Kierkegaard, Repetition and Ethical Constancy

Daniel Watts, *The University of Essex*

Abstract

How can a person forge a stable ethical identity over time? On one view, ethical constancy means reapplying the same moral rules. On a rival view, it means continually adapting to one's ethical context in a way that allows one to be recognized as the same practical agent. Focusing on his thinking about repetition, I show how Kierkegaard offers a critical perspective on both these views. From this perspective, neither view can do justice to our vulnerability to certain kinds of crisis, in which our ethical self-understanding is radically undermined. I further examine his alternative account of ethical constancy, by clarifying Kierkegaard's idea of a 'second ethics', as addressed to those who feel ethically powerless and as requiring an ongoing process of self-transformation.

> And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.
>
> (Romans 12:2)

> You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.
>
> (Beckett, The Unnamable)

Despite its centrality in his work, Kierkegaard's category of repetition remains in some obscurity. Constantin Constantius – the first authorial voice of the enigmatic little book, *Repetition* – introduces the category, with some fanfare, as a sort of modern counterpart to the ancient Greek idea of recollection:

> When the Greeks said that all knowing was recollecting, they were also thus saying that all of existence, everything that is, has been. When one says that life is a repetition, one also says that that which has existed now comes to be again. When one lacks the categories of recollection and repetition, all of life is dissolved into empty, meaningless noise.[1]

This much seems clear: to apply the category of repetition is to affirm the possibility of some form of meaningful continuity or constancy across time. It is supposed to be the category without which, absent also a full-

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1. Kierkegaard (2009a: 19)

blooded metaphysics of recollection, we moderns could only regard life in time as 'one damned thing after another' – if anything as coherent as that. But Constantin Constantius – whose name of course contains a double echo of the idea of constancy – scarcely offers a settled view about how his favourite category is rightly to be employed. In fact, as *Repetition* unfolds, Constantius himself comes to give up theorizing about repetition, not least in the light of his own comical failure to put theory into practice. This plausibly reflects Kierkegaard's aim to dramatize (and not just to state) repetition's opacity to the merely theoretical form of understanding that Constantius serves to personify.[2] But I think we can and should still ask: what sense can we make of this category from a theoretical point of view? If the answer is 'none at all', any claim to the effect that what Kierkegaard calls 'repetition' ultimately resists theoretical articulation will itself collapse into empty noise.

Having juxtaposed recollection and repetition, Constantius goes on directly to declare that '[r]epetition is the watchword [Løsnet] in every ethical outlook'.[3] Taking a cue from this admittedly gnomic remark, I want in this essay to propose an approach to the ethical significance of Kierkegaard's thinking about repetition. On this proposal, his work offers a distinctive approach to the question of ethical constancy, that is, the question of what it is for a person to manifest an ethical identity that is constant over time. I aim to show how his work provides a compelling critical perspective on two influential answers. The core of the first answer is the idea that ethical constancy means repeatedly basing one's actions on the same moral rules, via one's reflective grasp of the rules themselves. Call this the cognitivist view. The core of the second answer is the idea of a person continually readjusting to changes within a dynamic context of ethical life in a way that allows her to be recognized by her community as the same practical agent. Call this the community view.

These two views can be described as broadly Kantian and Hegelian, respectively. Thus, the cognitivist view is plausibly implied, for example, by Korsgaard's elaboration of the Kantian thought that the key to our 'self-constitution' as moral beings is our ability to take up the stance of so-called 'reflective distance' towards our instinctive or learned responses,

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2. For an illuminating reading of *Repetition* which develops this observation, see Carlisle (2005).

3. Kierkegaard *et al.* (1978-2000), Vol. VI: 149). Hereafter, this translation is cited as "*KW*", followed by volume and page number. The Danish word, 'Løsnet', translated 'watchword' by the Hongs, is rendered 'solution' by Piety (Kierkegaard (2009a: 19)). The root meaning is loosing or releasing: as in the releasing of canon-fire, in an opening salvo, or the loosening of a knotty problem. This suggests the following periphrastic translation of the quoted phrase: 'repetition is what releases every ethical outlook into motion.' Thanks to George Pattison for helpful discussion of this phrase.

so that these now become experienced instead as considerations in favour of a certain course of action, ones 'we can endorse or reject'.[4] In the case of the community view, one might think of Honneth's elaboration of Hegel's recognition-theoretical approach, for example, or the Hegelian story McDowell wants to tell about our 'second nature'.[5] However, I do not propose here to consider in detail how Kierkegaard's critique might play out with respect to different readings of Kant and Hegel or different versions of the cognitivist and community views. My main aim instead is to bring into relief what is most distinctive about Kierkegaard's own approach in this regard.

