

## Creation: By, For, and Before God

Andrew B. Torrance

### Introduction

Creation is not a major theme in Kierkegaard's writings. Indeed, for those familiar with Kierkegaard, it may be surprising to find a chapter on creation in a companion to his theology. However, when one explores his writings with an eye to discern his views about creation, we discover that he held a deep admiration for the natural order as created, governed, and belonging to God.

At the outset, it is worth saying something about the concept of 'creation'. Due to the process-product ambiguity, the term 'creation' is open to interpretation. It denotes a creative act, a creative event, and a created product. Rather than bemoaning this ambiguity and opting for a more precise definition of creation in this chapter, I shall embrace this ambiguity. By working with the broad usage of this term, as it is variously defined, we are given much more scope for reflecting on Kierkegaard's vision of creation.

So where does one first turn to develop an account of Kierkegaard's understanding of creation? A superficial trawl through his writings does not bear much fruit. One might think she has hit gold when coming across the discourse, "Think about Your Creator in the Days of Your Youth".<sup>1</sup> However, as one reads this homily, it quickly becomes apparent that it offers very little insight into a doctrine of creation. Upon digging a little deeper below the surface of Kierkegaard's writings, we can begin to

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<sup>1</sup> *EUD*, 233–51.

notice allusions to his thoughts on various features of creation. Then, if we go beyond his formal writings and look into his journals and notebooks, we find a good scattering of reflections on creation – personal, theological, and philosophical. What makes the journals and notebooks particularly helpful is that they provide us with some insight into what is going on in the mind of Kierkegaard during his official authorship.

In light of Kierkegaard's patchy engagement with the doctrine of creation *per se*, much of what I shall be doing in this chapter is piecing together fragments to try to present a more integrated picture of his theology of creation. As I do so, I shall draw attention to five aspects of his thought that pertain to his doctrine of creation:

1. his commitment to the doctrine of creation out of nothing;
2. his account of God as the power who established creation;
3. his perception of the beauty of creation;
4. his account of human uniqueness; and
5. his critique of the natural sciences.

Looking at these aspects will bring us to discover a profound understanding of the world as a creation that is purposefully created, defined, and governed by the transcendent creator. Cognizant of the loving nature of God's creative activity, we shall find that Kierkegaard held a deep appreciation for the goodness and beauty of creation. At the same time, we shall also notice an awareness of the fallenness of creation, particularly as he attends to humanity's despairing venture to resist its created nature. Nonetheless, this awareness does not diminish Kierkegaard's cognizance of the goodness of creation. His knowledge of human rebellion is overshadowed by a hope and joy in the fact that the Creator came to be with creation, to be at one with creation in

Jesus Christ, and thereby reconcile creation into loving relationship with himself. For Kierkegaard, '[c]reation is [really] only completed when God includes himself in it'.<sup>2</sup>

### **I. Creation Out of Nothing**

Kierkegaard always had Hegelianism in his sights. In particular, he was committed to critiquing what he saw to be a Hegelian confusion of God with the world, which he associated with pantheism.<sup>3</sup> A decisive teaching for addressing this confusion is the doctrine of creation out of nothing.<sup>4</sup> In alignment with traditional Christian orthodoxy, he viewed this doctrine as foundational to maintaining the absolute difference between God and creatures.

As well as making clear the creator/creature distinction, this doctrine also helps to make it plain that every facet of created existence is dependent on and objectively defined by God. It asserts that, in every respect, God is Lord over creation.<sup>5</sup> And, when this is affirmed with a recognition that God is the wholly benevolent Lord, whose activity corresponds to his essential goodness, this doctrine supports the conclusion that creation is 'all very good'.<sup>6</sup> As that which God lovingly wills into existence, creation lives and moves and has its being as a reflection of God's love. Its existence is grounded in the love of God such that 'every one of [God's] works seems to bear the appendage:

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<sup>2</sup> *KJN* 6, p. 176 / *SKS* 22, NB12:63, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> *CUP*, 122–3 / *SKS* 7, 117–18.

<sup>4</sup> While he makes very little reference to this doctrine in his formally published writings, his deep respect for this doctrine is clear from his journals and notebooks.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard writes: 'A beautiful word to express that all creation serves but one Lord and looks to only One: *uni-versum* (The universe).' *KJN* 5, p. 333 / *SKS* 21, NB10:124, p. 321.

<sup>6</sup> *CD*, 291 / *SKS* 10, 313.

*Praise, thank, worship the Creator*'.<sup>7</sup> Creation is the beloved of God that finds its true identity in loving conformity to its creator.

By creating that which is other than himself, God brings into existence that which has self-definition: that which is distinguished from God in itself. For most of creation, this self-definition simply flows from its createdness; most created objects are simply distinguished from God by the fact that they have been created out of nothing. But then, in their otherness, they live as beings who are true to their nature, as it has been determined by God; they cannot make self-conscious choices to define themselves otherwise. For human beings, however, the situation is very different. The otherness they experience comes with an ability to betray God and, in an act of despair, seek to define themselves apart from God. They have the ability to turn against their nature and fail to be who they truly are.

As I discuss further below, Kierkegaard holds that God creates human beings with a volition that allowed them to behave as though they are lords over their existence, as though they are creators of their identities. He insisted that God 'refuses to intervene forcibly' in their life-journeys.<sup>8</sup> This gives them the possibility of either taking offence at both God and their createdness, or choosing to conform to his creative purposes. If, on the one hand, a person chooses to take offense at God, thereby denying his created nature, he becomes caught up in a life of sin: a state of imprisonment in which he 'holds himself captive'.<sup>9</sup> By so doing, he looks to himself, as if he were Lord and Creator and, denying his createdness, creates the wrong existence for himself. He

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<sup>7</sup> *CD*, 291 / *SKS* 10, 313.

<sup>8</sup> *JP* 2:1450, p. 153 / *SKS* 26, NB34:29, pp. 340–1.

<sup>9</sup> *PF*, 17 / *SKS* 4, 226.

chooses a life of unfreedom.<sup>10</sup> If, on the other hand, a person chooses to embrace his createdness before God, then he engages in ‘the true worship of God’.<sup>11</sup> By so doing, not only does he praise, thank and worship God by his created existence, but also with the choices he makes within that existence. He chooses to be true to his created nature, to who he is.

Kierkegaard viewed it as a testimony to ‘the wondrousness of creation’ that God would create beings who could choose their identities – beings who do not concur with God by natural instinct but by voluntary choice.<sup>12</sup> By creating such beings, God makes it possible to have a reciprocal relationship with those creatures.<sup>13</sup> To be clear, this relationship is not a symmetrical relationship between equals. And Kierkegaard was adamant that the reciprocal nature of this relationship did not compromise God’s aseity.<sup>14</sup> For him, the omnipotence of God is such that God can create out of nothing

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<sup>10</sup> *PF*, 17 / *SKS* 4, 226.

<sup>11</sup> *CUP*, 246 / *SKS* 7, 223.

