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Disability, Anthropology, and Flourishing with God: A Kierkegaardian Account

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Received: 12 March 2020; Accepted: 9 April 2020; Published: 14 April 2020

Abstract: How can the writings of Søren Kierkegaard address contemporary issues in the theology of disability? For while it is surely true that Kierkegaard had ‘no concept of “disability” in the contemporary sense’ of the term, I will argue that there is much in Kierkegaard’s writings that addresses issues related to disability. I begin by exploring Kierkegaard’s discussion of suffering and its application to disability theology. I argue that while this has some application, it doesn’t get to the heart of the issue, since a theology of disability must address more than the issue of suffering. Instead, I argue, we should look to Kierkegaard’s anthropology because it is here that we find a vision of what it is to be truly human, and, therefore, how we might understand what it means for those with disabilities to be truly human. To do this, I outline the account of the human being as spirit in *The Sickness Unto Death*, noting its inability to include certain individuals with severe cognitive disabilities. A straightforward reading of *Sickness* suggests that Kierkegaard would think of those with cognitive disabilities as similar to non-human animals in various respects. Noting the shortcomings of such an approach, I then offer a constructive amendment to Kierkegaard’s anthropology that can retain Kierkegaard’s concern that true human flourishing is found only in relationship with God. While Kierkegaard’s emphasis on teleology can be both affirming and inclusive for those with disability, I argue that we need to look to Kierkegaard’s account of ‘neighbor’ in *Works of Love* to overcome the difficulties with his seemingly exclusive anthropology.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; anthropology; disability

1. Kierkegaard and Disability

How can the writings of Søren Kierkegaard address contemporary issues in the theology of disability? For while it is surely true that Kierkegaard had ‘no concept of “disability” in the contemporary sense’ of the term,¹ I will argue that there is much in Kierkegaard’s writings that can speak to issues related to disability. Kierkegaard addresses issues of suffering throughout his authorship and describes the ways in which suffering can be beneficial to people of faith, which is something of clear application to those suffering because of physical or cognitive disabilities. Moreover, throughout his writings, Kierkegaard is concerned with affirming the particularity of each human being in their relationship with God, regardless of their worldly status and position. He is also devoted to affirming that each individual, disabled or otherwise, is created by God ‘to live on the most intimate terms with God’.² It is relationship with God, rather than physical or psychological well-being, that is the mark of true flourishing for Kierkegaard. Thus, Kierkegaard’s vision of humanity appears to be radically inclusive and affirming of those with disabilities.

However, I will argue, despite the promise of Kierkegaard’s writings for the theology of disability, a problematic theme that emerges in Kierkegaard’s anthropology concerns his view of human uniqueness. For Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *The Sickness Unto Death*

¹ (Brittain 2012, p. 286).

² (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 85).

describes, ‘human beings’ are identified as self-reflective creatures with the capacity for higher-order willing, that is, creatures of *spirit*. Such an account appears to exclude many with severe cognitive disabilities, and, alarmingly, such individuals seem to more closely resemble Anti-Climacus’ category of ‘animal’ than ‘human’. While there is no straightforward way of deleting or ignoring these problematically exclusive passages from Kierkegaard’s account of anthropology, I argue that there are ways of adapting Kierkegaard’s account that are consistent with his broader aims and concerns, such that we can offer an inclusive vision of human beings existing before God.

The paper proceeds as follows: I begin by exploring Kierkegaard’s discussion of suffering and its application to disability theology. I argue that while this has some application, it does not get to the heart of the issue, since a theology of disability must address more than the issue of suffering. Instead, I argue, we should look to Kierkegaard’s anthropology because it is here that we find a vision of what it is to be truly human, and, therefore, how we might understand what it means for those with disabilities to be truly human. To do this, I outline the account of the human being as spirit in *The Sickness Unto Death*, noting its inability to include certain individuals with severe cognitive disabilities. A straightforward reading of *Sickness* suggests that Kierkegaard would think of those with severe cognitive disabilities as similar to non-human animals. Noting the shortcomings of such an approach, I then offer a constructive amendment to Kierkegaard’s anthropology that can retain the concern that true human flourishing is found only in relationship with God. While Kierkegaard’s emphasis on teleology can be both affirming and inclusive for those with disability, I argue that we need to look to Kierkegaard’s account of ‘neighbor’ in *Works of Love* to overcome the difficulties with his seemingly exclusive anthropology.

2. Kierkegaard’s Theology of Suffering

For many, a life of disability is one of immense suffering—both physical and psychological. Kierkegaard himself was no stranger to such suffering. Some commentators believe Kierkegaard may have suffered from some kind of physical disability,³ and Kierkegaard writes at length about his own difficulties with mental illness (in his own words, ‘Melancholy shadows everything in my life’⁴). So, it might seem that Kierkegaard’s remarks on suffering are an obvious place to start in thinking about a Kierkegaardian response to disability.⁵ Indeed, Kierkegaard seems to identify those who suffer as especially important in thinking about the Christian life. For instance, consider a remark from his journals:

If Christianity relates to anyone in particular, then it may especially be said to belong to the suffering, the poor, the sick, the leprous, the mentally ill, and so on, to sinners, criminals. Now see what they have done to them in Christendom, see how they have been removed from life so as not to disturb—earnest Christendom... Christianity in Christendom fares as a weak child who is given something and then a couple of stronger children come and grab it. These all too intensely secularized people whose entire life and way of thinking are secular, they take possession of Christianity, grab all its consolation served up in the form of human sympathy—and those unfortunate persons who especially ought to have the benefit of Christianity are shoved aside.⁶

While Christendom may set aside or marginalize those with disabilities, or those whose life is marred by intense suffering, Kierkegaard held that true Christianity was for the sick not the healthy (an allusion, of course to Jesus’s remarks in Mark 2:17). Those undergoing what Kierkegaard calls ‘useless suffering’ are of particular importance. There are some, Kierkegaard thinks, for ‘whom life itself seems to have assigned to quiet and, if you will, useless sufferings, useless because the sufferings do not benefit others, do not benefit any cause, but instead are a burden to others and to the sufferers

³ (Brittain 2012, p. 287).