In the view I hope to illuminate, ethical constancy is in general reducible neither to moral rule-following nor to the ability to develop continuously within a dynamic context of mutual recognition. These types of repetition – the reapplication of rules/repeated acts of adjusting to a changing ethical context – are inadequate to account in general for the possibility of ethical constancy. A general source of his scepticism in this regard is Kierkegaard's recognition of our vulnerability to certain sorts of crisis, in which our ethical self-understanding is radically thrown into question. In the face of such crises, he holds that ethical repetition must instead take the form of an ongoing process of self-transformation in which one's whole ethical context is rediscovered and rendered anew. For a model of this process, I shall turn (in II) to his striking description of how an actress might respond to a crisis in her ability to carry on as an artist, in terms of 'the metamorphosis of potentiation'. I shall then show (in III) why he thinks an analogous process of self-transformation is required for ethical constancy, with respect to Christian ethics and the ideal of non-preferential love. We shall why Kierkegaard thinks the 'metamorphosis of continuity', posited by the community view, is not enough for such constancy. And we shall see why he thinks the ideal of non-preferential love is suitable to specify a 'second ethics': that is, an ethics addressed to those who feel at a loss how to 'go on' ethically.

First, let us consider how Kierkegaard's thought engages with the cognitivist view, in which ethical constancy means reapplying the same moral rules.

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The cognitivist view gives pride of place to the idea of moral rule-following. Crucially, this is not merely the idea of behaviour that accords

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with public or moral norms. In this regard, the cognitivist view reflects a standard gloss on the familiar contrast: conforming to/following a rule. Thus, it is said that, quite generally, what we properly call rule-*following* requires 'an intentional attempt to bring one's behaviour in line with the dictates of [the] rule'; or that 'to follow a rule is... to conform as a result of trying to conform'; or again that the rule 'should tell me what I ought to do in each new instance'.[6] Noting Wittgenstein's analogy between following a rule and obeying an order, David Bloor makes the contrast vivid, with reference to moral rules:

> Long before rigorists talked of the categorical imperative, irreverent street urchins would have been making a version of the same point. 'Get out!', orders the voice of authority: 'I was going anyway', comes the reply. This is not only impertinent, it is philosophically astute. If you are going anyway (i.e. going of your own volition and in accordance with your own purposes), then you are not going because of the order. An order to do X is only obeyed if X is done, and done only because of the order and with the intention of obeying it.[7]

Bloor goes on to endorse a 'conscientiousness condition', according to which a rule is genuinely followed if and only if 'the actors bring about the conformity of their behaviour with the rule by intending to follow it. They must, as it were, have the rule before their mind as their guide and goal'.[8]

Now, Kierkegaard evidently agrees with the negative part of the cognitivist view. That is, he agrees that behaviour that merely conforms to public norms is not enough for ethical constancy. A representative passage invites us to concur that 'someone could very well live on, get married, be respected and well regarded as husband, father, and popinjay champion ... without ever receiving any impression of the infinitude of the ethical, because ... he got by through resorting to the customs and traditions prevailing in the city where he lived'.[9] Indeed:

> As a mother admonishes her child about to attend a party, 'Be sure now to behave yourself, and do as you see the other well-behaved children do', so could he, too, live and behave as he saw others behave. He would never be the first to do anything, and he would never have an opinion without first knowing that others had it; for precisely this 'the others' would be for him the first. On out-of-the-way occasions

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6. Boghossian (1989: 517); Pettit (1990: 3); Kripke (1982: 24). For a critical perspective on the rule-conforming/rule-following distinction, see Boghossian (2005), which in this regard repudiates Boghossian (1989); Gert (2015); Ginsborg (2011); Watts (2012).

7. Bloor (2002: 43-4). For his analogy between following a rule and obeying an order see, for example, Wittgenstein (1975: 3).

8. Bloor (2002: 44). Compare also Tomoji Shogenji's clam that rule-following involves conformity plus 'subscription' to a rule (2000: 503).

9. Kierkegaard (2009b: 204).

he would behave like someone who, on being served some course at a banquet, did not know how it should be eaten; he would look around him until he saw how others did it, etc.[10]

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard offers the memorable image of the 'spiritless person' as a 'talking-machine', for whom 'there is nothing to prevent him from repeating by rote a philosophical rigmarole, a confession of faith or a political recitative'.[11] Our tendency to relate to public norms in this way, in the manner of 'a parroting echo's routine rendition', is one Kierkegaard will trace back to the mimetic character of some of our most deep-seated desires.[12] He evidently thinks that we (for some 'we') find ourselves spontaneously inclined to ape the others, to lose ourselves in a dynamic of comparison and adaptation.