<sup>12</sup> *CUP*, 246–7 / *SKS* 7, 224.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus writes: ‘Nature, the totality of creation, is God’s work, and yet God is not there, but within the individual human being there is a possibility (he is Spirit according to his possibility) that in inwardness is awakened to a God-relationship, and then it is possible to see God everywhere.’ *CUP*, 246–7 / *SKS* 7, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Climacus ponders that the god ‘must move himself and continue to be what Aristotle says of him, ἀκίνητος πάντα κινεῖ [unmoved, he moves all]. But if he moves himself, then there of course is no need that moves him, as if himself could not endure silence but was compelled to burst into speech. But if he moves himself and is not moved by need, what moves him then but love, for love does not have the satisfaction of need outside itself but within.’ *PF*, 24 / *SKS* 4, 231.

without becoming 'ensconced in a relationship to another'; in his omnipotence, God 'can give without giving up the least bit of its power'.<sup>15</sup>

How is this possible? Kierkegaard did not think he could begin to explain how God creates such an arrangement. He notes that it is 'inconceivable' that God can create 'a being that is independent vis-à-vis omnipotence': that 'omnipotence, with its mighty hand, can take hold of the world so powerfully and can also make itself so light that what has been brought into being has independence'.<sup>16</sup> But what he does say is that it is made possible by an act of creation out of nothing.

[I]f a [human] being had the least bit of independent existence vis-à-vis God beforehand (with respect to *materia*), he [God] could not make him free. Creation out of nothing is, once again, an expression of the capacity of omnipotence to make someone independent. He to whom I owe absolutely everything – even while he has just as absolutely retained everything – this is the person who has in fact made me independent. If in creating a [human] being God himself had lost a little of his power, he would indeed be unable to make a [human] being independent.<sup>17</sup>

To return to a previous point, Kierkegaard's commitment to the doctrine of creation out of nothing lent support to his critique of the Hegelian philosophy that he believed was distorting Danish theology. For example, he has this philosophy in mind when he notes:

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<sup>15</sup> *KJN* 4, p.57 / *SKS* 20, NB:69, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 57 / *SKS* 20, NB:69, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 57 / *SKS* 20, NB:69, p. 58.

the idea that 'God could create beings who are free in relation to himself is the cross that philosophy could not bear but upon which it has remained hanging'.<sup>18</sup> The doctrine of creation out of nothing calls for a recognition that there is no human philosophy that can include *within it* an adequate representation of the eternal God, who is beyond human reason. As such, one of the key features of Hegelianism that Kierkegaard sought to critique was its overconfidence in the human ability to comprehend God: to incorporate God into a systematic understanding of the world-historical process in which 'God does not play the role of the Lord'.<sup>19</sup> For him, Hegel's philosophy invited a certain lack of respect for God – a lack of fear and trembling. Instead of a transcendent God, God was viewed as someone who could be made at home in the bourgeois culture of Denmark. The customary Christianity of Denmark was a testimony to the Hegelian perception that God could be known in and through human culture.<sup>20</sup> Aside from the doctrinal difficulties with such a theology, Kierkegaard also saw this theology as inviting a forgetfulness of God's transcendence.

For Kierkegaard, when a culture becomes desensitized to God's transcendence, it can become all too easy for that culture to confuse God with creaturely objects and phenomena. As a result, persons can start to confuse their lives before God with their

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<sup>18</sup> *KJN* 2, p. 95 / *SKS* 18, FF:149, p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> *CUP*, 156 / *SKS* 7, 173. Kierkegaard writes: 'Father in heaven! You are incomprehensible in your creation; you live afar off in a light which no one can penetrate, and even if you are recognized in your providence, our knowledge is still only weak and obscures your clarity. But you are still more incomprehensible in your grace and mercy.' *JP* 3:3409, pp. 561–2 / *SKS* 27, Papir340, p. 355.

<sup>20</sup> Commenting on Hegelianism, Climacus writes: 'In the world-historical process, God is metaphysically laced in a half-metaphysical, half-esthetic-dramatic, conventional corset, which is immanence.' *CUP*, 156 / *SKS* 7, 173.

lives before creation. Not only does this lead to a forgetfulness of God *qua* creator, but also to a more general forgetfulness of createdness. Creation becomes something that is not objectively defined by the creator but by the imagination of the creatures who live within it. Human beings come to perceive creation as something that can be known on its own terms (or, more precisely, on their own terms) as an end in itself – as a self-defining natural order rather than a divinely defined creation. In turn, when theology is done under these circumstances, God becomes a projection of human beliefs, and theology becomes mythology – ‘mythology in the proper sense[, which] is the creation of God in human form’.<sup>21</sup> In view of this dynamic, Kierkegaard implores:

Recall that you are created in his image and according to his likeness, and this is the highest and the most glorious thing that can be said – and you wilfully and arbitrarily want to create him in your image and form him according to your likeness.<sup>22</sup>

While the danger of persons forgetting their createdness is not always an explicit concern in Kierkegaard’s writings, it is nonetheless an underlying concern that is tied to

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<sup>21</sup> *JP* 3:2700, p. 190 / *SKS* 27, *Papir*200, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> *KJN* 1, pp. 267–8 / *SKS* 17, *DD*:198a, p. 276. To point beyond the theme of creation, for Kierkegaard, there is only one anthropocentric turn at the heart of Christianity: God assuming human form in the incarnation. In Jesus Christ (the ‘God-man’), the Creator assumes createdness and thereby gives the world the foremost revelation of who the Creator is. But, to be clear, this does not give human beings the ability to know God *qua* Creator. It simply gives human beings the capacity to know who God is for us. Anti-Climacus writes: ‘In paganism, man made god a man (the man-god); in Christianity God makes himself man (the God-man).’ *SUD*, 126 / *SKS* 11, 237.



his emphasis on divine transcendence. And, for him, the doctrine of creation out of nothing is particularly apt for clarifying the proper place of creation before the eternal God.

## II. The Power that Established Creation

As we have just seen, Kierkegaard was clear that it is only God who determines the true nature of creation. And, for him, God determines that creation should have a fixed purpose: one that is not 'up to creation' but defined by the love of God.<sup>23</sup> The main place where he addresses God's purposive creativity is in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Here, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Anti-Climacus offers an extended discussion of what it means to be a self. And, for him, the self has a particular nature that is defined according to 'the power that established it': God the creator.<sup>24</sup>

In complete contrast to the secular forms of existentialism that would come later, Kierkegaard was committed to a theological definition of human existence. He believed that the task of the true self was not to create its own distinctive identity but to become the self it was created to be.<sup>25</sup> In Anti-Climacus's words, it is futile to attempt to define

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<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard associates the contentment that creation makes for itself, apart from God, with an 'arbitrary merit'. He writes: '[a self-made contentment] is a sign of your miserable state that only witnesses against you! There is really nothing in the wide world that is able (no more than the whole world is able) to compensate a person for the harm he would inflict on his soul if he gave up the thought of God'. *EUD*, 235 / *SKS* 5, 235.