⁴ (Kierkegaard 1999, VI: 6161).

⁵ This one of the key focuses of Kevin McCabe’s (2017) on Kierkegaard and disability.

⁶ (Kierkegaard 1999, I: 386).

themselves'.⁷ For such individuals, there is no obvious *reason* for their suffering, at least not in a worldly way of thinking. Christendom can have no place for the useless sufferer, but instead, *shoves them aside*. In contrast to Christendom's disposal of the sufferer, Kierkegaard writes, 'you suffering one, even if you cannot in this way do something for others, and this is part of your suffering, you can still do—the highest; you can will to suffer everything and thereby in the decision be with the good'.⁸ In other words, for Kierkegaard, it is clear that Christianity is concerned with the marginalized and those who suffer the most; yet, he thinks, the suffering individual can flourish in willing God's goodness.⁹

Moreover, while Kierkegaard is clear that the life of suffering cannot be chosen or opted into ('to want to suffer and to choose sufferings—that is a wish that never arose in any human heart'¹⁰), he thinks that the suffering life is to be expected for those living in relationship with Christ. He writes that, 'as was the prototype, so must the imitation also be... a heavy cross to take up, a heavy cross to bear, and one that, according to the prototype's instructions, is to be carried in obedience unto death, so that the imitator, even if he does not die on the cross, nevertheless resembles the prototype in dying "with the cross on."¹¹ In a set of discourses entitled 'The Gospel of Sufferings', Kierkegaard aims to encourage those who are under the burden of suffering by aiming to make 'a heavy moment lighter', in helping the reader not to go 'astray in many thoughts'.¹² These discourses reflect on what suffering can teach us and the ways in which God can use suffering.

Whilst under no illusions in thinking that explanations for suffering can always be given,¹³ Kierkegaard thinks that God can use the weight of suffering to bring certain blessings to an individual.¹⁴ One such benefit that can be found in relating to Christ's sufferings is that of obedience; Christ 'learned obedience through what he suffered' (Hebrews 5:8). Kierkegaard thinks that even though Christ's 'earthly life was the heaviest suffering, heavier than any mortal being's can ever be' that 'obedience could be learned from it'.¹⁵ Thus, Christ's obedience in suffering exemplifies how human beings might respond to suffering in their own lives; as Kierkegaard puts it, 'Obedience is not apart from suffering, faith is not apart from obedience, eternity is not apart from faith. In suffering obedience is obedience, in obedience faith is faith, in faith eternity is eternity.'¹⁶ In affirming that Christ suffers with the sufferer and that Christ can bring value from suffering, Kierkegaard seeks to avoid the shoving aside of the marginalized in Christendom and to affirm that, in many respects, those suffering are closest to God. While a superficial reading might think that Kierkegaard trivializes suffering by focusing on its value, Kierkegaard does not seek to instrumentalize suffering for the purpose of earthly happiness, and he does not think that the value in suffering can be prescribed by

⁷ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 79).

⁸ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 111). Note, as an anonymous referee helpfully points out, the acceptance that one's disabilities are the will of God is a controversial issue in disability theology. I will not explore to what extent Kierkegaard endorses this view here. However, the key claim in the passages quoted from the *Gospel of Sufferings* is much more minimal, namely that one's suffering can *sometimes* be used by God to strengthen one's capacity to will the good.

⁹ The idea that some suffering might be *useless* has been discussed in contemporary disability theology. For instance, Peter Capretto has argued that theology should resist the urge to instrumentalize disability for theological ends and instead should 'embrace' the uselessness of some disabilities. Summarizing his argument, he writes that,

I contend that this embrace of uselessness, a relation to disability without operationalization, is undoubtedly a privileged responsibility of theology's method: to interrogate others and ourselves not out of utility, but out of a wonder that demands nothing other than attention itself. The possibility raised here in conversation with experiences and operationalizations of disability is that theology's method, if there is such a thing, might be defined precisely by this uselessness, and that this would be okay. (Capretto 2017, p. 915).

¹⁰ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 250).

¹¹ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 221).

¹² (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 216).

¹³ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 311).

¹⁴ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 235).

¹⁵ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 255).

¹⁶ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 263).

anyone other than God. Instead, he thinks that the one who suffers is able to draw close to God through Christ, the suffering savior.¹⁷

Thus, it is clear that Kierkegaard wishes to uphold the life of those who suffer and to resist the marginalization forced by Christendom on ‘the suffering, the poor, the sick, the leprous, the mentally ill, and so on.’¹⁸ However, while there may be value to be found in such remarks, the idea that suffering and disability are inseparable is problematic for many. For instance, philosopher Elizabeth Barnes makes a distinction between ‘bad-difference views of disability’ and ‘mere-difference views’.¹⁹ ‘According to bad-difference views of disability’, Barnes writes, ‘not only is having a disability bad for you, having a disability would still be bad for you even if society was fully accommodating of disabled people’.²⁰ In contrast, for ‘mere-difference views of disability, having a disability makes you nonstandard or different, but it doesn’t by itself make you worse off.’²¹ In other words, whilst many individuals with disability undoubtedly experience a life of suffering, this is often due to the maladapted environment in which disabled individuals live. On a *mere difference* view, for instance, there is nothing inherently bad about being blind, other than the fact the environment is created by sighted individuals for sighted individuals. Societies function around the needs of sighted people, which excludes those who are blind. However, simply having differences from individuals is not inherently bad, just as having red hair is not any worse than having brown hair. If we think of disabilities as *mere differences*, then Barnes’s distinction calls into question an approach to disability only focused on the suffering of such individuals.