Thus, Kierkegaard's work harbours a rather strong form of the scepticism implicit in the cognitivist view towards rote rule-conforming and its place in ethical life. But what of the claim that, over and above mere rule-conforming, genuine ethical constancy requires the reflective grasp of moral rules, treating these as one's 'guide and goal'? In its most general form, the Kierkegaardian worry is that this view is *too intellectualistic*, failing to do justice to the roles of passion, imagination and spontaneous action in ethical forms of repetition. But his objection really splits into two: (i) the cognitivist view is inadequate to account for how ethical repetition can so to speak *get going* – that is, how one's performances can begin to manifest a stable form of ethical identity in the first place; and (ii) the cognitivist view is unable to account for how ethical repetition can *keep going* – that is, how one can sustain an enduring ethical identity, especially in the face of crisis-situations in which reflective rule-following breaks down.

Firstly, then, how does moral rule-following get going? In one place, Kant ventures the following advice on how to bring up children into a moral culture:

> Moral culture must be based on maxims, not discipline. The latter prevents bad habits, the former forms the way of thinking. One must see to it that a child accustoms itself to act according to maxims and not according to certain incentives. Discipline leaves us only with a habit, which, after all, fades away over the years. The child should learn to act according to maxims whose fairness it itself understands. It is easy to see that this is hard to bring about in children, and that moral

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10. *Ibid* (204-5).
11. Kierkegaard (*KW* VIII: 95).
12. Kierkegaard (2009b: 61). As several critics have observed, Kierkegaard's work affords sustained comparison in this regard with Girard's account of mimetic desire. See, for example, Bellinger (1996).

education therefore also demands the most insight from the side of the parents and teacher.[13]

Kant's picture of moral education no doubt reflects his view that, in contrast with the way non-rational phenomena merely accord with natural laws, 'only a rational being has the capacity to act in accordance with the representation [*Vorstellung*] of laws'.[14] Again, in Korsgaard's terms, what makes the difference is the human capacity to achieve 'reflective distance', so that we can represent moral rules to ourselves and base our actions upon them. But we might press the question: how then is the child supposed to learn to act according to maxims whose fairness [*Billigkeit*] it understands for itself?

On the face of it, Kant's answer is that the child must be taught to represent to herself the moral law, so that she can base her actions upon it. This is what enables the child to self-regulate, to test the fairness of maxims for herself, and thereby to forge an enduring moral identity. But some of Kant's own formulations look immediately to be in some tension with this rule-centred picture of moral education. For one thing, the contrast between teaching a child to act on maxims and, on the other hand, training her drives through discipline is already complicated by Kant's characterization of the former in terms of the need to see to it that the child 'accustoms itself' to acting on maxims. But what can it mean to see to it that a child gets accustomed to moral rule-following, if this is not a matter of discipline, training, habituation? As Hegel emphasizes in his account of ethical life, and as Wittgenstein underlines more generally, representations of rules are not, after all, self-interpreting. Moreover, as Kant already seems to recognize, it is difficult to see how the child, especially the very young child, could already exhibit the reflective distance needed consciously to base her actions on the moral law. Indeed, Kant says that cultivating the child's moral appreciation calls for the greatest insight on the part of her teachers and parents. But, again, what sort of insight and pedagogy is called for here, if this cannot be reduced to the representation of rules?

In pressing this question, we need not saddle Kant with the view that learning to follow rules is all there is to our moral acculturation. The point is that, as Kant seems to recognize, this cannot be the whole story. It is instructive in this connection to compare Kant's picture of moral education with the one sketched by Judge Wilhelm, Kierkegaard's fictional 'ethicist'. Rather than reflection on rules, the Judge emphasizes

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13. Kant (2007: 468).
14. Kant (1997: 24).

the learner's spontaneous responses and primitive impressions.[15] Thus, in describing what it takes for an individual to make the transition to a socially mediated form of ethical identity – styled as the transition from a 'personal self' to a 'civic self' – the Judge maintains that the learner's task is 'not to form himself but to act' and insists that if 'he does not begin concretely he will never make a beginning'.[16] These claims are based in the reasoning that a person's ethical identity cannot be a matter of reflective self-regulation all the way down, so to speak, but must bottom out in concrete actions that express her primitive ethical responses. As Wittgenstein also insists, rules cannot be based on prior rules ad infinitum: at some point rule-followers must act, on the basis of their primitive responses.[17]

The Judge indicates the sort of ethical impression he has in mind by way of a homely autobiography of his own first impressions of ethical life. His first assignment on his first day at school, he recalls, was to learn by heart the first ten lines of a catechism:

> It seemed to me that heaven and earth would tumble down if I did not do my homework … At that age I knew very little about my duties; I had not yet become acquainted with them in Balle's catechism. I had but one duty, to do my homework, and yet I can derive my whole ethical view of life from this impression.