<sup>24</sup> *SUD*, 14 / *SKS* 11, 130.

<sup>25</sup> This meant that Kierkegaard denied that true freedom was to be found by focusing on 'freedom of choice'; indeed, he believed such focus leads to the 'the loss of freedom'. *KJN* 7, pp. 62-3 / *SKS* 23, NB15:93, pp. 64-5. In agreement with Augustine, he insisted that 'abstract freedom of choice (*liberum*

oneself apart 'from the power that established it'.<sup>26</sup> This is because, no matter how hard a person tries to recreate himself (tries to define himself by his own hopes and dreams), and no matter how much a person might believe he has successfully done so, his true self will always be defined 'by that directly before which it is a self', which will always be 'the power that established it'.<sup>27</sup> For Kierkegaard, a person's created nature always holds true; it cannot be lost, even if a person embraces a life that is seemingly ignorant of his createdness.<sup>28</sup>

This criterion for selfhood is particularly evident in Anti-Climacus's account of the self as 'a self directly before God': a self that is defined according to the purposiveness of its creator. For Anti-Climacus, the creator's criteria are definitive for determining what it means to be a 'vital' and 'healthy' self, irrespective of whether or not a person is conscious of her createdness.<sup>29</sup> God's definition of what it means to be

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*arbitrium*) is a phantasy', and alongside Gottfried W. Leibniz and Pierre Bayle he asserted 'a perfectly disinterested will (equilibrium) is a nothing, a chimera'. *JP* 2:1268, p. 59 / *SKS* 24, NB23:170, p. 287. Concrete human freedom is not grounded in a state of being equally disposed to go one way or another. Human lives are swayed by their subjective content; indeed, in one journal entry Kierkegaard notes that this content is 'so decisive' that a person can only ever choose to go one way. *KJN* 7, pp. 62-3 / *SKS* 23, NB15:93, pp. 64-5. For him, true human freedom is realized by aligning with the order for which God established creation. Any so-called 'freedom' to choose between obeying and disobeying God is, in actual fact, a 'freedom' to choose between freedom and unfreedom, between humanity and inhumanity, between truth and untruth.

<sup>26</sup> *SUD*, 20 / *SKS* 11, 136.

<sup>27</sup> *SUD*, 20-1, 79-80 / *SKS* 11, 136-7, 193-4.

<sup>28</sup> *SUD*, 20-1 / *SKS* 11, 136-7.

<sup>29</sup> *SUD*, 7-8 / *SKS* 11, 123; see also *PV*, 88-89n / *SKS* 16, 66-7n. As Rowan Williams puts it: 'To discover who I am I need to discover the relation in which I stand to an active, prior Other, to a transcendent

human is objective and cannot be swayed by human caprice. True human identity finds its home in a life of faith in which 'the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests [*grunder*] transparently in God'.<sup>30</sup> In Kierkegaard's own words, '[j]ust like the arrow of the skilled archer that, as it streaks away from the bowstring, won't allow itself to rest before it has struck its target, so also is the [human] being created by God to set his sights on God, and finds no rest before he rests in God.'<sup>31</sup>

To be clear, however, neither Kierkegaard nor Anti-Climacus believed that the rest a person finds in God makes life in this world physically or mentally restful (according to a person's baser instincts). Resting in God brings an experience of struggle in this world. By becoming who she was created to be, a person will find herself at odds with the fallen patterns of the world, which shape the dominant trends in society. This is because, by failing to correspond to God's creative purposes, the preponderance of human beings have settled into a way of life that may feel comfortable in this world but is, in actual fact, characterized by despair – which Anti-Climacus defines as the 'sickness unto death' (Jn. 11.4). By falling into sin, human beings find themselves pursuing life in non-life-giving ends. Analogously, they think they are breathing a healthy air when they are actually breathing an air that is gradually suffocating them. They are caught up in a way of existing that is 'dead' to God and which is in 'the state of deepest spiritual

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creator: I don't first sort out who I am and then seek for resources to sustain that identity.' Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 91.

<sup>30</sup> *SUD*, 82 / *SKS* 11, 196. Anti-Climacus ends *The Sickness unto Death* by noting that 'the definition of faith' is 'in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it'. *SUD*, 131 / *SKS* 11, 242.

<sup>31</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 341 / *SKS* 20, NB4:116, p. 340.

wretchedness'.<sup>32</sup> In short, they have fallen into a forgetfulness of their creator. As a result, they find themselves on a path to death: death being the condition that results from seeking life where there is none (i.e. apart from the creator).

By coming to faith, however, a person is cured from the despair of sin by dying to her untrue self (her self that embraces sin) and entering into a relationship with the one who gives her life.<sup>33</sup> In fellowship with her creator, she discovers a sense of belonging and worth that is not enjoyed by the person who lives as though she were a mere accident of history. She finds a renewed sense of kinship by learning that she is the beloved child of her creator. Reflecting on this experience, Kierkegaard writes:

when I go out under the heavens' vault and see the many stars – then I do not, after all, feel myself a stranger in this vast world – for of course it is my father's. Still less do I feel myself abandoned in face of life's changes, its wretchedness, for indeed my father's eyes are always upon me.<sup>34</sup>

With this experience of belonging comes a desire to look to God for governance, to God's revelation, to learn what is expected of the person who has been created to live within God's creation. For Kierkegaard, a person will want to find out the house rules, as they have been decided by the divine homeowner and creator. However, the child of God realizes that God not only creates a particular home for persons who already exist, on second thought; God creates particular persons for a particular home. The person

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<sup>32</sup> *SUD*, 6 / *SKS* 11, 118.

<sup>33</sup> *SUD*, 6 / *SKS* 11, 118.

<sup>34</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 378 / *SKS* 20, NB5:17, p. 378.

herself belongs to God, 'not by birth but by creation out of nothing', which means that she 'belongs to God in every thought, the most hidden; in every feeling, the most secret; in every movement, the most inward'.<sup>35</sup> And because she is a part of the creation that God has established, there is no other way for her to be. God has set boundaries in place that prevent human beings from being able to define their humanity for themselves.

Kierkegaard writes:

As God has limited a human being physically, so he has also set bounds to him in a spiritual sense, if in no other way, simply by his being a creature, one who has not created himself ... By means of abstract imaginative thinking a person wishes to transform himself (although if this self-creation were to succeed, it would simply mean his annihilation); yet at the same time he does continue to exist [*existere*], to be present [*at være til*], and therefore it can never succeed.<sup>36</sup>

So, for Kierkegaard, 'God's relationship to the world is not like that of an earthly government; he has, after all, the creator's right to demand faith and obedience from what is created, as well as that every created being in his heart dare think only all that is agreeable to him.'<sup>37</sup> Creation is bound to God in a bond of love.<sup>38</sup> And, as the loving creator, God determines who a person should be because God knows what is best for her

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<sup>35</sup> *WL*, 115 / *SKS* 9, 118.