Note that Kierkegaard does not necessarily affirm a ‘bad-difference’ view of disability, but it still remains true that if all Kierkegaard has to offer the theology of disability is a response to suffering, then we cannot truly get to the heart of the matter. Indeed, I think Kierkegaard affirms much of Barnes’s sentiment regarding the ways in which Christendom turns mere difference into a life of suffering for many. In *Two Ages*, for instance, Kierkegaard describes the attempt by society to bring about the kind of equality that ‘levels’ individuals into a single mass or crowd.²² The suffering of being marginalized by such a society is not something inherently bad about the person of disability, then, but a broader systemic problem of a society that elevates uniformity above particularity. Furthermore, this enforcing of equality removes the possibility of the individual relating to God in her particularity. This is an issue Kierkegaard addresses throughout his writings. For instance, in describing the aim of his entire authorship, he writes that he aims to ‘shake off “the crowd” in order to get hold of “the single individual”’.²³ This resistance to the uniformity of enforced equality shares much in common with Barnes’s diagnosis of the badness of disability lying in social structures, rather

¹⁷ This approach to suffering is not merely theoretical for Kierkegaard. In writing to his cousin, Hans Peter Kierkegaard, who was paralyzed completely on one side, Kierkegaard demonstrates the application of his thinking on suffering. He writes, ‘reconciled to your fate, with patience and quiet devotion, you carry out as important a task as the rest of us who perform on a larger or smaller stage... Undeniably your stage is the smallest, that of solitude and inwardness—but *summa summarum*, as it says in Ecclesiastes, when all is said and done, what matters most is inwardness—and when everything has been forgotten, it is inwardness that still matters.’ (Kierkegaard 1999, 7: 6295). Similarly, he writes to Jette, his sister-in-law, who was bed-ridden with severe illness and depression for a number of years (Brittain 2012, p. 302). Here, Kierkegaard writes, ‘You are in some measure always suffering—hence the task lies right here: Divert your *mind*, *accustom yourself by faith to changing suffering into expectation of the joyous*. It is really possible. ... Oh, if one were never to see another human being again—and that is far from your case—then one could *by faith conjure up or forth* a world of diversion into the loneliest room.’ (Kierkegaard 1999, 5: 6091).

(Kierkegaard 1999 1: 386).

¹⁹ (Barnes 2016, p. 89).

²⁰ (Barnes 2016, p. 89).

²¹ (Barnes 2016, p. 89).

²² He writes that ‘the present age is orientated to equality, and its most logical implementation, albeit abortive, is leveling the negative unity of the negative mutual reciprocity of individuals’ (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 84); in such a society, ‘The individual does not belong to God, to himself, to the beloved, to his art, to his scholarship; no, just a serf belongs to an estate, so the individual realizes that in every respect he belongs to an abstraction in which reflection subordinates him’ (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 85).

²³ (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 9).

than in the disability or the disabled individual.²⁴ For in a society in which the individual must belong to a uniform crowd, those with differences will inevitably be shoved out.²⁵

Thus, whilst reflecting on the suffering of disabled individuals might help to provide encouragement or relief for those who suffer, focusing *only* on this section of Kierkegaard's authorship sells Kierkegaard's potential contribution to disability theology short. To proceed any further with a Kierkegaardian theology of disability, then, it will be important not only to see what Kierkegaard's thinking can offer to those who suffer, but also to consider the fundamental issue of what human beings are.

3. The Limits of Capacity-Based Anthropology

Whilst Kierkegaard has a great deal to offer in response to the sufferings arising from disability, a theology of disability ought not to focus only on finding resources to include those with disabilities, but it also ought to take seriously the implications of disability for understandings of anthropology and relationship with God. However, it is here that things get more difficult for Kierkegaard. Consider Anti-Climacus's remarks in the opening lines of *The Sickness Unto Death*:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. ...

Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another. ... The human self is such a derived, established relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.²⁶

For Anti-Climacus, a human being is identified as a self-reflexive self that wills to exist in balance between finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, freedom and necessity. Moreover, a human being is a self that is established by another and in willing to be a self, they relate to this other. In Anti-Climacus's words, 'in relating to itself and willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.'²⁷ Put theologically, the self originates from, and relates to, God and it is only in existing as a God-related self that one can relate properly as a self at all.

Yet the human race is stricken with a sickness that prevents this right relation to God; human beings do not relate properly to God as the source of their selfhood. This sickness is, of course, sin—human beings exist in a state of despair in which they fail to will to be a self through ignorance, or weakness, or by willing to be a self independently of God through defiance. Therefore, despair, as a disease of the will, is tightly connected to reflective self-consciousness; '[t]he more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also'.²⁸ Thus, Anti-Climacus summarizes, '[t]he possibility of this sickness [despair] is man's superiority over the animal.'²⁹

²⁴ (Brittain 2012, p. 292).

²⁵ In a journal entry, Kierkegaard puts the point succinctly:

Christianity begins to console there where human society wishes to be ignorant that such sufferings exist. In Christendom there is no change at all. True Christianity would shock everybody, as it once did, because in proclaiming consolation for such horrible sufferings it embarrasses society by pulling out these horrible sufferings for a day, something we usually defend ourselves against so that we may remain ignorant of them—we Christians! (Kierkegaard 1999, 3: 3498).

²⁶ (Kierkegaard 1980, pp. 13–14).

²⁷ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 49).

²⁸ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 29).

²⁹ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 15).

Thankfully, there is an antidote to this despair. Through the gift of faith, the human being is made aware of her sickness; 'there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted'³⁰ and is able to relate to God in faith, through which, 'The believer has the infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment'.³¹ Faith, according to Anti-Climacus, is 'a state in which there is no despair at all' and in which, 'in relating to itself and willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it'.³² In other words, faith is a gift from God in which individuals will to relate properly to themselves by relating properly to God as the source of their selfhood. Yet, despair is not overcome in an instant; rather, faith is 'the task of a whole lifetime',³³ to borrow a phrase from Johannes de Silentio's treatment of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. Thus, coming to faith (conceived psychologically) is primarily an instance of coming to greater self-awareness; 'to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness.'³⁴