> I can smile at such a little fellow of five years who approached a matter that passionately, and yet I assure you that I have no higher wish than that at any period of life I may approach my work with the energy, with the ethical earnestness I did then. It is true that later on in life one gets a better idea of what one's work is, but the energy is still the main thing. That this event made such an impression on me I owe to my father's earnestness … In that respect I can say that my childhood was happy … I did not have many duties, and how many children are warped by being overwhelmed by a whole ritual of duties.[18]

The Judge's basic insight here is that rule-following and reflective self-formation is ultimately founded on primitive forms of human judgement and sensitivity. This insight is a returning theme in Kierkegaard's

15. That the rehabilitation of the passions in ethical life is among the aims of *Either/Or*, against the background of a Kantian emphasis on reason and duty and rules, is already indicated by its epigraph from Edward Young: 'Are passions, then, the pagans of the soul? Reason alone baptized?' (*KW* IV.I: 603n). Compare John Skorupski: 'The deep distortions in Kant's ethics seem to me, as they have seemed to many others, to stem from a profoundly false contrast between 'Reason' and feeling … Recognition of reasons for feeling is based on the spontaneity of feelings, in exactly the way that recognition of reasons for belief or action is based on the spontaneity of dispositions to act' (2010: 27). Thanks to Bob Stern for drawing my attention to this passage.)
16. Kierkegaard (*KW* IV.II: 263).
17. See, for example, Wittgenstein (1953: §§ 145, 201, 455, 457).
18. Kierkegaard (*KW* IV.II: 267–269).

work and helps to explain his famous use of the image of a leap to characterize 'qualitative transitions' quite generally.[19] Such transitions include, but are not restricted to, cases of religious conversion. Just as a literal leap gets you from A to B without traversing the intervening ground, so Kierkegaard thinks the advent of a qualitatively new dimension in a person's life – whether it be linguistic competence, or sinfulness, or faith, or an ethical identity – must at some point in its genesis be immediate and direct, unaided by any such intermediary steps as the prior mental representation of a rule or goal. Again, his insistence on this point reflects Kierkegaard's recognition of the incoherence of any view that implies that agents can perform acts of a certain type only if they have already performed acts of the selfsame type: the implication that any given act of sin presupposes prior acts of sin, for example, or that acts of self-constitution can only be performed on the basis of prior acts of self-constitution.[20]

What in general should we treat as primitive with respect to moral rule-following? In my view, Kierkegaard's work invites closer scrutiny in this connection, not least regarding the role of ethical exemplars, and our fundamentally non-rule-based responses to them.[21] And we could further consider what exactly the Judge means by 'earnestness' and 'energy' and how he understands his father's role in the formation of his ethical imagination. But I leave for another occasion the task of developing Kierkegaard's view of ethical education. For our purposes here, what is important is the way he extends the general lesson, about the limits of rules and reflective self-regulation, beyond the first moments of ethical life. For, his work also emphasizes our vulnerability as human beings to certain sorts of ethical crisis, in which our rules and maxims seem only to leave us in the lurch. Supposing we have somehow got going as ethical agents, the further question therefore arises: how can we *keep going*?

Consider Korsgaard's insistence that the rules of practical reason are not merely general but universal, in the sense of being *exceptionless*. She makes a telling concession:

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19. For the use of image of the leap to describe 'qualitative transitions' in general, see, for example. Kierkegaard (1967: 261). Plausibly, the insight that rule-following is ultimately founded in our primitive human responses is a major source of the philosophical affinity between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. For a discussion of this affinity, see Watts (2017a).
20. In other words, Kierkegaard recognizes the general principle that David Bell has identified as 'The Principle of Spontaneity': 'If the performance of an act of type Φ is learned or rule-governed, then it cannot be a general requirement of my performing an arbitrary act of type Φ that I have already performed an act of that type or, indeed, of any other type that in its turn requires the prior performance of an act of type Φ' (1987: 225).
21. For a discussion of Kierkegaard's account of ethical exemplars, with particular reference to his portrayal of Socrates and Socratic irony, see Watts (2017b).

There's no reason to suppose we can think of everything in advance. When we adopt a maxim as universal law, we know that there might be cases, cases we hadn't thought of, which would allow that it is not universal after all.[22]

Mark LeBar comments: 'Korsgaard is squarely facing a problem any account of deliberative rationality must confront, one which arises from the fact that life is a matter of constant change, sometimes in directions that are not only unforeseen but practically unimaginable'.[23] For his part, LeBar concludes that Korsgaard's 'universal' principles are not load-bearing, the real work being done instead by our context-sensitive judgements about particular situations and what to do when we are in them. In Kierkegaard's terms, it is not only the first moment of ethical formation that requires a 'leap', but each subsequent moment.[24]