<sup>36</sup> *JP* 2:1348, pp. 98–9 / *SKS* 27, Papir 340:14, p. 358.

<sup>37</sup> *KJN* 2, p. 273 / *SKS* 18, JJ:470, p. 296.

<sup>38</sup> *WL*, 115 / *SKS* 9, 118.

in a way that totally exceeds a person's own perception of what might be best. God's demands upon creation are not those of a tyrant but those of a loving father or mother. In the relationship between God and creation, it is out of love that God calls creation to order. This means that a person should not seek to follow God on her own terms and for her own reasons but should seek to follow God in God's terms and for God's reasons.

We talk about being obliged to love God by virtue of being created by God – and the only one who truly loves God is the apostle, he who in order to become an instrument is absolutely unconditionally shattered by God.

To love God because he has created you is to love yourself. No, if you want to love God in truth, you must show it by gladly, adoringly letting yourself be totally shattered by God in order that he can unconditionally advance his will.<sup>39</sup>

Ever aware of the failings and weaknesses of human culture, and knowing how easy it is for human beings to lapse into attempts to define their relationship with God in their own terms, Kierkegaard insisted that creation must come to know its identity as it is and has been defined by the power who established it. It is not God who belongs to creation but creation that belongs to God. When this point is taken seriously, there is a greater obligation to attend to the plurality of ways in which God defines both what creation is and what it should be. For Kierkegaard, there can be a realization that there is much more to creation than first meets the eye. Together with the visible order of creation, God has also created a moral order and aesthetic order.

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<sup>39</sup> *JP* 2:2098, p. 455 / *SKS* 26, NB31:68, p. 51.

### III. The Beauty of Creation

Kierkegaard is never more lyrical than when writing on the splendour of creation. Throughout his writings, we find numerous expressions of awe and wonder at the beauty of creation – particularly in his more personal and devotional writings. Also, we find that he had an amazing ability to capture a natural scene and draw people into it. For example:

In the aroma that hay always gives off, to stand just outside the gate to that little place in the late evening light; the sheep wander home and provide the foreground; dark clouds broken by the solitary patches of light that clouds have when heralding strong winds, – the heath rising in the background – – if only I might properly be able to remember the impression of this evening.<sup>40</sup>

**Commented [DJG1]:** Note to the typesetter: in this quotation, we do want to use the comma followed by the single en-dash and the two consecutive en-dashes before the final clause.

We could spend quite a bit of time going through various passages in which Kierkegaard waxes poetic on the natural world. In so doing, we would find that there are some features of creation for which he had a particular fondness: e.g., the colours of an autumn scene, a sunset, or a moonlit evening.<sup>41</sup> But we would also notice that he did not think the beauty of creation was simply in the eye of the beholder. He did not believe that real beauty could be reduced to what is immediately lovely or gratifying. He

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<sup>40</sup> *KJN* 3, p. 196 / *SKS* 19, Not6:27, p. 201.

<sup>41</sup> See *KJN* 3, p. 222 / *SKS* 19, Not8:7, p. 226; *KJN* 2, p. 241 / *SKS* 18, JJ:367b, p. 261; *JP* 3:2841, p. 259 / *SKS* 27, Papir343, p. 367.

held to a theology of beauty, according to which he recognized that there is an objective beauty to creation that is determined by its creator. This beauty is one that comes to be known by the person of faith who is given to discern the natural world as creation. Through faith, a person is taken beyond her lustful infatuation and immediate enchantment with the surface of the world and comes to perceive beauty for what it really is.

At the same time, Kierkegaard did believe that the surface phenomena of creation could possess both an external beauty as well as a theological beauty: a beauty that could be enjoyed by both natural sentiment and faithful contemplation. The two are not necessarily incompatible. But, again, he did believe that, before God, there is a much deeper and truer beauty to creation than that which lay on the surface. And this meant that there were some things that the aesthete might immediately view as beautiful that the faithful believer would view as being, in actual fact, ugly (and vice versa). This is particularly evident in the following journal entry, which starts out with a seemingly enthusiastic reflection on the external beauty of creation.

Beautiful – indescribably beautiful – when the moonlit winter night is strangely like a fairy tale, a poem, or when the stars on a dark night twinkle in the enormous arch of the sky, or when echo waits in the still night for something to break the silence so that it can have the joy of echoing! Beautiful – rapturously beautiful, who can keep from surrendering to it – beautiful, to gaze out over the ocean, far, far into the distance, this distance which continually, captivately remains distance



and continually seems to beckon you, so close that it invites you to let your gaze follow – into the distance.<sup>42</sup>

However, following this reflection, he asks: ‘is this looking at the world from a Christian point of view’?<sup>43</sup> He then responds sarcastically, seeking to expose the ways in which human beings can be so very confused about the beauty of creation:

Look now at the world, the human world – is it not a beautiful world, a splendid world. A splendid world, where man, created in the image of God, essentially lives to eat, drink, accumulate money – in short, occupies himself with the things which make him forget that he is created in the image of God.<sup>44</sup>

Again, to be completely clear, Kierkegaard held a deep appreciation for the external beauty of creation. But he was incredibly sensitive to how easy it is for human beings to become enraptured and mesmerized by external beauty in a way that prompts forgetfulness of their creator. For him, it is far too easy for persons to get lost in a perception of the world as an immanent order that can be understood in human terms (à la Hegel). When this happens, when God is pushed out of the picture (or collapsed into the picture), persons disregard their createdness and become fooled into

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<sup>42</sup> *JP* 4:5033, pp. 596–7 / *SKS* 26, NB32:62, p. 161.

<sup>43</sup> *JP* 4:5033, p. 597 / *SKS* 26, NB32:62, p. 161.

<sup>44</sup> *JP* 4:5033, p. 597 / *SKS* 26, NB32:62, p. 161.

overlooking the true nature of things. So, for example, when Kierkegaard considers the immediate beauty of a(n apparently) loving relationship, he writes:

However beautiful a relationship of love has been between two people or among many, however complete all their desire and their bliss have been for themselves in mutual sacrifice and devotion, even though everyone has praised this relationship – if God and the relationship with God have been omitted, then this, in the Christian sense, has not been love but a mutually enchanting defraudation of love.<sup>45</sup>

At the beginning of this passage, Kierkegaard indicates that if God is not present in a relationship, a loving relationship can give off an appearance of beauty. Such beauty, however, can be hiding a fraudulence to that loving relationship – it can be disguising the ugliness of a godless and, therefore, loveless relationship.<sup>46</sup>

There is much more to be said about Kierkegaard's understanding of the difference between a worldly aestheticism and a Christian aestheticism. Such elaboration, however, would take us beyond the scope of this chapter. However, there is one further concern that I want to mention, which does relate to our discussion. A pressing worry, for Kierkegaard, was the way in which Christianity was being confused

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<sup>45</sup> *WL*, 107 / *SKS* 9, 111.