Kierkegaard's claims about human beings as *spirit* immediately ring alarm bells from the perspective of disability theology. The anthropology articulated in these opening pages of *Sickness*, as well as elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writing, define human beings as creatures with the capacity for a certain kind of self-reflection such that they can will (or fail to will) to exist in relation to God. Indeed, as we have seen, for Anti-Climacus, the distinguishing feature between human beings and non-human animals is the possibility for despair,³⁵ which, it transpires, is defined as a failure of the human will. Yet, not all human beings appear to demonstrate the capacity for self-reflection or higher-order willing. Consider an example:

Brian is 36 years old. He has no language and does not communicate through any formal system of communication (at least any known system). We had spent a couple of hours talking about Brian with his mother, his caretakers and various other support workers, trying to work out precisely what his spiritual needs might look like. At the end of this process Brian's mother said, "It's been lovely to talk about Brian. Since I can't talk to him, talking about him is good. He's a good person." She did not of course mean that she literally could not talk to Brian. She spoke with him all the time, even though it was not at all clear how much Brian could understand and whether his responses related to their immediate encounter. (I can think of a few of my theology students to whom the same observation could be made!) Her point was that he was limited in his ability to respond to her and that she had actually learned a lot about him by listening to the various stories that people had told about him. But what is interesting in her statement is the way that she positions Brian as "a good person."³⁶

Many individuals similar to Brian lack the capacity to use language (as far as we know), and we might also think that some of these individuals lack the capacity for second-order willing or reflective self-consciousness. At the very least, it seems reasonable to claim that we have no way of knowing whether Brian has the kind of self-reflexivity that Kierkegaard takes to be at the heart of human personhood. For those with even more severe cognitive disabilities, such as individuals in permanent vegetative states, the difficulty in identifying these capacities looks even more difficult.

Some cognitive disabilities are so profound that it is very difficult to know what constitutes the mental life of such individuals. Are such individuals truly *human* for Kierkegaard? The answer appears to be no. If "human beings" are identified as *spirit* (those who have an inherent capacity for self-reflection and the higher-order will to relate properly to God), and if "animals" are identified as

³⁰ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 96).

³¹ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 39).

³² (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 49).

³³ (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 42).

³⁴ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 15)

³⁵ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 15).

³⁶ (Swinton et al. 2011, p. 87).

those that lack even the capacity for despair, then those with severe cognitive disabilities appear closer to the latter category than the former. This is not to say that individuals with severe cognitive disabilities cannot flourish or relate to God in their own kind of way, but only that they cannot flourish in a specifically *human* way. For as we have seen, ‘a human being is a self... [and] a self is a relation that relates itself to itself’.³⁷

If this is what Kierkegaard intends, this need not be a *wholly* negative claim, for Kierkegaard certainly does not think that being human is always a decisive advantage in relating to God. Consider a discussion from his journals, for example:

Animal life is so simple, so easy to understand, because the animal has the advantage over man of not being able to talk. The only talking in animal existence [*Tilværelse*] is its life, its actions. ...

When I see a spider spinning its fine web, truly a work of art, I see—for the spider has the advantage over man of not being able to talk—I see what it means, the spider is seeking a living.³⁸

Animals are not only capable of a meaningful existence, but they also have various advantages over human beings in achieving this existence. Here, Kierkegaard speaks of the value of the animals’ inability to articulate its actions or motivation; something is lost, Kierkegaard thinks, in the human need to explain everything. Indeed, this theme is also spoken of in spiritual terms. One of Kierkegaard’s favorite passages of Scripture is that of Christ’s pointing to the lilies and the birds in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 6). Kierkegaard writes that the lilies ‘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*’.³⁹

Non-human creatures are of profound value for Kierkegaard; they have advantages over human beings, and they can teach human beings a great deal about relating properly to God. Thus, it might be argued, while it appears to follow from Kierkegaard’s anthropology that those with severe cognitive impairments are not fully human, this need not mean one must diminish their value or capacity for relationship with God. If this view is an implication of Kierkegaard’s position, he is not alone in endorsing it. Contemporary ethicist, Jeff McMahan, for instance, thinks that human persons are defined by their cognitive capacities and psychological functioning. For McMahan, nonpersons, including animals and humans with severe cognitive impairments are not morally insignificant, even if we think of them as distinct from persons. McMahan argues that our partiality toward human nonpersons should incline us to hold other nonpersons, such as animals in higher esteem:

It is arguable, however, that a further effect of our partiality for members of our own species is a tendency to decreased sensitivity to the lives and well-being of those sentient beings that are not members of our species. ... While our sense of kinship with the severely retarded moves us to treat them with great solicitude, our perception of animals as radically “other” numbs our sensitivity to them... When one compares the relatively small number of severely retarded human beings who benefit from our solicitude with the vast number of animals who suffer at our hands, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the good effects of our species-based partiality are greatly outweighed by the bad.⁴⁰

While this is not an argument Kierkegaard makes, one might think that something similar is an implication of the anthropology outlined in *Sickness* and is consistent with his generous remarks toward non-human animals. Indeed, many of the claims made about suffering point to the fact that what is distinctive about human persons is their capacities for self-reflection and willing; we have seen that, for Kierkegaard, suffering’s benefit is that it strengthens the will to be obedient to God, and

³⁷ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 13).

³⁸ (Kierkegaard 1999, III: 2337).

³⁹ (Kierkegaard 1997, pp. 26–27).

⁴⁰ (McMahan 2003, pp. 221–22).

that it allows individuals to achieve the kind of inwardness that is required for relating properly to God. According to such an account, then, rather than thinking of the category of ‘human’ or ‘person’ as excluding and degrading those with cognitive disabilities, we might instead elevate all of God’s creatures in their particularity. Thus, just as we might learn from the animal kingdom, those with severe disabilities might teach us something about our human *telos* as resting transparently in God.

