latter tendency—to *point towards* reality as a way of circumventing the reasoning associated with abstract principles—as a form of "monstration" or "showing": one effects one's aim through a medium of sensibility that exceeds or escapes the order of intellectual comprehension and thus achieves one's aim without the inter-mediation of philosophical thought.[11]

Deleuze draws from this general orientation towards philosophical thinking an account of how these conceptions lead to various views of human selfhood and the respective ethical practices that serve to achieve a maximum of expression related to those forms of selfhood. For Deleuze, "irony" tends to present individual persons as constraining and organizing the materiality that underlies the reality of the world around us. "Humour," on the contrary, sees the pre-individuated mixing of bodies—that is, the "concrete" materiality that underlies one's determination as an individuated human being—as a *differentiated* and generative dimension of experience. Consequently, when Deleuze speaks of the apparently "humorous" character of Stoic philosophy, he means to say that Stoicism directs the individual not towards the principles by which existence is supposed to be constrained in its material character or forms, but rather towards the *ground* from which abstract principles, ideas, and incorporeal "events" arise as distinct phenomena.

Stoic ethics, by extension, reflects this "humorous" decision to direct the individual away from moral principles and towards the forms of necessitation that underlie one's concrete experiences in the world. The Stoic practice of "divination," for example, refers to a technique by which one attempts to discern in the bodies of dead birds, or in the various paths of birds across the sky, the "events" that are supposed to arise on account of a subtle causality nearly impossible to systematize. The diviner used the intense singularity of a bird's entrails, for example, to give guidance on the abstract experiences that could be expected to arise. The Stoic "sage," similarly, made it his task to discern, in the materiality of the world, the ab-

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[10] See Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book VI, Ch. 2.

[11] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 135. Deleuze also associates this dimension of Stoic ethics with the Zen school of Buddhism, which distinguishes itself by its emphasis on "direct," or non-verbal, transmission of enlightenment. See "Translators' Introduction," in *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, (tr.) N. Waddell and M. Abe (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), xi; and Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 136.

stract incorporeal events that would arise for him, and in this way achieve a certain kind of appropriative dispassion through which he would find himself in harmony with the world.[12] Deleuze describes this appropriative receptivity towards abstract "events" as part of a Stoic principle of "willing what happens": one uses access to the necessity of the concrete world as a tool for the acceptance of, or identification with, one's own *fate* as a kind of ethical achievement.[13] In other words, rather than willing *against* or *in favour* of what goes on, the Stoic sage identifies himself with the very necessity of his fate, and consequently earns a distinctive subjectivity in harmony with the very existence to which he is necessitated. Stoic ethics introduces, therefore, neither a prescription of obligatory behaviours, nor a specification of the kinds of behaviour that ought to lead to greater happiness, but rather an account of the particular *way of being* that would seem to follow from an individual's non-illusory understanding of the world around her. And this amounts ultimately to a dispelling of moralistic notions about what ethical self-reflection *ought* to be and do for the individual. As Deleuze writes, "Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us."[14] In other words, to integrate oneself into the flow of the concrete, to recognize one's finitude and the inevitability that governs a life and thereby to adopt and inhabit that life on the undecidable edge between self-expression and self-acceptance: that is the lesson of Stoic ethics in its immanent character.

Kierkegaard's Immanent Ethics

In what sense, then, is Kierkegaardian ethics similar to this conception of ethics as a science of "willing what happens"? The first consideration to bring to bear on this question has to do with the relationship between Kierkegaardian faith and moral rules. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard presents the problem of religious normativity as fundamentally a problem of the failure of prescriptive obligation. Whereas morality had been based on the principle of abdicating one's individual, particularistic desires for the sake of universal social or rational principles, religious normativity applies where actors are no longer able to appeal to the governance of universal

[12] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 144.
[13] *Ibid*., 149.
[14] *Ibid*.