But Kierkegaard's worry arguably cuts deeper than LeBar's. For, Kierkegaard recognizes a more radical kind of ethical crisis, one which throws into question one's very identity as an ethical agent. An example of a crisis that, for biographical reasons, doubtless had a special salience for Søren Kierkegaard is a situation in which one finds oneself unable to follow through with an engagement to be married. Tortured expression is given to just such a crisis by the second authorial voice in *Repetition* – the Young Man – having lost faith in the advice of his erstwhile moral guide and confidante, Constantin:

> What do I do now? I begin again from the beginning, and thus also from the end. I flee from every external reminder of the whole thing, while my soul, day and night, waking and dreaming, continues to be obsessed by it … All of existence seems to me to contain nothing but allusions to this past. The day before I left, I read in Adressavisen, '16 yards of heavy, black silk for sale because of change of plans.' What could have been the original purpose, perhaps a wedding dress? If only I could sell my name through the papers because of a change of plans![25]

The general form of the Young Man's predicament is that he feels unable to project into the future ethical commitments he has accrued in the past and that continue to haunt him. His question, 'What do I do now?' expresses not just uncertainty about how to answer a specific first-order ethical question – for example, whether or not to go through with the marriage – but a far more pervasive sense of ethical disorientation.

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22. Korsgaard (2009b: 74–5).
23. LeBar (2013: 192).
24. Thus, according to a central claim in *The Concept of Anxiety*, in human spiritual development quite generally, '[t]he history of the individual life proceeds in a movement from state to state. Every state is posited by a leap' (Kierkegaard (2009a: 56–7)).
25. Kierkegaard (2009a: 56-7).

As we might put it, he no longer makes ethical sense to himself.[26] While no doubt extreme in its felt intensity, this predicament serves to typify a mundane difficulty of ethical life: how to sustain one's ethical identity in the face of upheaval, both inner and outer. That rules need to be reapplied in new situations becomes all the more problematic when the changes are such as to throw into question what it would mean to apply the rules, going forward. In the face of such a crisis it will be of little help to be told to do whatever it is the rule requires.

Now, while Kierkegaard certainly gives them his own stamp, the points we have so far considered, regarding the irreducibility of ethical life to reflective rule-following, are broadly continuous with Hegel's critique of Kantian morality, harking back to an Aristotelian emphasis on situated judgement, ethos and insight.[27] However, my aim in the remainder of this essay is to illuminate what is most distinctive about Kierkegaard's view in this regard. To bring this into view, we need to consider how he thinks a person might respond to the sort of crisis of ethical identity typified by the Young Man in *Repetition*. In the next section, I shall approach this issue obliquely, via one of Kierkegaard's less well-known texts: *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (hereafter, *'Crisis'*).[28]

II

Crisis turns on a contrast between two ways in which an ageing actress might respond to a crisis in her identity as an artist that arises from the changing expectations of a fickle theatre-going public. The real-world occasion for this theme was the return of Johanne Luise Heiberg to the part that first established her reputation as an actress, Shakespeare's Juliet. Accordingly, Inter et Inter – the fictional author of *Crisis* – invites us to consider the plight of a fading star whose identity as an actress has become inextricable from her celebrated reprisal of Juliet as a stunning teenager. Specifically, we are to consider what it would mean for this actress now to return to the role of Juliet and to do so in response to the

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26. Kierkegaard's Young Man thus fits Cavell's description of a 'search for direction in what seems a scene of moral chaos, the scene of the dark place in which one has lost one's way' (1990: xxxii).

27. In the way he develops these points, Kierkegaard anticipates important current strands in moral particularism. See, especially, Gleeson (2007).

28. Having initially agonized over its publication, Kierkegaard came to regard *Crisis* as pivotal for his authorship (see, for example, Kierkegaard (*KW* 4.2: 437–8) and the discussion in Pyper (2007)). For his retrospective view of its importance for his authorship, see Kierkegaard (*KW* XXII: 30–31).

threat of her artistic life coming to a standstill. In order to bring into relief the special kind of self-transformation he thinks such a return to Juliet would involve, Inter et Inter juxtaposes an alternative strategy that an actress might adopt in such circumstances. This is what he calls, 'the metamorphosis of continuity':

> [T]he metamorphosis of continuity ... is a process, a succession, a steady transformation over the years, so that the actress as she grows older changes her sphere, takes older roles, again with the same perfection with which she at a younger age filled younger roles. This metamorphosis could be called straightforwardly perfectibility ... The metamorphosis, however, of which we have been speaking is the metamorphosis of potentiation, or it is a more and more intensive return to the beginning ... Over the years the metamorphosis of continuity will spread evenly over the essential range of assignments within the idea of femininity. Over the years the metamorphosis of potentiation will stand in an ever more intensive relation to the same idea ... [I]t may be said of both of them that time has no power over them.[29]

So, we have two types of self-transformation, both of which *Crisis* presents ultimately not just as two options open to an ageing actress, but, on a grander scale, as two general forms of human defence 'gainst Time's scythe':

> M1. 'The metamorphosis of continuity.' Our actress might adapt to the audience's changing expectations by taking on new roles within a range she can regard as continuous with her first rendition of Juliet. She might take on Juliet's nurse, for example, or her mother, so as further to explore and perfect her ability artistically to express the Idea of feminine youthfulness, the ability that, ex hypothesi, was always at the heart of her celebrated reprisal of Juliet in the first place and so foundational for her identity as an actress.