However, whilst it is surely true that those with cognitive impairments have advantages over neurotypical individuals and that we can learn a great deal from such individuals, anthropologies that define personhood or humanness in terms of capacities are deeply problematic.⁴¹ Consider Eva Kittay’s response to McMahan:

For a mother of a severely cognitively impaired child, the impact of such an argument is devastating. How can I begin to tell you what it feels like to read texts in which one’s child is compared, in all seriousness and with philosophical authority, to a dog, pig, rat, and most flatteringly a chimp; how corrosive these comparisons are, how they mock those relationships that affirm who we are and why we care? I am no stranger to a beloved animal. I have had dogs I have loved, dogs I have mourned for. But as dog lovers who become parents can tell you, much as we adore our hounds, there is no comparison between the feelings for a beloved child of normal capacities and those for a beloved canine. And I can tell you that there is also no comparison when that child has intellectual disabilities.⁴²

Kittay’s response to McMahan articulates something that many of us know intuitively, even if we cannot articulate it philosophically; we know what a human person is when we see it, and any attempt to degrade or exclude such individuals from the category of *humanness* is both worrying and potentially dangerous. This is not to belittle the importance of animal ethics; it is possible to affirm Kierkegaard’s recognition of the sacredness of all of God’s creation while still insisting that ‘human being’ or ‘human person’ is a meaningful category into which the severely disabled must be included. Thus, we cannot be satisfied with any approach that does not recognize these differences.

4. The Promise of Teleological Anthropology

An alternative approach is needed if we are to take seriously the concerns raised above and still defend Kierkegaard’s anthropology. Whilst, as I have noted, there is something deeply problematic about the identification of human beings as self-reflective creatures with the capacity to will their relationship to God, I do not think this reflects the heart of Kierkegaard’s concern in *Sickness* or elsewhere. One promising way of upholding the heart of Kierkegaard’s position, while ensuring that Christianity relates to those with severe cognitive disabilities, is to maintain that the account of will and self-reflexivity is symptomatic of the sickness of despair, but that the flourishing of these capacities is not symptomatic of the cure.

Allow me to expand this thesis. Anti-Climacus’s account of the self is teleological; human beings were created for the right relationship with God and cannot flourish outside of this relationship. Thus, a necessary condition of what it means to be human is that one is a creature made by God in order to rightly relate to God. What prevents human beings relating to God, at least in neurotypical cases, is the willed misrelation between the individual and God, that is, despair. The sickness of most human beings is that they cannot will to be a self, and, therefore, they cannot properly relate to the power that established them. Despair prevents human beings fulfilling their *telos*, and therefore, it prevents them from being properly human. However, note what Anti-Climacus states about the antidote to despair:

⁴¹ As Joanna Leidenhag argues, many relational anthropologies, according to which personhood is defined as ‘the capacity for relationality’ are deeply problematic, since, ‘In so far as autistic spectrum disorders are primarily defined by a neurologically grounded impairment in social interaction, the failure of the relational turn prohibits positive theological treatments of persons with autism.’ (Leidenhag n.d., p. 24).

⁴² (Kittay 2009, p. 610).

Very often, however, it is overlooked that the opposite of sin is by no means virtue. In part, this is a pagan view, which is satisfied with a merely human criterion and simply does not know what sin is, that all sin is before God. No, *the opposite of sin is faith*, as it says in Romans 14:23: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” And this one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity—that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.⁴³

If the opposite to sin were virtue, then Anti-Climacus’ account would be structured as follows: (i) Human beings are creatures with certain capacities that have been damaged by sin, such that they cannot flourish. (ii) In being healed from sin by God, human beings are enabled to function properly, thereby existing as virtuous human beings free from disorder. However, if the opposite of despair is *faith* and not *virtue*, then any appeal to virtue is merely instrumental. That is, Anti-Climacus’s account (or my reconstruction of it) is structured as follows: (i) Human beings are creatures with certain capacities that have been damaged by sin, such that they cannot flourish in a right relationship with God. (ii) In being healed from sin by God, human beings are enabled to function properly, thereby enabling them to fulfill their true purpose of relating to God through faith. Thus, so long as despair is an impediment to a right relationship with God, it is necessary that God overcomes despair in the individual in order to enter into proper relationship with them.⁴⁴

Thus, whilst Kierkegaard’s account of the human being as spirit might have problematic resonances, his account of the human *telos* has more potential for providing an inclusive anthropology than it might first appear.⁴⁵ If those with cognitive disabilities lack the capacity for higher-order willing or self-reflection, then they surely also lack the capacity for despair. However, this is a good thing, for Kierkegaard. Since flourishing is not defined by the proper functioning of one’s capacities, but by relating to God in faith, then it seems that those with cognitive disabilities might more easily relate to God and thereby fulfill their *telos*. There may be other obstacles to faith in such individuals (other than despair), but what it is for them to function properly and to flourish is defined in relation to God, not according to their particular abilities and cognitive differences.⁴⁶

Indeed, these individuals might teach us a great deal about what it means to be a human being flourishing in relationship with God. Consider Rowan William’s discussion of those with severe disabilities in *The Edge of Words*, for instance:

Notice the dangerous word—that a putative human organism (an unborn child, a severely challenged adult, a person with dementia or with a condition that radically isolates them from communication, a person in a so-called vegetative condition) is beyond the community of mutual sense-making, we need to pause and weigh the importance of recognizing not necessarily another speech-user operating just like ourselves but another

⁴³ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 82)

⁴⁴ A similar remark is made in the *Christian Discourses*:

Alas, who does know himself? Is it not exactly this to which the earnest and honest self-examination finally leads as its last and truest, this humble confession: “Who knows his errors? From my hidden faults cleanse thou me” (Psalms 19:12). And when a person examines his relation to Christ, who then is the human being who completely knows his faithlessness, who the human being who would dare to think that in his very self-examination there could not be faithlessness? Therefore you do not find rest this way. So, then, rest; then seek rest for your soul in the blessed comfort that, even if we are faithless, he still is faithful. (Kierkegaard 1995a, pp. 287–88).

Just as true flourishing is not found in proper function or virtue, Kierkegaard tells us here that true self-knowledge is found only in resting in God and God’s faithfulness.

⁴⁵ In Brittain’s words, Kierkegaard ‘has no investment in a theological anthropology concerned to establish a standardized form of human existence. His emphasis is consistently on becoming the sort of human being God intends you to be, which has little in common with social and cultural standards and norms’ (Brittain 2012, p. 290).