principles for the determination of their actions. But here it is not the *rejection* of moral principles that figures as the most important element of the religious subject's way of acting.[15] Instead, to act in the name of a properly religious motivation, in this context, means to act in terms of a principle that *exceeds* an appeal to a moral right and wrong. Just as Deleuze describes the foundational premise of immanent ethics as the idea that good and bad actions are seen as ultimately only indicative of those behaviours compatible with or in contradiction to the essential nature of the individual, so, here, individuals are typologically distinguished according to the manner in which they carry out their decisions—that is, as expressions of their "selfhood" (linked as this is to one's divine commandment) and not in terms of abstract *norms* against which individuals can compare their actions. The "knight of faith," for example, acts not for the sake of the moral law but—as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio describes it—"for God's sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake."[16] In other words, it is the distinctive nature of the individual in question that is primary in the actions in question. In acting in faith, the individual opens herself up to moral critique specifically because, in spite of her awareness of the supposed claim that morality makes upon her, she instead acts in such a way that she takes upon herself full ownership of her actions, and thus affirms an immediacy between herself and the Absolute in so doing. The religious individual exempts herself from all actions justified by way of representation under the law, and instead acts in a way that is immediately in harmony with her own essence in its relationship to God. The identification of a "religious" domain therefore indicates the existence of a domain of normativity extrinsic to the claims of moral obligation, while nonetheless acknowledging the ostensible claims that this domain makes upon individuals. As Kierkegaard says, it is *resignation* that is sufficient for a conception of

[15] It is important to notice, in *Fear and Trembling*, that the pseudonymous author's main representation of faith is of an act that is *contrary* to ethical obligation. However, as he himself illustrates by reference to imaginative constructions like that of the "tax collector," faith can equally be instantiated by an individual who *obeys* moral rules but does so within the constraints of the religious relationship that Abraham has to moral rules in the binding of Isaac. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, (tr.) H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 267, where Christianity is described as "exemption from doing the ethical."

[16] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, (tr.) H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 59.

moral obligation, whereas *faith* is sufficient to understand the properly Christian mode of normative existence.[17] Hence the peculiar indetermination or absence of moral obligation in Christian ethics reproduces something of the character of "immanent ethical" forms of normativity—to wit, that ethics is primarily a matter of partial or particularistic forms of interest, *without* these being either merely aesthetic, egoistic desires or expressions of moral obligation. Ultimately, one acts neither in the name of one's mere desires nor in the name of moral necessity, but rather as an expression of one's *singularity*—a singularity that falls outside the rational accounting of moral obligation that can be given according to universal principles.[18]

Kierkegaard's signed works are reflective of this principle of acting outside of ethical commands. These works invoke various ideals intended to confound the moral intentionality of the reader and thereby to provoke the kind of "dispassionate appropriation" of one's fate that I spoke of in reference to Stoic ethics. In the "Upbuilding Discourse" entitled "Look at the Birds of the Air; Look at the Lily in the Field," Kierkegaard interprets the injunction to become like "the birds of the air" and "the lilies in the field" in terms of the paradoxical commandment to "seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness."[19] Kierkegaard persistently forestalls questioning here about the meaning and content of the eponymous injunction in order to return the reader to a single, simple commandment: to "seek first God's kingdom." In so doing—and despite the fact that this injunction would appear to serve as an obvious case of religious *obligation*—in essence the reply that this passage makes to the anxious reader seeking some kind of moral guidance is to *frustrate* her moral will to obligation by appealing to the priority of the injunction to *first*

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[17] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

[18] In this interpretation I am particularly close to the interpretation of Andrew Cross, who writes that "teleologically suspending the ethical is not a matter of performing a certain kind of action, [but rather] a matter of the state of the person…in relation to the ethical. The knight of faith is so configured that he will continue to count absolutely on God even when doing so seems certain to lead him to perform an ethically unforgivable action." Andrew Cross, "Faith and the Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," *Inquiry*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2003): 3–28, here 22. I believe my reading is also compatible with that of Jean Wahl in *Études Kierkegaardiennes* (Paris: Édition Montaigne, 1938), who presumably had some influence (direct or indirect) upon Deleuze.

[19] Søren Kierkegaard, "Look at the Birds of the Air; Look at the Lily in the Field," in *Without Authority*, (tr.) H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 10. The biblical passage discussed comes from Matthew 6:24–34.