> M2. 'The metamorphosis of potentiation.' Our actress might instead return to the role of Juliet, seeking to recover afresh the interpretative possibilities it presents, as though approaching it for the very first time. In this scenario, on which his attention is focused, Inter et Inter argues that the middle-aged actress is actually now in a better position to artistically express the essential Idea of Juliet, on the grounds that she is better placed to 'carry the weight of Juliet's intense complexity' and less liable than she was, as a teenage sensation, to be mistaken for the Idea of Juliet, by herself or by her audience.[30]

The contrast between M1 and M2 affords redescription under the category of repetition. We can say that, in M1, the actress 'repeats' herself *qua*

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29. Kierkegaard (*KW* XVII: 321; 323-4).
30. Interestingly, Heiberg's own *A Life Relived in Recollection*—a title which, as Hugh Pyper observes, itself has a Kierkegaardian ring—reports in retrospect that, as a 16-year-old, 'I played Juliet like a child that sings a charming song without knowing about notes' (cited in Pyper (2007: 306)).

actress by readjusting to her own changing physicality in the context of the changing expectations of a theatre-going public; in M2, she does so by returning to her first role and by rediscovering the Idea of Juliet in a way that renders anew her own artistic self-understanding. More generally, we can distinguish two ways of responding to a crisis of practical identity: through repetitions of *readjustment*, by taking up new roles such that these can be recognized as continuous with the old ones; or through repetitions of *rediscovery*, by taking up again the old roles but now in a new way.

This distinction is easily fudged. After all, both M1 and M2 can be described as ways of taking up again an established form of practical self-understanding. But I take it that what really distinguishes M2 from M1 is what Inter et Inter captures by the phrase, 'a more and more intensive return to the beginning'. In M1, a person's self-understanding is *extended*, through new practices which can be recognized – by herself and by her audience – as continuous with the old; whereas in M2, a person's self-understanding is *intensified*, through a process of retrieving the potential already latent in past expressions of the ideals to which she is committed.

Illustrations of the repetition of rediscovery are also to be found in other arts. Picasso, for example, made over 200 variations in different media of Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur l'herbe*, a work which itself radically challenged the tradition by (inter alia) discovering new possibilities latent in Raphael's *The Judgement of Paris*, which in turn appropriates a relief sculpture found on two ancient Roman sarcophagi. Upon viewing the Manet for the third time, Picasso is said to have written on the back of an envelope: 'When I see Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* I say to myself: trouble for later on!'[31] There is of course no question here of mere copying. Picasso evidently regards his artistic tradition not as a fixed actuality, something to be simply continued or broken with, but as an unsettling challenge, one he is fated to keep on rediscovering.[32]

How does all this bear on the question of ethical constancy? In *Crisis*, M2 is said to be the kind of self-transformation that is of special interest to aestheticians; M1, to ethicists. Inter et Inter alludes in this connection to a long footnote in *Stages on Life's Way,* in which, in developing his defence of ethical life, Judge Wilhelm seeks to illustrate the idea of

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31. Cited in Cowling and Goldring (1994: 37).
32. Compare T. S. Eliot's characterization of the poet's proper relationship with tradition in terms of 'the present moment of the past' (1982: 42). Compare also Heidegger's conception of *Wiederholung* in relation to 'the possibility that Dasein may chose its hero' (1962: 437), and as no doubt influenced by Kierkegaard: 'in repetition the 'force' of the possible gets struck home into one's factical existence – in other words, that it comes towards that existence in its futural character' (*ibid*: 447).

constancy over time. Given the ethical context, it is something of a sur-
prise that it is to a certain actress that the Judge turns here for a para-
digm, as one who manages constantly to perfect her identity through the
changing scenes of life: this time, namely, to one Anna Nielsen.[33] So the
connection between the metamorphosis of continuity and ethics is plau-
sibly this. M1 is of special interest to ethicists because it is the kind of
transformation that enables individuals continually to reinterpret their
identities within a given context of substantial ethical life. We are surely
right to think here in the first instance of Hegel on *Sittlichkeit* and the
dynamic logic of intersubjectivity in which, in Axel Honneth's summary,
'subjects are always learning something more about their particular iden-
tity' such that, for each new stage of ethical life they reach, they must
leave this stage 'in order to achieve the recognition of a more demanding
form of individuality'.[34]