<sup>46</sup> For Kierkegaard, 'Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person – God – a person, that is, that God is the middle term.' *WL*, 107 / *SKS* 9, 111 (emphasis original). God is the 'middle term' (*Mellembestemmelsen*) in the true love-relationship because 'the love is God'. *WL*, 121 / *SKS* 9, 123.

Therefore, if God is not at the center of a relationship between two persons, then that relationship cannot be a truly loving relationship.

with an external beauty that was not its own; it was being dressed up in dazzling clothes that were more immediately appealing to human sentiment.<sup>47</sup> Whether Christianity was being painted in a positive light by focusing on the charm of Church architecture, the dulcet tones of a choir, the lyricism of Christian poetry, or by focusing on its connection with the grandeur of the natural world, he felt that such attention to external beauty was distracting persons from the struggles and sacrifices of the Christian life. 'Christianity' had ended up revolving around the enjoyment of a nominally 'Christian' culture and its products. It had ended up embracing a kind of theology from below, in which it was being distorted by the choice tastes of a particular culture – in which 'loving God is loving the beautiful'.<sup>48</sup> Such theology, for Kierkegaard, was turning Christianity into idolatry by attempting to elevate the creator with aesthetic values – by attempting to make God 'beautiful' according to secular standards of beauty. Dryly commenting on the culture of Danish Christendom, he writes:

If I were a father or had to order someone to do something, and the one who was to obey was continually walking around chattering about how delightful and wonderfully delightful and how profoundly and matchlessly delightful [it was], then I'd say: "damn it, shut up and obey!" Yet this is how some of the orthodox behave with God and [Christ] – always with this chatter about delightful and delightful; I think God and [Christ] must

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<sup>47</sup> See *KJN* 5, p. 327 / *SKS* 21, NB10:112a, p. 316; *JP* 1:544, p. 223 / *SKS* 25, NB28:53a, pp. 255–6; *KJN* 5, p. 327 / *SKS* 21, NB6:86, pp. 64–5.

<sup>48</sup> *JP* 3:2455, p. 61 / *SKS* 22, NB11:127, pp. 76–7.

finally become tired of it and say: “Be [human] beings, period; obey, fear, love, and no more nonsense.”<sup>49</sup>

For Kierkegaard, one of the things that most distinguished Christianity from Hellenistic philosophies was that it ‘does not at all emphasize the idea of earthly beauty’.<sup>50</sup>

The concept that most definitively distinguishes [Christianity] from antiquity is that of the Good. The Greeks were unable to think about the Good without the Beautiful (the direction outward). In [Christianity] the essential expression of the Good is suffering (the direction inward; for suffering lies precisely in the outward direction being negated – the world’s sin).<sup>51</sup>

The idea that God would reveal himself in the midst of suffering (as well as in ‘the immediate form [of] beauty, power, glory, etc.’) was ‘foolishness to the Greeks’.<sup>52</sup> But, for Kierkegaard, it is not only God who is made known in the midst of Christian suffering; beauty is also made known: ‘there is truly a community of suffering with God, a pact of tears, which is in itself so very beautiful.’<sup>53</sup> Because the true beauty of creation corresponds to God’s will for creation, and because following God goes against the

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<sup>49</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 310 / *SKS* 20, NB4:49, pp. 309–10.

<sup>50</sup> *JP* 1:797, p. 368 / *SKS* 27, Papir259, pp. 213–14.

<sup>51</sup> *KJN* 2, p. 276 / *SKS* 18, JJ:481, p. 299.

<sup>52</sup> *BA*, 162 / *SKP* VIII-2 B 9:15, 51.

<sup>53</sup> *KJN* 3, p. 230 / *SKS* 18, Not8:35, p. 236.

comfortable ways of the world, there is a beauty in the act of taking up one's cross in obedience to God.

However, even the martyr is not fully in touch with the theological beauty of creation. There is a limit to how much a human being can appreciate the extent and quality of creation's beauty, even if she becomes completely aligned with the will of God. No human believers can ever capture this beauty for themselves. The beauty of creation is grounded in and defined by the ways and works of God who cannot be comprehended by systematic human thought; it is a beauty that transcends creaturely speculation and imagination. For this reason, Kierkegaard reflects: 'I cannot really say that I positively enjoy *nature* [because] I do not quite realize *what* it is that I enjoy.'<sup>54</sup> He continues:

The works of the deity are too great for me; I always get lost in the details.

This is the reason, too, why people's exclamations on observing nature:

It's lovely, tremendous, etc. – are so frivolous. They are all too anthropomorphic; they come to a stop with the external; they are unable to express inwardness, depth.<sup>55</sup>

Kierkegaard did not think the real beauty of creation was something that could be grasped by even the most devout of Christians; it could only *begin* to be truly appreciated by faith, as a person comes to know the one who bestows beauty upon creation. Therefore, for him, the beauty of creation is to be respected with a wonderment and awe that sees this

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<sup>54</sup> JP 1:117, p. 50 / SKS 27, Papir 96:1, p. 117.

<sup>55</sup> JP 1:117, p. 50 / SKS 27, Papir 96:1, p. 117.

beauty as something that transcends the mastery of the creaturely imagination. As the Christian grows consciously in her relationship with God, she will recognize that there is always more to be discovered in the beauty of creation. And as her imagination begins to correspond to God's aesthetic purposes, she can start to enjoy some of the many ways in which she has been created to play a unique role in creation.

#### **IV. Human Uniqueness**

Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard continually looks to non-human animals for inspiration: including sheep, camels, kangaroos, foxes, sparrows, eagles, storks, kingfishers, spiders, butterflies, frogs, and jellyfish.<sup>56</sup> To provide some examples of this: when reflecting on rhetorical technique in argument, he draws on the analogy of the shark that, when wanting to snatch its prey, turns on its dark-coloured back to reveal its silvery white underbelly in a way that confuses its prey.<sup>57</sup> Or, when reflecting on the experience of watching persons fail to learn the language of an 'eternal philosophy', he writes:

it pained him; he thought the words to be so beautiful that he could not stop listening to them, just as one sadly gazes after the wild geese in the sky. Anyone who wants to belong to that world must join them, and yet no one has ever been seen flying with them.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> In the rest of this chapter, when referring to 'animals' I will be referring to non-human animals.

<sup>57</sup> *JC*, 122 / *SKS* 15, 20.

<sup>58</sup> *JC*, 148 / *SKS* 15, 40.

One final example: when reflecting on how remarkable the stork is, Kierkegaard comments: 'when the water is so low that it cannot drink, [the stork] throws in stones until the water is deep enough.'<sup>59</sup> Numerous other examples could be listed to show his diverse musings on various facets of creation: on the seasons, the stars, and the world's geography. Doing so, however, would be a distraction. Suffice it to say, Kierkegaard was captivated by the natural world. It was continually on his mind and he was continually learning from it.