seek God's kingdom. Here the individual is not asked to set about the performance of any number of obligatory moral actions, but instead to calm her anxious intentionality by guiding her attention back to a single question: "Am I now seeking God's kingdom?"[20] In this context, Kierkegaard argues, the invocation of the stillness of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field refers to the dispassion and receptivity with which an individual seeking God's kingdom would approach the world. Whereas lilies and birds embody virtues like stillness and silence instinctively (primarily by virtue of their inability to speak, and therefore their inability to become reflectively concerned with their circumstances), for intentionally-minded human beings, stillness and silence are in fact ethical accomplishments of the highest sort: one suspends one's desire for the practical tasks one can accomplish and instead inhabits the active/passive duality of *being* in the fullest expression of one's existence.[21] Here again is something of the cultivated non-intentionality discussed in Deleuze's account of Stoic ethics: as with the Stoic sage who identifies herself immediately with the immanent causes that have brought about her current position in *this* particular situation at *this* moment in time, Kierkegaard's ideal here is the figure who no longer directs intentionality outward in accordance with a sense of obligation or moral necessity, but rather identifies herself entirely with the present moment, resting confidently in the Governance of God that permits her to avert her guilty conscience as much as her moral striving. Hence Kierkegaard comments that to seek the kingdom of God is, in a certain sense, to do "nothing": to "become yourself nothing, become nothing before God."[22] One becomes "nothing," in this context, in the sense of releasing the intentionality that separates an individual from what she can do. The individual thus loses her "self" (as an intentionally-minded being) in order to gain herself again, as a self-consciously finite, ethically innocent, singular individual.

In "To Gain One's Soul in Patience," Kierkegaard draws on a similar theme, that of becoming "still," in a meditation on the nature of patience as a means of obtaining one's self. In this discourse, the idea that a self could be gained in this way is presented as essentially

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[20] On the religious injunction as specifically *non-moral* in character, see particularly David Kangas, *Errant Affirmations: On the Philosophical Meaning of Kierkegaard's Religious Discourses* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 6: "The 'Thou Shalt:' an imperative is needed, not as a moral principle, but as an intervention, a disruptive factor."

[21] Kierkegaard, "Bird of the Air; Lily in the Field," 12.

[22] *Ibid*., 10.

paradoxical, since to gain a self—indeed to gain anything—must presuppose a self for whom this gaining can take place.[23] What, then, could it mean to "gain" a self, when to have a self is the very condition for any gaining in question? For Kierkegaard, this question is isomorphic with the problem of the nature of acquiring patience (*Taalmodighed*). In patience, we acquire the very thing which we would seem to require for its acquisition: the capacity for receptivity adequate to becoming a patient person would seem to depend upon our possession of an already-patient character. In this sense, as Kierkegaard points out, to "gain" a self—just as much as to "become" patient—implies a temporality and a metaphysics that defies one's intentionally-minded approach to the world.[24] The paradoxical injunction to gain one's soul in patience is a kind of invitation to *forestall* one's anxious moral intentionality. As in the discussion of seeking first God's kingdom, it is the self-conscious intentionality of obligation that is eschewed in favour of a non-prescriptive invitation to consider one's very understanding of ethical behaviour in the first place. Kierkegaard here presents us with a Stoic "monstration" of Christian ethics, pointing the reader towards the virtues of patience and receptivity that allow for a realization of one's full human potential.[25]

In these signed discourses, therefore, Kierkegaard's discussions of Christian ethics do not present the reader with mere moral obligations, but rather are aimed towards attuning the reader to the paradoxical task of becoming a Christian as a particular mode of existential self-expression. These discourses, not only through their discussions of paradoxical virtues like stillness and patience, but also in their very form, orient the reader towards a mode of thinking about ethics entirely distinct from that of transcendent morality. Rather than appealing to principles of moral judgment (good and evil) and

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[23] Søren Kierkegaard, "To Gain One's Soul in Patience," in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, (tr.) H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 162–63.

[24] Kierkegaard, "To Gain One's Soul in Patience," 169: "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."

[25] In Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), the author identifies what I am calling an ethical "self-realization" with a paradoxical affirmation of what one is (and hence with a dialectic of activity and passivity involved there), by describing Kierkegaard's "patience [*Taalmodighed*]" as "hav[ing] the courage [*Mod*] to endure [*at taale*] the truth of the situation," Mackey, *A Kind of Poet*, 106.

prescriptive intentionality, these discourses figure as direct interventions into the experience of the reader by illustrating those ways of being that most directly correspond to an individual's existential self-realization.[26] Just as Deleuze introduces the concept of an "immanent" ethics in order to function in the service of the reader's ethical growth, Kierkegaard's accounts of patience and faith reflect the specifically Christian ideal of dispassionate "transparency" with respect to the foundational power of God, highlighting the ways in which an individual can achieve, or fail to achieve, the kind of immediate identification with one's metaphysical dependency that is a distinctive quality of faith. In this sense, Kierkegaard's ethics involves the kind of ethical *amor fati* that prefigures Deleuze's immanent ethics, showing how a rejection of the metaphysics of moral obligation can lead readers to a deeper ethic of joy and self-realization.