⁴⁶ Swinton makes a very similar comment in writing that, ‘a gospel based on divine grace reveals us all as essentially dependant beings. Our status before God and our relationship with Him are products of His undeserved and unearned grace, quite apart from any contribution we may seek to make, and as such are independent of our cognitive capabilities.’ (Swinton 1997, p. 22).

center of meaningful experience, another point of view, the focus of another intelligible situation—and therefore a contributor in ways I may not easily grasp to my own intelligence.⁴⁷

Whilst Kierkegaard never makes such a reference to the value to be gained from those with cognitive disabilities, Williams' words seem entirely in keeping with Kierkegaard's emphasis on faith as the true *telos*, rather than virtue or "proper" functioning.⁴⁸ Similar to Kierkegaard, Williams sees that a human being's capacity for meaningful existence in relationship with God ought not to be confused the visible, outward manifestations of this *telos*; the human being's glory is invisible, Kierkegaard tells us.⁴⁹ Thus, an anthropology rooted in *telos* before God might allow us to recognize both the value of individuals with cognitive disabilities, as well as the contribution such individuals might make to our communities. As we have already seen, a repeated theme of Kierkegaard's writings is his emphasis on the 'single individual before God'. Unlike the dominant views of the Danish Hegelians in his own culture, Kierkegaard was keen to emphasize that the individual must relate to God, independently of the crowd of culture and organized religion. God does not deal with human beings *en masse*, but in their particularities, and Kierkegaard quite clearly includes those who are on the edges of such societies.

In many ways, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, then, our understanding of disability is challenged.⁵⁰ Coupled with the recognition that the *telos* of those with severe cognitive disabilities is defined in relation to God, we can affirm an anthropology that recognizes all human beings as created by God in their particularity and made for intimate relationship with God. God does not relate to 'humanity' monolithically but rather to each individual in their particularity. While many are blighted by their inability to overcome sin because of the distortedness of their will, some individuals with cognitive disabilities might be seen to have an advantage in this respect. We might even say that some cognitively disabled individuals have the potential to uphold their purpose in God more authentically and more fully than those living under the burden of despair.⁵¹ Grant Macaskill, in his recent work on autism and theology, affirms something similar in noting that those with autism, 'lack the capacity to participate in some of the sinful value systems that compromise others.'⁵² However, Macaskill goes on to argue, 'We must not be crass or naive in this, however, and must not romanticize autism, as if those who are autistic are blissfully free from sin... Those with autism participate in the war of flesh and Spirit as much as anyone else does.'⁵³ Yet, in affirming Kierkegaard's teleological anthropology, we can see that even amidst severe and debilitating suffering, disabled individuals

⁴⁷ (Williams 2014, p. 115).

⁴⁸ Swinton makes a similar point about the limits of language as a test of flourishing in relationship with God (Swinton 1997, pp. 25–26).

⁴⁹ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 193).

⁵⁰ As Brittain describes, 'Under the weight of sin, all human beings are effectively "disabled." Sin impedes human self-understanding; it disrupts relationships with others and prevents wholeness of living' (Brittain 2012, p. 289).

⁵¹ As Grant Macaskill notes, it is important to allow those with disability to inform our theology without romanticizing these disabilities. He observes that,

Much of the theological engagement with autism rightly seeks to give a positive account of the condition and its place within the church, but we cannot allow this to blind us to the real difficulties and suffering that it can often bring. We have to develop ways of speaking about autism that allow us to identify certain of its elements or aspects as *bad*, without thereby labeling the condition in wholly negative term (Macaskill 2019, p. 40).

⁵² (Macaskill 2019, p. 99).

⁵³ (Macaskill 2019, p. 99). As he later goes on to elaborate: 'The physical constitution of a person with autism can give rise to a different set of problems than that of a "neurotypical" person. But sets of problems, though are associated with the "flesh," the physical and neurophysiological particularities of each person. Both sets can rightly be called sin.' (Macaskill 2019, p. 142)

have the potential for meaningful and flourishing lives lived in relationship with God. There is much here that can affirm and uphold disabled individuals in our communities and in our theology.⁵⁴

Whilst it seems clear that the emphasis on *telos* would put Kierkegaard at odds with many contemporary ethicists, such as McMahan, it is still difficult to see what distinguishes human beings with cognitive disabilities from non-human animals. Since Kierkegaard upholds all of creation as having a *telos* rooted in God, we are still no closer to giving an answer to what makes those with cognitive disability truly *human*. For even if we emphasize the teleological aspects of Kierkegaard's thought, he still wants to claim that 'human beings' fulfill their *telos* in a distinctive way by existing as spirit. For instance, in an upbuilding discourse, Kierkegaard writes, that while the lilies of the field worship God through their outward beauty, they do not resemble God, 'precisely because the glory of the lily is visible'.⁵⁵ In contrast, human beings are made in God's image, since, 'to be spirit, that is the human being's invisible glory'.⁵⁶ As C. Stephen Evans puts it, for Kierkegaard, the term spirit 'describes what a self necessarily is. Ontologically, a spirit is a being that (at least partially) defines itself or helps to create its own identity'.⁵⁷ Thus, the defining feature of human uniqueness is that unlike inanimate objects and non-human animals, human beings have the freedom to will their own existence in relation to God. It is when the human being wills to relate to God in worship through this *invisible* glory of existing as *spirit* that they truly fulfill their *telos* as those that resemble God.⁵⁸

Even if a human being's glory is invisible, it is clearly defined in relation to certain capacities. As Anti-Climacus makes clear: 'The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also.'⁵⁹ While ever we define human uniqueness through capacities, we will inevitably exclude some from the category of 'human'. Thus, Kittay's worry about distinguishing her disabled daughter from her pet dog seems to begin to rear its head once more. We are forced to admit, I think, that Kierkegaard's claims about human uniqueness do not extend to the severely cognitively disabled. Without the capacity for self-reflection, we cannot identify them in the category of "human", even if we can uphold and learn from them. So, while there is a great deal that Kierkegaard can say that is affirming and inclusive of such individuals, we are still left with the worrisome conclusion that such individuals are not really human, even if they can flourish in their particularity through relationship with God.