Thus, M1 is plausibly associated with a certain view of ethical con-
stancy. On this view – the community view – to exemplify ethical con-
stancy is to adapt to a changing ethical context in a way that allows one
to be recognized by one's community as the same practical agent. A the-
ory of ethical constancy along these lines will then tell us something
about the mechanisms of social recognition. The analogy here is to M1
and to the scenario in which the actress adapts to the changing expecta-
tions of her public, by taking on new roles but ones her audience can
recognize as continuous with her past. Notably, M2 is less accommodat-
ing towards the audience's expectations: in the case in which she returns
to the role of Juliet, the actress defeats these expectations.

Now, if *Crisis* were all we had to go on, we might naturally ascribe
to Kierkegaard himself the claim that repetitions of readjustment are
proper to the sphere of ethics, repetitions of rediscovery, to the sphere
of aesthetics. But we should note that *Crisis* presents this correlation,
pseudonymously, in the mode of a neutral report on a de facto difference
between ethicists and aestheticians. Moreover, in the wider context of
his authorship, there are powerful reasons to dissociate Kierkegaard from
the idea that repetitions of rediscovery are strictly the preserve of aes-
theticians. We need not read far in his work to find support for the view
that he thinks that, on the contrary, it is repetitions of rediscovery that
mark the deeper forms of ethical constancy. Consider, for instance, the

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33. For the Judge's reference to Anna Nielsen, see Kierkegaard (*KW* XI: 131–2). On
Kierkegaard on Heiberg and Nielsen, see Risum (2003).
34. Honneth (1996: 17). Cf. Robert Pippin: '[I]n a way much like the classical ideal of
freedom as 'realization within the whole,' Hegel too tries to show how the attempt at self-
determination requires (at least at some, often very implicit level) an understanding of oneself
as occupying a 'place' within a larger whole, except in his view that whole is not nature or
the cosmos, but the history of a collectively self-determining subject' (1999: 72–3).

following from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which takes its cue from Shakespeare's Falstaff:

> Falstaff says somewhere that he once had an honest face, but the year and date have been erased ... Perhaps the poet wants to teach us how rare it is for there to exist... an individuality (for let us not speak aesthetically, as if the ethical were a lucky stroke of genius) who from one day to the next strives to reinstate that primitivity that was his eternal origin? How rare, perhaps, is an individuality for whom the ethical preserves that holy chasteness, ... an individual that preserves it—but no (let us speak ethically), who gains it, who in life gains this virginal purity of ethical passion, compared with which the purity of the child is but an endearing pleasantry![35]

This passage strongly associates genuine ethical agency with a process of striving to 'reinstate' one's 'primitivity'. In Falstaff, we see something of the difficulty this involves. But there can surely be no question here of Falstaff recovering exactly that which time has long erased. Likewise, as Inter et Inter emphasizes, there can be no question of an ageing actress turning back the clock and re-enacting the youthful vitality of her first appearance on stage. Rather, what the actress is supposed to retrieve, now in an intensified way, is the aesthetic Idea that was already implicit in her inspired reprisal of Juliet as a rising star. This is the sense in which her transformation is a 'more and more intensive return to the beginning'. And what is at issue in the passage just cited is plausibly analogous: whether even a Falstaff could somehow renew a relationship with the ethical ideals expressed in his once honest bearing – despite the latter being now, for him, irrecoverably lost.

I suggest that the Falstaff passage provides a clue to the significance of the title of Kierkegaard's essay, 'The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress'. While the ostensible topic of the essay is simply *a* crisis in the life of a particular actress, its underlying problematic is plausibly *the* human crisis that Kierkegaard associates with feelings of guilt, loss of innocence and feelings of powerlessness to realize the human good: in short, the problem of what he calls 'sin-consciousness'. On this suggestion, *the* crisis at stake in this essay for Kierkegaard is really the one at stake in the religious category of sin. As I hope also to make plausible, his special interest in the metamorphosis of potentiation reflects this underlying concern.

Crucially, for Kierkegaard, sin-consciousness is not to be confused with experiences of local ethical failure. Feeling sinful is not just a matter of regretting one's moral mistakes. Rather, sin-consciousness is to be understood as a pervasive feeling of ethical powerlessness, as if one were incapable of 'going on' ethically, as if excluded from the good. (One of

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35. Kierkegaard (2009b: 127-128.)