The Problem of Transcendence

Having shown, in what precedes, how Kierkegaard's Christian ethics restates certain central features of a Deleuzian conception of immanent ethics, I now want to consider a fairly obvious objection to this reading. This would have to do with the way in which, for Deleuze, to consider normativity in terms of immanence, rather than transcendence, means specifically to oppose "transcendent" values in terms of which an individual's actions can be judged. On a superficial level, then, it would seem that this reading invites a strong rebuttal on the grounds of Kierkegaard's regular invocation of "transcendence" as a *distinctive* principle of (his) Christian thought. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, the pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis describes Christian ethics as presupposing a dogmatics that has "transcendence" at its core; and, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus writes that, whereas a non-Christian conception of religion—what he calls "Religiousness A"—remains governed by principles of "immanence," "the *paradoxical-religious*" (*i.e.*, Christian) conception of religion "breaks with immanence and makes existing the absolute contradiction—not within immanence but in opposition to imma-

[26] On the topic of reserving the individual her own freedom in this ethics, see Søren Kierkegaard, "The Expectancy of Faith," in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, (tr.) H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 18.

nence."[27] In other words, Christianity specifically involves the principle of a transcendent God whose existence cannot be comprehended according to the principles of "immanent" rationality.

In response to this potential rebuttal, two things can be said. First, there is the fact that within Kierkegaard's own system of ethics, the principle of a transcendent God only intervenes for the sake of the more primary distribution of *types* of existence involving faith and, for this reason (as Deleuze himself says at various points), transcendence is only there *for* immanence in the immanent ethical sense that I have described. Second, there is the fact that, as I will argue, Kierkegaard's conception of "transcendence"—especially when it is a matter of the "movement" or "becoming" that he associates with the discontinuity of faith—refers to virtually the same conceptual object that Deleuze identifies by use of term "immanence": to wit, the irreducibly singular world that cannot be grasped using the generality of abstract categories such as one finds in rationalized morality.

First, to the idea that transcendence in fact serves for the sake of the immanent distribution of "types" of existence, one can say that this claim is itself something that Deleuze and Guattari themselves affirm in their references to Kierkegaard in *What is Philosophy?* There, the authors specifically refer to the "illusion" of transcendence in Kierkegaard in order to show that—for Kierkegaard—despite the appeal to an apparently transcendent God whose existence should abstract us from the immanence of our ethical lives, this concept of a God whose existence can only be the object of a non-rational belief more immediately serves to distinguish so many "modes of existence" of the one who struggles to affirm the possibility of his happiness in the here-and-now of concrete existence.[28] It is for this reason that Kierkegaard is classified as a thinker primarily distinguished by virtue of the "rich series of characters who *are* so many modes of concrete existence" that he describes.[29] According to this reading, the principle of transcendence that Kierkegaard identifies does not necessarily *compete* with the immediate, non-prescriptive character of immanent ethics, but in fact serves to

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[27] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, (tr.) R. Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 21; Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 573.

[28] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, (tr.) H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 74.

[29] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, (tr.) H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 114.

organize this mode of ethical reflection, where determinations of "kinds" or "types" of lives depend upon the ways in which individuals can take up and live in relation to the paradoxical principle of the "God in time," or fail to do so. Christian ethics, in this context, remains governed by the principle of *how* individuals live and inhabit their world, rather than what they *ought* to do in the manner of a transcendent morality.

A second reply to the aforementioned objection has to do with the specific character of transcendence that Kierkegaard emphasizes. There are two points to be made here in Kierkegaard's favour, both of which, incidentally, ought to challenge conventional interpretations of Deleuze's work as fundamentally a thinking of immanence. When Kierkegaard invokes the concept of transcendence with respect to the paradoxicality of Christianity, the paradox is intended specifically to refer to the reality of an object which cannot be adequately understood in terms of the categories of rational reflection. Speaking of the divine "paradox" of the "God in time" in *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus writes that a relationship with the Eternal "coming-into-existence" requires "faith" (*Tro*) *because* it is something that cannot be grasped according to the principles of rational, reflective understanding. If to know things *a priori* means to set the principles for the possibility of human experience over and above the singularity of concrete events, then to have faith in an event like the appearance of God in time—something supposed to "transcend" the immanence of rational reflection—specifically means to orient oneself with respect to what lies *beyond* the realm of mere rational reflection. In this sense, it directs us towards something *historical* and *factual*, and therefore towards the irreducibility of concrete, temporally-expressed reality, and not—as others would have it—to something that is "beyond" experience in the manner of an ineffable abstraction. Here it is the singularity of the object—what Deleuze would say cannot be grasped by large, generic concepts—that Kierkegaard intends by the idea of transcendence.[30]