5. A Relational Teleological Anthropology

At this point, it seems clear that Kierkegaard can take us no further, at least not without some amendment. If we insist on defining human uniqueness in reference to certain capacities, we will inevitably exclude some who intuitively are included in the category, 'human', regardless of how valuable one holds such individuals to be.⁶⁰ In this concluding section, then, I turn to consider how Kierkegaard's teleological anthropology might be amended to propose an inclusive vision of human flourishing in relationship with God.

⁵⁴ However, returning to Barnes' terminology, we might also suppose that some individuals with cognitive disability exist in a state of 'mere-difference', rather than 'bad-difference'. That is, while many human beings lack the capacities held by neurotypical individuals for self-reflection or higher willing, their existence is not one defined by pain and suffering simply because their capacities differ from those of other human beings.

⁵⁵ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 192).

⁵⁶ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 193).

⁵⁷ (Macaskill 2019, p. 15).

⁵⁸ (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 193).

⁵⁹ (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 30).

⁶⁰ We know from many of his own descriptions that Kierkegaard's primary audience was those deceived by Christendom into thinking that they were truly Christian. Kierkegaard's aim to 'introduce Christianity to Christendom' (Kierkegaard 1991, p. 36) is often deconstructive, prompting those who relate to God through the crowd to realize the need to relate to God as an individual. And thus, is not surprising that Kierkegaard's anthropology centres on the despair of the self-deceived and those who take refuge in worldly structures, rather than relationship with God. None of this can excuse Kierkegaard for not addressing the issue of cognitive disability more directly, but it might help us to appreciate the specifics of his context.

In short, my positive proposal is this: First, returning the observations of section one, we can affirm Kierkegaard's desire to include the marginalized and *shoved out* of society. Kierkegaard is right to claim that Christianity has a particular focus on those who are suffering and thought of as the least in worldly terms. Secondly, we should retain Kierkegaard's emphasis on the *telos* of all creation as made to worship and glorify God, thereby giving an infinite value to all of God's creatures, including those with severe cognitive disabilities. This means that, following Rowan Williams, we can learn something about relating to God from individuals with even the most severe disabilities. Thirdly, we should recognize that human beings *typically* exist in the state of willed misrelation to God that Anti-Climacus describes in *Sickness*. The neurotypical sin of failing to relate properly to God as the source of one's selfhood is widespread and a source of deep lament for Christian theology. However, fourthly, we should resist Kierkegaard's claim that what distinguishes the human from the animal is to be found in a capacity to exist as spirit, willing one's existence and relating to oneself reflexively. Instead, I will conclude by suggesting that we should locate our shared humanness in a sense of human community. While this is not something Kierkegaard explicitly endorses, I think his depiction of 'neighbor' in *Works of Love* provides the seeds for such an account.

To begin to sketch an alternative vision anthropology that can retain the important features of Kierkegaard's account, let us first return to Kittay and consider her positive proposal. One difference between Kittay's own daughter and a non-human animal, as she describes it, is that human beings have a status within communities that animals do not. She writes that,

We human beings are the sorts of beings we are because we are cared for by other human beings, and the human being's ontological status and corresponding moral status need to be acknowledged by the larger society that makes possible the work of those who do the caring required to sustain us. That is what we each require if we are some mother's child, and we are all some mother's child.⁶¹

In other words, for Kittay, what makes her daughter distinct from an animal is not her *capacities* but her relational identity as a daughter and a member of a human community. While Kittay might affirm Kierkegaard's positive views about non-human animals, at least one difference between her daughter and the birds of the air is that no bird is her daughter, no bird belongs within the human community in such an intimate way. Put in Kierkegaard's terminology, we might rephrase Kittay's claim as such: What distinguishes her daughter from any other animal is her daughter is a *neighbor*.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard explores the commandment of Christ to 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Mark 12:31). For Kierkegaard, love of neighbor is foundational for human morality. Asking the question, 'Who, then, is one's neighbor?', Kierkegaard answers:

The word is obviously derived from "nearest"; thus the neighbor is the person who is nearer to you than anyone else, yet not in the sense of preferential love, since to love someone who is in the sense of preferential love is nearer than anyone else is self-love....The concept of "neighbor" is actually the redoubling of your own self; "the neighbor" is what thinkers call "the other." That by which the selfishness in self-love is to be tested.⁶²

What Kierkegaard says here is striking. For while there is always a certain amount of selfishness to preferential or romantic love,⁶³ the Christian command to love concerns one's neighbor, that is, to love *everyone*, regardless of personal preference. Thus, for Kierkegaard, 'only when one loves the neighbor, only then is the selfishness in preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved.'⁶⁴ In other words, one important way of willing to exist as a self before God is to love of the other

⁶¹ (Kittay 2009, p. 625).

⁶² (Kierkegaard 1995b, p. 21).

⁶³ (Kierkegaard 1995b, p 44).

⁶⁴ (Kierkegaard 1995b, p 44).

selflessly.⁶⁵ In a revealing passage, Kierkegaard considers the instance of a parent's love for their newborn child. He writes that,

Parents love the children almost before they come into existence and long before they become conscious beings, therefore as nonbeings... If parents had no hope whatever, no prospect at all, of ever receiving joy from their children and reward for their love—well, there would indeed still be many a father and mother who still would lovingly do everything for the children—ah, but certainly would also be many a father and mother whose love would grow cold. By this it is not our intention to declare outright that such a father and mother are unloving; no, but the love in them would still be so weak, or self-love so strong, that this joyous hope, this encouraging prospect would be *needed*. And with this hope, this prospect everything is all right.⁶⁶

The prospect of future joy and reciprocal relationship means that a parent's love for a child still retains an element of self-love; even the love of a helpless newborn can never be completely selfless so long as the parent keeps in mind the *prospect* of future joy in building reciprocal relationship with the child. However, in contrast, Kierkegaard thinks, 'one who is dead makes no repayment... If, then, you wish to test yourself as to whether you love unselfishly, just pay attention to how you relate yourself to one who is dead.'⁶⁷