When Kierkegaard draws on the non-human features of the world, he tends to do so because of the way they represent certain patterns in creation: patterns that human beings should either follow or avoid. On the one hand, he encourages his readers to learn from the goings on in creation. Drawing on Mt. 6.28, he thinks that human beings have much to learn from the way that the birds of the air and the lily in the field correspond to the will of God, without question. He admires the way that the rest of (the non-human) creation naturally corresponds to God's will: as is evident in 'the rising of the sun on the hour and setting on the hour, the shifting of the wind in a flash, the ebb and flow of the tide at specific times'.<sup>60</sup> What is so beautiful about the rest of the natural world is that it unquestioningly obeys the will of the creator. The natural world simply exists in the way that it was created to exist, according to the will of God, without vacillation (and without anxiety about vacillating).<sup>61</sup> In this way, the natural world can teach human beings about 'the unconditioned'. In obedience, the birds of the air and the

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<sup>59</sup> *JP* 3:2848, p. 263 / *SKS* 20, NB3:12, p. 249.

<sup>60</sup> *WA*, 26 / *SKS* 11, 31.

<sup>61</sup> *WA*, 26-8 / *SKS* 11, 31. As Haufniensis notes, anxiety is one of the experiences that particularly distinguishes human beings from animals. See *CA*, 42 / *SKS* 4, 348.

lily in the field 'are so simple or so sublime *that they believe that everything that happens is unconditionally God's will, and that they have nothing whatever to do in the world other than either to do God's will in unconditional obedience or to submit to God's will in unconditional obedience*'.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, Kierkegaard does not think God created human beings to be defined by the same inevitability that defines the rest of the natural world. As I have mentioned, he believes that human beings have been created for, and are thus called to, an utterly unique way of life. God calls human beings to strive to resist their baser instincts in order to be obedient. They are called to struggle to be true to their created nature, and it is when they fail to do so that they act unnaturally. He did not believe that human beings should let their animal passions carry them away, like 'a drunken peasant who lies in the wagon and sleeps and lets the horses shift for themselves'.<sup>63</sup> Rather, they should grab hold of their lives and self-consciously take responsibility for their decisions and life-directions. In this respect, human beings were created to be more eminent than flora and fauna.

For Kierkegaard, the key thing that distinguishes human beings from all other animals is a capacity for self-conscious individuality. They are created with an individuality that cannot be found anywhere else in creation. Now, to understand this particular emphasis, we need to turn to his account of what it means for a human being to exist as spirit. The person who exists as 'spirit', exists as a self 'that relates itself to itself'; she lives as a self-conscious self.<sup>64</sup> With self-consciousness, she is able to reflect

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<sup>62</sup> *WA*, 26–7 / *SKS* 11, 31 (Kierkegaard's emphasis).

<sup>63</sup> *CUP*, 311–12 / *SKS* 7, 283.

<sup>64</sup> *SUD*, 13 / *SKS* 11, 129.



on herself (her actual self) in relation to the concept of another self. For example, she can reflect on whether she thinks she is a good self in relation to some concept of a bad self.<sup>65</sup>

By existing in this way, as spirit, a person distinguishes herself from the rest of kingdom *animalia*. The beast of the natural world, as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis writes, 'is a slave of blind instinct and acts blindly'.<sup>66</sup> Animals are caught up within the inexorable processes of the natural world, and only ever act according to their natural instincts. There is no self-conscious way for individual animals to distinguish themselves from the other members of a species. As such, they are primarily defined by what kind of animal they are. So, for Kierkegaard, when it comes to 'every animal species ... [t]he type is higher; the specimen is lower'.<sup>67</sup> Any individuality that an animal might attain will tend to be the result of a person bestowing a certain individuality upon them: for example, when a person names and trains a pet, or when a person points out something remarkable about an individual animal.

In light of contemporary studies of animal behaviour, especially on higher primates, there may be some debate about Kierkegaard's assessment of non-human animals. Regardless of such debate, however, it seems fair to suggest that most human beings are distinguished by a capacity to make self-conscious choices to define themselves as particular individuals. For this reason, Kierkegaard writes: 'in the human

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<sup>65</sup> Again, for Kierkegaard, a person does not simply stand before her own conception of self. Because she has been 'established by another', she also stands before that other's conception of what it means to be a self. *SUD*, 13 / *SKS* 11, 129.

<sup>66</sup> *CA*, 68 / *SKS* 4, 372

<sup>67</sup> *JP* 2:2071, p. 435 / *SKS* 26, NB31:149, p. 110.

species ... the individual is higher than the species.’<sup>68</sup> Human beings are primarily identified by their individual names, and are known (and judged) by the particular lives that they choose for themselves.

When it comes to human behaviour, Kierkegaard observes three kinds of (non-bestial) existence that human beings can create for themselves within the immanence of the natural world: aesthetic, ethical, and immanent religiousness. Without going into detail, he understands that a person can naturally distinguish herself as an individual by self-consciously devoting herself towards a single *telos* – such as beauty, culture, virtue, her own idea of a god. By so doing, she commits herself to a higher existence that is not impelled by baser instincts – as would be the case if she lived out a bestial existence. She may, for example, distinguish herself by becoming a musician, a scholar, a human rights activist, or a Buddhist monk.

However, when a person chooses to orient herself towards a single *telos*, which she imagines for herself, she does not transcend her world-historical existence. She simply chooses a relatively different kind of world-historical existence. Such relative attempts at self-definition do nothing more than actualize ‘a human creation’; they involve human beings creating themselves in their own images, as beings caught up in the patterns of the world-historical order.<sup>69</sup> To become truly distinguished from the rest of creation, for Kierkegaard, a person must become oriented towards an end that (or who) transcends the world-historical order – an end that is beyond the immanence of creation. The only way for this to happen is by being transformed in and through a

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<sup>68</sup> *JP* 2:2071, p. 435 / *SKS* 26, NB31:149, p. 110; see also *KJN* 7, p. 108 / *SKS* 23, NB 16:21, pp. 107–8.

<sup>69</sup> *JP* 3:3225, p. 489 / *SKS* 26, NB34:36, p. 346.

relationship with the transcendent reality of the eternal God.<sup>70</sup> A person requires God to orient her to himself by interacting with her from beyond the boundaries of creation history. It is by being given to participate in a reciprocal relationship with God that a person becomes absolutely distinguished from the rest of creation – that she embraces her uniqueness as a single individual ‘created in the image of God’.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, Kierkegaard insists that it is ‘only God’ who, in a creative active act, ‘can give individuality’.<sup>72</sup> By being reconciled to God, a person becomes ‘different from ordinary men by a whole quality (in no animal species is there anything analogous to this, that one specimen is a whole quality different from others)’.<sup>73</sup>

With his emphasis on divine transcendence, Kierkegaard again critiques what he saw as a Hegelian commitment to the reduction of reality to the one world-historical system.<sup>74</sup> To be clear, he did not think that right relationship with God involves an abstract relationship that somehow takes place outside history – in some kind of mystical, metaphysical realm. Rather, in and through the eternal-historical person of Jesus Christ, he understood that God mediates himself to creation.<sup>75</sup> ‘As a rule the relationship [to God] is present thus: it is Christ who leads us to God; man needs a mediator in order to come to God ... [God] becomes my Father in the Mediator by means

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<sup>70</sup> See *JP* 2:2008, pp. 403–4 / *SKS* 21, NB7:59, p. 105.