Related to this, when Kierkegaard specifically invokes the concept of transcendence in reference to the kind of "rupture" or "transition" brought about through faith, this concept is used in order to indicate the way in which "movement" and "becoming" entails *real change and novelty* in contrast to the "immanence" of merely "logical" movement.[31] Whereas for Deleuze the concept of immanence is

[30] See Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, (tr.) H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 44, where Deleuze cites Kierkegaard approvingly.
[31] See, in particular, Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 17–19.

intended to highlight the way in which phenomena of change and becoming in fact *ground* concepts of identity, and therefore to show that transcendence is an illusion predicated on immanence, for Kierkegaard "immanence" is understood as what *misrecognizes* the nature of reality for precisely the same reasons—namely, that in what is merely thought or understood dialectically, there is no *true* movement but the misapplication of a category of existence to a category of reflection.[32] Consequently, when Kierkegaard discusses transcendence as a principle of Christian ethics, he is indicating thereby the close association between the concept of faith as a kind of existence-changing property, and the *real change* or novelty that belongs to this transformation. In this case, "transcendence" reflects the kind of ungrounded or unlimited "becoming" that Deleuze says is precisely a feature of immanence: "Movement of the infinite does not refer to spatiotemporal coordinates [but rather] takes in everything, and there is no place for a subject and an object that can only be concepts…. The relative horizon recedes when the subject advances, but on the plane of immanence, we are always and already on the absolute horizon."[33] To interpret this passage, one could say that, for Deleuze, movement without underlying *subjectum* is what defines the nature of immanence (because of its difference from the "grounding" character of what transcends phenomenal change and becoming), whereas for Kierkegaard, *this same quality* is what characterizes genuine change as *transcendent* since real change loses the conditioning sameness of reflection which turns all becoming into a movement "of" or "within" some abstract *suppositum* ("*Geist*," for example, for Hegel). Consequently, "transcendence" functions very differently for Kierkegaard than it does for Deleuze, and the valorization of *becoming* remains essential to both their accounts, despite the fact that one adopts the term "transcendence" and the other adopts the term "immanence" when speaking of their highest ethical ideals. For both, their ethics remain a matter of accepting the becoming that is endemic to human existence, and only an "immanent" ethics (in the Deleuzian sense) can account for the centrality of this principle by rejecting the moral rule-giving that tends to restrict becoming, just as it does for Kierkegaard's account as well.

Hence it is clear that Kierkegaard and Deleuze not only agree on their conceptions of normativity, but also that a closer look at this apparent point of conflict only deepens our understanding of the similarities between their approaches to ethics. For both, it is the

[32] See *ibid*., 81–85.
[33] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 37–38.

emphasis on the concreteness of existence—on the "becoming" essential to it, and on the principles that guide an individual towards or away from this becoming—that underlies both of their conceptions of normativity. For both, the notion that ethics should be a mere accounting of obligatory or forbidden objects of willing is something straightforwardly rejected. And it is the way in which a kind of faith or belief serves to liberate individuals from the familiar problem with moral guilt that leads both to consider belief as a key element of their ethics of affirmation.[34]

Conclusion

So what can be gained from this interpretation of Kierkegaard as a thinker of immanent ethics in this sense? To my mind there are at least two substantive benefits to be gained from such a reading: one from a "Kierkegaardian" perspective, and the other from a "Deleuzian" perspective.

To begin on the Kierkegaardian side of the equation:

For Kierkegaardians, the way in which Kierkegaard thinks about Christian ethics as somehow "beyond" traditional morality, and the kinds of practical reflections he pursues (for example, in the signed *Works of Love*, where he discusses the duty to love one's neighbour) are objects of perennial interpretive debate. Some argue that Kierkegaard's normative thought ought to be understood in terms of a kind of virtue ethics, arguing that Kierkegaard's discussions of "faith," "patience," and "humility" sketch a set of qualities necessary for happiness in a sacred world.[35] Others defend an interpretation of Kierkegaard as a kind of "divine command" theorist whose appeal to extra-rational principles remains within a broadly deontological, albeit Christian, framework.[36] On the reading I have presented here, however, one thing both of these kinds of interpretation tend to overlook is the particular way in which prescriptive discourse in Kierkegaard is frustrated by an appeal to the non-intentional mode of existence of Christianity. If Christian ethics depends in a central way on a certain receptivity or even passivity that *coincides* with a kind of self-realization, it is because certain forms of ethical behav-

[34] See, again, Kangas's *Errant Affirmations* for a reading of Kierkegaard that emphasizes these themes.