There are a few points worth reflecting on for our purpose here. First, in discussing the love of newborn infants, unborn infants, and the dead, Kierkegaard clearly affirms that love of neighbor extends to those without the capacity for self-reflection and the ability to will in the right kind of way. Thus, it seems uncontentious to think that those with severe cognitive disabilities should be included in the category of 'neighbor', even if they fall short of the capacities described in the discussion of spirit. The category of *neighbor* appears to function more broadly than that of human beings as *spirit*, yet more narrowly than referring to the created order as a whole. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard makes little appeal to the neighbor as one with spirit, and the passages above suggest that there are neighbors who lack the capacity for self-consciousness. So, what reason do we have to think that those with cognitive disabilities are our neighbors and that our dogs are not? One answer, inspired by Kittay, which seems in keeping with Kierkegaard's thinking (if not endorsed directly by him) is that these individuals are part of our human community; in them, we encounter the face of the other.⁶⁸

In reflecting on Christ's discussion of neighbor, Kierkegaard makes it clear that Christ never answers the question: 'Who is my neighbor?'; this is the wrong question, Kierkegaard thinks. As he puts it, 'Christ does not speak about knowing the neighbor but about becoming a neighbor oneself, about showing oneself to be a neighbor just as the Samaritan showed it by mercy.'⁶⁹ Kierkegaard's point is that rather than debating where precisely to draw the lines in excluding some as neighbors and others as foreigners (which he takes to be Levite's intention in asking the question), we should seek to love those who we immediately come into contact with and encounter as other and love them selfless, regardless of their background. Moreover, Kierkegaard is clear that a love for a neighbor who cannot enter into reciprocal relationship is a less selfish instance of love. For the very severe cases of cognitive disability in which there is little or no reciprocity, Kierkegaard can affirm not only that we have a requirement to love this person as a neighbor, but also that one's love for that particular neighbor is all the more important, even if it is more difficult to achieve.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Such love involves a kind of *redoubling*; here Kierkegaard is expanding the discussion of 'other relatedness' from *Sickness* to apply not only to relating to God, but also to relating to one's neighbor.

⁶⁶ (Kierkegaard 1995b, pp. 349–50).

⁶⁷ (Kierkegaard 1995b, pp. 350–51).

⁶⁸ Indeed, many scholars see *Works of Love* as Kierkegaard's attempt to bring the single individual into a genuine Christian community (see Ferreira 2001, p. 104).

⁶⁹ (Kierkegaard 1995b, p. 22).

⁷⁰ A similar conclusion is reached in John Swinton's discussion of disability and ecclesiology. He writes that, there is a constant, and that constant is Jesus. At the heart of that constant is a place of belonging for all people. The only norm that matters is love. To be include you just need to be there; to belong you need to be missed; to miss one another we need to learn what it means to love with the passion of Jesus. And perhaps

In what sense is the individual with severe cognitive disability thought of as a *neighbor*, then? Precisely in the terms that Kittay articulated so movingly; that is, just as a newborn infant who unable to engage with their parents is one that we have a requirement to love, those human beings who exist in our communities as daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, next-door neighbors, are those we have a requirement to love unselfishly. Kierkegaard makes no attempt to define neighbor in the terms used in *Sickness*, since the neighbor is simply those we encounter as *other*. It is difficult to see how we might avoid thinking of even the most profoundly disabled in these terms, regardless of their capacities and abilities. It seems that the concept of neighbor is broader than, and avoids the thorny issues surrounding the account of human being as spirit. We should think of our human neighbor as those around us, in our communities and families, and those who are regarded by God as having utmost value. Kierkegaard's powerful words about the value of the neighbor seem to be a powerful place to conclude:

Dissimilarity is temporality's method of confusing that marks every human being differently, but the neighbor is eternity's mark—on every human being. Take many sheets of paper, write something different on each one; then no one will be like another. But then again take each single sheet; do not let yourself be confused by the divine inscriptions, hold it up to the light, and you will see a common watermark on all of them. In the same way the neighbor is the common watermark, but you see it only by means of eternity's light when it shines through the dissimilarity.⁷¹

6. Conclusions

We have seen that there is much about Kierkegaard's discussion of human existence that is positive and affirming of those with disability. His recognition of the marginalized and the value he sees in their suffering can help provide a source encouragement and comfort for those who suffer. Yet, I have argued, to remain here would be to fall short of giving a theology of disability. Kierkegaard's anthropology seeks to recognize that true flourishing lies in each individual relating to God in their particularity. Every human being finds their value in right relationship with God. Moreover, Kierkegaard thinks that even the most unlikely parts of God's creation can reflect God's glory and teach us to worship more fully. Therefore, his anthropology has a great deal to offer to disability theology.

However, as we have seen, Kierkegaard's remarks about human beings as spirit have problematic implications for those who lack the capacity for higher-order willing and reflective self-consciousness. If human beings are identified as those who meet certain criteria of cognitive ability, then Kierkegaard's anthropology will always exclude some, thereby undermining the profound contribution he has to offer to disability theology. Finally, I have argued, an emphasis on neighbor, rather than spirit, can help to alleviate this worry. This need not mean that Kierkegaard's claims about despair and sin are moot. Rather, I have suggested that these claims should be weakened to claims about *typical* human beings; all those who exist in the freedom to will their own existence are no doubt our neighbors, but so also are those members of our human community for whom this is not possible. Such a move thereby allows us to recognize the profound lessons to be learnt in loving all of our fellow human beings as neighbors created for intimate relationship with God.

Funding: This research was funded by the Templeton Religion Trust, grant number 58801.

Acknowledgement: With thanks to Koert Verhagen, Andrew Torrance and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

that is as good a definition of the calling of the church that we can get? It could be that in wrestling with the meaning of the term disability we actually discover the meaning of love. (Swinton 2012, p. 188).

⁷¹ (Kierkegaard 1995b, p. 89).

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