<sup>71</sup> *KJN* 7, p. 61 / *SKS* 23, NB15:91, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> *JP* 3:3225, p. 489 / *SKS* 26, NB34:36, p. 346. Kierkegaard also adds in this journal entry: ‘if man is going to imitate God’s feat, it consists of taking away individuality.’

<sup>73</sup> *JP* 2:2059, p. 430 / *SKS* 25, NB30:90, p. 458.

<sup>74</sup> See *CA*, 3 / *SKS* 4, 310.

<sup>75</sup> See *JP* 2:1424, p. 132 / *SKS* 24, NB24:13, p. 237 (emphasis and boldening original).

of the Spirit.’<sup>76</sup> In and through Jesus Christ, the God-man, human persons can relate to God as historical beings and experience conversion to God within the natural history of the world.

As I have already indicated, this conversion does not come easily. Proper (viz. created) human function is taken up in and through a process of struggle and suffering that will go against a person’s baser animal instincts.<sup>77</sup> As such, for Kierkegaard, ‘to be animal is more comfortable’.<sup>78</sup> By embracing a bestial existence, a person ‘is freed entirely from those strenuous efforts which certainly must appear to people nowadays to be fantastic madness – relating oneself personally to God, thinking that one is tested by God’.<sup>79</sup> By living as a beast, a person can still relate himself to his own idea of ‘God’, but only has to worry about doing so ‘when he feels like it’.<sup>80</sup> Also, he can find safety in numbers, without experiencing the isolation that comes with going against the grain of society. For Kierkegaard,

to have to stand alone, abandoned, mocked, ridiculed, etc., is what animal-

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<sup>76</sup> *JP* 2:1432, pp. 137–9 / *SKS* 25, NB27:23, pp. 140–1. Kierkegaard also affirms in this journal entry that the God-relationship begins with the Father who draws human beings to himself. He writes: ‘it is not the Spirit who leads to the Son and the Son who leads to the Father; no, it is the Father who directs to the Son, the Son who directs to the Spirit, and not until then is it the Spirit who leads to the Son and the Son who leads to the Father.’

<sup>77</sup> For example, Kierkegaard writes: ‘To make health the highest good is an animalistic principle; this is the way an animal is regarded – if it is not in good health, it is not worth anything.’ *JP* 1:913, p. 405 / *SKP* V B 148:38.

<sup>78</sup> *JP* 2:2071, p. 435 / *SKS* 26, NB31:149, p. 110.

<sup>79</sup> *JP* 2:2071, p. 435 / *SKS* 26, NB31:149, p. 110.

<sup>80</sup> *KJN* 5, p. 112 / *SKS* 21, NB7:65, p. 108.

man fears most, most of all, because *qua* animal-creature he lives in fear of men. Therefore animal-man has the courage to do the most frightening things as long as he simply has human numbers with him, knows that others are doing the same thing or that the others think that he displays courage. Therefore this is the very collision Christ points to in particular: to suffer from men means Christianly precisely to fear God in contrast to fearing men, in contrast to what men as animal-creatures fear most of all – human numbers.<sup>81</sup>

If, however, a person seeks to live out a true relationship with God, if she follows Christ and lives according to the Spirit, she will find herself repudiated by the human race. For Kierkegaard, it is precisely in this isolation that persons ‘are helped through suffering to discover their distinctiveness’.<sup>82</sup> Yet he does not think that obedience to God requires a person to engage in an unrelenting struggle against her primal instincts in order to give her life to God. This is because, on the journey of a person’s relationship with God, a person’s primal instincts become transformed such that it becomes natural or basic for a person to obey God within this world.<sup>83</sup> Under these circumstances, the ‘other will’ of the human comes to correspond to God’s will such that his obedience to God is ‘free

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<sup>81</sup> *JP* 2:1940, p. 375 / *SKS* 27, *Papir* 586, pp. 684–8. While Kierkegaard understands that reconciliation with God will deliver a person from her conformity to her animal instincts, it is worth clarifying that he did not think that sin is natural to the human species – comparable to the way in which web-feet are an innate part of ‘a species of water birds’. *JP* 1:51, p. 21 / *SKP* V B 53:15.

<sup>82</sup> *JP* 2:2059, p. 430 / *SKS* 25, *NB30*:90, p. 458.

<sup>83</sup> It is worth noting here that, for Kierkegaard, it only as a result of the Fall that ‘sensuousness becomes sinfulness’. When this happens, ‘what it becomes is not what it first was.’ *CA* 58–9 / *SKS* 3, 363.

from care, is never *indecisive* – he has faith; never *vacillating* – he is eternally resolved; never *disconsolate* – he is always joyous, always giving thanks'.<sup>84</sup> In this way, a person finds his life in alignment with the will of God, just like the birds of the air and the lily of the field.

#### **V. Kierkegaard's Critique of the Natural Sciences**

From the discussion so far, it should be clear that Kierkegaard thought there was much more to reality than meets the empirical eye. This point, however, was not always taken as seriously as it should be by Christian scholars in the modern scientific age. This meant that Kierkegaard had a bittersweet appreciation for the natural sciences. On the one hand, he had no objection with the natural sciences as a descriptive study of the history, structure and behaviour of the natural world. Indeed, he had a deep admiration for the sciences, which is evident from his fascination with the natural world.<sup>85</sup> He writes:

There are probably few branches of knowledge which bestow on man the serene and happy frame of mind as do the natural sciences. He goes out into nature and everything is familiar to him; it is as if he had talked previously with the plants and animals. He not only sees what use man can make of them (this is something quite subordinate), but he sees their

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<sup>84</sup> *CD*, 85 / *SKS* 10, 96.

<sup>85</sup> See *WL*, 282–3 / *SKS* 9, 280.

significance in the whole universe. He stands like Adam of old – all the animals come to him, and he gives them names.<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, this admiration was marred by a concern for the way in which the veneration of the sciences had led to an overemphasis on an objective understanding of reality. For him, this development had led scholarship in Europe to devote itself to naturalistic patterns of thought that conflicted with the discernment of the natural world as creation – patterns that follow a trajectory that ‘will finally end with physics replacing moral reflection.’<sup>87</sup>

Again, as we have seen, Kierkegaard believed that the world is not simply created with physical and natural laws, which can be observed objectively. It is also created with a moral reality and purpose that needs to be apprehended subjectively, in and through a life of faith. As such, he believed that empirical science could only go so far in its reading of both the world and the place of human beings within it. To know created reality in its fullness requires the guidance of the creator. It requires God’s special revelation, which not only communicates to persons by way of objective facts and propositions, but also by transforming them from within. Not only does it require the discernment of the mind but also the attentiveness of the heart.