[35] See, for example, Edward Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

[36] See, for example, C. Stephan Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

iour (*e.g.*, obedience) by *themselves* displace the individual from the properly religious realization of their richest human potential. Consequently, to be a Christian on these accounts cannot square with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the *receptive* dimension of his ethics. From the perspective of my Deleuzian reading, however, such principles of moral obligation or prescription are recognized as *themselves* alienating from the aim of normative self-realization, to the favour of a conception of normative ethics that aims to dissolve the illusions of morality in a form of appropriative understanding. A consideration of Kierkegaard's thinking as essentially "immanent" in character thus provides readers with a set of conceptual tools for understanding various perplexing features of his work—for example, his pseudonymous cataloguing of normative "personae," the "solicitous," indirect manner of his writing, and his paradoxical emphasis on non-intentional virtues like patience and stillness—as well as some of the more obvious features, like his distinction between rationalistic morality and religious faith, and his reticence towards moralistic prescription. From this perspective, we gain a radically new and generative conceptual approach to understanding Kierkegaard's thought, *accounting* for its strangeness with respect to conventional conceptions of ethics, rather than explaining it away.

A second upshot of this reading falls to the Deleuzian side of the equation, where a reading of Kierkegaard that self-consciously "Christianizes" Deleuze's philosophy might contravene an otherwise undesirable way of thinking about the practical impact of immanent ethics. Although there is work on what a Deleuzian ethics might look like, and several accounts that argue for various practical extrapolations from his mode of normative thinking (for example, Gordon Bearn's *Life Drawing*,[37] which attempts to sketch a broadly "existentialist" version of Deleuzian ethics), still the field of illustrations of what it might mean to live in accordance with an immanent theory of ethics is in need of development. An elaborated theory of how one ought to understand Deleuze's ethics, and of what kinds of practices can be derived from it, has yet to be thoroughly elaborated. By looking to Kierkegaard's discussions of virtues like patience, stillness, love, and faith as expressions of an immanent ethics, it becomes clear what it might mean, within concrete experience, to live an immanent ethics such as Deleuze understands it. Moreover, through these themes one can avoid a tempting (mis)interpretation of Deleuze's ethics more generally—namely, the tendency to interpret his ethics

[37] Gordon C. F. Bearn, *Life Drawing: A Deleuzean Aesthetics of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

in the direction of a Romantic valorization of self-destruction as an expression of some value of self-realization. In fact, this tendency accounts for one reason why interpreters like Tamsin Lorraine and Christine Battersby have questioned the usefulness of Deleuze's practical philosophy for individuals who have historically been the object of systematic exclusion and violence. Lorraine, for example, writes that Deleuze and Guattari might appear to "emphasize nomadic space over the homier spaces that are our resting point as we continue to unfold."[38] And Battersby argues against the practicality of Deleuze and Guattari's thought for feminism specifically on the grounds of their apparent preference for self-dissolution over the more adaptable values of change and self-development. (In fact, it is for this reason that Battersby argues on behalf of Kierkegaard as presenting a "model of temporality and also of self which refuses the Greek notion that all becoming is only a recollection of being, whilst also rejecting the Heraclitean counter-thesis that life is only a stream."[39]) In other words, for these interpreters, Kierkegaard may serve as a positive practical alternative to Deleuze's apparent emphasis on self-dissolution as a form of escape from moral judgment. From this perspective, Deleuze's understanding of ethics is balanced by the more intuitable appeal of forms of ethical growth like becoming patient, falling in love, and learning to forgive oneself that often appear in Kierkegaard's work. Kierkegaard's thought, consequently, appears as a valuable resource for reframing Deleuze's work away from the more problematic emphases on modes of self-destruction and abnegation. Through Kierkegaard, Deleuze might have more to say to subjects who have already struggled enough with experiences of self-destruction and are perhaps in greater need—even for the sake of making life more intense—of experiences of self-expression and self-acceptance. These are resources that Kierkegaard's thought can offer.

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[38] Lorraine, *Deleuze and Guattari's Immanent Ethics*, 140.
[39] Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 196.