As Kierkegaard saw it, scholarship in Europe was on a trajectory towards a ‘pantheistic scientism’.<sup>88</sup> That is, the directly observable world was being treated as God. In practice, science was displacing religion. And, due to ‘a lack of religious

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<sup>86</sup> *JP* 3:2806, p. 239 / *SKS* 27, Papir32, p. 85.

<sup>87</sup> *KJN* 2, p. 260 / *SKS* 18, JJ:425, p. 281

<sup>88</sup> *KJN* 7, p. 71 / *SKS* 23, NB15:103, p. 72.

discipline, a lack of “sobriety”, even Christian scholars were praising “science, science”.<sup>89</sup> This trajectory was symptomatic of a theological confusion about the place of human beings before God. It bespoke a yearning for cognitive mastery that was only appropriate to the creator. Scholars were laboring under the illusion that they could step back from the world of existence, in which they participate subjectively, and understand the world *sub specie aeterni*, from the aspect of eternity. Scientific scholarship had been placed on a pedestal that was overshadowing existential and faithful understandings.<sup>90</sup> And this led to the numbing of the intellectual world.

This prompted Kierkegaard to make what was a rather curious move for him: he expressed admiration for a youthful understanding. It is well known that he had little time for infant baptism and felt that a certain level of cognitive maturity should be expected before a person openly commits to becoming a Christian in confirmation – because a child is not yet ready to take on such a decisive task.<sup>91</sup> Yet, when it comes to knowing creation, he had a much higher regard for youthfulness.

Youth understands that God has created the world, and yet that was six thousand years ago. But youth understands it immediately – no wonder, for to the young, what are six-thousand years but yesterday. When one grows older, six thousand years are a great many years; then one

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<sup>89</sup> *KJN* 7, p. 71 / *SKS* 23, NB15:103, p. 72.

<sup>90</sup> *KJN* 7, p. 71 / *SKS* 23, NB15:103, p. 72.

<sup>91</sup> See *JP* 3:3101, p. 416 / *SKS* 26, NB33:8, pp. 250–1. Kierkegaard proposes that ‘confirmation must be postponed to the 25th year’. *KJN* 5, p. 189 / *SKS* 21, NB8:86, p. 181.



perceives that it was six thousand years ago that the world was created and also six thousand years since everything was very good.<sup>92</sup>

Kierkegaard's appreciation for youthfulness here is comparable to his appreciation of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. He has a high regard for the readiness of youth to relate to creation as God's creation in a more immediate way. The problem with the kind of learning that was going on in Hegelian Denmark was that it encouraged a forgetfulness of createdness. It attended to creation as an immanent order that could be understood in its own terms, apart from the uncertainty of faith. As it did so, it established unfaithful habits of thought.

What was happening was that the nature of reality was being reduced to those phenomena that could be directly observed, leading to a neglect of both the transcendent creator and the unobservable dynamics of creation. So, for example, Kierkegaard was deeply concerned about the way that the question of 'what ought to be the case' was being reduced to (or neglected in favor of) the question of 'what is the case' – what is now referred to as the naturalistic fallacy.<sup>93</sup> He was also concerned about the way that scientists were minimizing those aspects of humanity that they could not directly explain – such as 'how consciousness comes into being, or how consciousness of the surrounding world becomes self-consciousness, becomes God-consciousness'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *EUD*, 243–4 / *SKS* 5, 242. It is worth noting that Kierkegaard's comments in this passage about the age of creation are simply a product of his time. There is no theological freight to these remarks, so they should not be read as a sign of support for the contemporary movement of young-earth creationism.

<sup>93</sup> See *KJN* 4, pp. 57–61 / *SKS* 20, NB:70, pp. 58–62.

<sup>94</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 59 / *SKS* 20, NB:70, p. 60; see also *KJN* 4, pp. 62–3 / *SKS* 20, NB:73, pp. 63–4.

Instead, scientists were preoccupied with explaining human beings in terms of ‘the nervous system and the system of ganglia and the circulation of blood’.<sup>95</sup>

Now it seems fair enough for natural scientists to be doing this and, at times, Kierkegaard clearly goes too far in his criticism of scientists for doing what one would expect them to be doing. But what was problematic was the concurrent emergence of naturalistic and scientific tendencies, which not only arose in the sciences but were also creeping into ethics and theology. For example, he was incensed by the way that biblical scholarship had begun to favor a scientific-historical hermeneutic that conflicted with a theological hermeneutic – with a reading of Scripture as revelation.<sup>96</sup> What made this worse was that theologians were bending to the will of the sciences because of their embarrassment at the uncertainty of faith.<sup>97</sup> Under these circumstances, Kierkegaard believed that theology required the bold confidence to be itself, to stand firm as a witness to the proper object of theological reason: the transcendent creator. Accordingly, Christians – whose faith in God should lead their whole worldview to be theological – were called to interpret reality with a humility that was sensitive to the boundaries of creaturely intellect. It is only in this way that creation can be known as creation.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>95</sup> *KJN* 4, p. 60 / *SKS* 20, NB:70, p. 61.

<sup>96</sup> See *KJN* 4, pp. 62–6 / *SKS* 20, NB:73, pp. 63–7.

<sup>97</sup> *JP* 3:2823, pp. 252–4 / *SKS* 25, NB27:72, p. 188.

<sup>98</sup> For further discussion of Kierkegaard’s relationship to the natural sciences, I would highly recommend M. G. Piety’s discussion of this theme in her superb book *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard’s Pluralist Epistemology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 80-7.

Kierkegaard devoted very little direct attention to the doctrine of creation. However, his entire way of thinking was grounded in a reflective awareness of the created nature of things. He was clear that the natural order was not self-creating but was created by God to be the object of his love. But not only this; creation was established to be an object that would return this love by living out its created purpose. Such a response came naturally to most of God's creation. But God gave human beings more choice. And, in despair, they continually made the wrong choices, causing them to fall into patterns of existence that went against the grain of their createdness. With an improper self-confidence and curiosity, human beings became caught up in intellectual games in which they pretended to be creators of the world. They came to doubt that there was anything more to reality than that which is immediately in front of them. They questioned the existence of an objective purpose and moral order, and they pioneered to create their own identities. In face of this downward spiral, Kierkegaard uttered a call to repentance. He called society to turn back to God, to stop running away from the creator. He called them to recognize that they live and move and have their being as children of God, so that they might seek to reciprocate the love with and for which they have been created. As he did so, he spoke to them of the loving creator, of God's creative activity, and of their createdness. Indeed, to conclude, so much of his theological vision is aptly captured by his words (to requote): 'Recall that you are created in [God's] image and according to his likeness, and this is the highest and the most glorious thing that can be said.'<sup>99</sup>

### **For Further Reading**

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<sup>99</sup> *KJN* 1, pp. 267–8 / *SKS* 17, DD:198a, p. 2.

Bellinger, Charles K. *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

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Thompson, Curtis L. 'Creation'. In *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart, 93–9. *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15: tome II. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2014.

Zook, Darren C. 'Kierkegaard's Zoo: Humanity, Nature, and the Moral Status of Animals', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (July, 2006): 263–76.