Kierkegaard's most striking illustrations of sin-consciousness, so con-
ceived, is another Shakespearean character: Richard III, for whom 'every
tale condemns me for a villain'.)[36] His commitment to the claim that
our vulnerability to such feelings is part of being human is why Kierke-
gaard can describe sin in general as the snag on which ethics is ship-
wrecked, where ethics is conceived in the Greek way as the science of
human excellence and flourishing. As this idea is worked out in *The
Concept of Anxiety*, the 'first ethics' – the science of human flourishing,
virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition – comes to grief on the human
experience of ethical powerlessness.[37] If, for example, our best ethical
theory tells us that honesty is part of human flourishing then this would
be a part of the human good that Falstaff, for one, feels it is no longer
within his power to realize.

Although I take it to be central to Kierkegaard's thought, I shall not
try here to defend the claim that sin-consciousness is part of being
human. My aim in the final section of this essay is instead to illuminate
the positive account of ethical constancy that emerges from the way he
develops the idea of a 'second ethics'. This will help to bring into focus
why, and in what sense, Kierkegaard holds that ethical constancy requires
an ongoing process of self-transformation, on the model of what Inter et
Inter calls the metamorphosis of potentiation.

III

We have seen that Kierkegaard has good reasons to reject any view in
which ethical constancy reduces to reflective moral rule-following. As
we have also seen, he further distinguishes two general ways a person
can try to keep going in the face of a crisis of practical agency. The one
way, 'the metamorphosis of continuity', amounts in ethical contexts to
the Hegelian alternative to the cognitivist view. This is the idea of an
individual's perfectibility within a local context of mutual recognition:
the community view. But Kierkegaard homes in on a different way: 'the
metamorphosis of potentiation'. My aim now is to further develop this
latter notion by showing how it is exemplified by his idea of a 'second
ethics'. This will help to bring into view his positive account of ethical
constancy, in its critical relation both to the cognitivist and community
views.

In Kierkegaard's view, Christian ethics is a 'second ethics'. That is, he
holds that, rightly understood, Christian ethics presupposes feelings of

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36. *Richard III* (5.3.196). For his reading of Gloucester, see Kierkegaard 2011: 159).
37. See Kierkegaard (*KW* VIII: 16ff).

ethical powerless. He also holds the uncontentious view that, at the heart of Christian ethics, is the command and duty to love your neighbour as yourself. But these two views appear to be in some tension. For, as *Works of Love* is at some pains to show, the Christian ethical ideal is highly demanding, even severe. Indeed, according to a persistent line of criticism of this text, there is something cruel and inhuman about Kierkegaard's presentation of this ideal. So, how could this ideal be of any help to agents who feel powerless to realize the human good? How could the duty to love your neighbour, highly demanding as it is, specify the content of a 'second ethics'?

I submit that Kierkegaard's view is cogent and defensible in this regard, provided we understand aright how he thinks love of the neighbour can be repeated. That it can be repeated is a major part of what he thinks distinguishes this kind of love, conceived as non-preferential love, from *eros*, conceived as preferential love. My love for another is not love for them *qua* neighbour if it is not the kind of love that could in principle be expressed, repeatedly, to any other human being. In contrast, the love that I show for my spouse, as such – or for my children or parents or friends – is ineluctably indexed to them. Moreover, if all there is to one's love is the spontaneity of eros, Kierkegaard observes that such love is liable to atrophy into mere habit:

> Spontaneous love can be changed from itself, it can be changed over the years, as is frequently enough seen. Then love loses its ardour, its joy, its desire, its originality, its freshness. Just as the river that sprang out of the rocks is dissipated further down in the sluggishness of the dead waters, so also love is dissipated in the lukewarmness and indifference of habit. Alas, of all enemies, habit is perhaps the most cunning ... No only eternity's you shall—and the listening ear that wants to hear this shall—can save you from habit.[38]

Again to this extent in common cause with the cognitivist view, Kierkegaard thinks the repetitiveness of mere habit fails the minimal conditions of ethical constancy, let alone the demand to keep your ears ever-attuned to the call of the neighbour.[39]

What then is it for a person to keep faithful to the injunction to love your neighbour as yourself? How is non-preferential love to be sustained? In my view, it is just here that there commonly arises an egregious misreading of *Works of Love*. This runs roughly as follows. In contrast with natural, spontaneous, preferential love, Kierkegaard thinks

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38. Kierkegaard (*KW* XVI: 36).
39. Notably, Kierkegaard introduces the term 'spontaneous love' by the phrase 'spontaneously loving according to preference' (*KW* XVI: 36). As I shall argue below, the distinction between preferential and non-preferential love is not a distinction between spontaneous and non-spontaneous love.

Christian love is a strenuous duty and involves self-denial. He must therefore think this love is essentially a matter of reflective rule-following. That is, as per the cognitivist view of ethical constancy, he must think that sustaining non-preferential love involves continually reflecting on the duty to love your neighbour and then repeatedly bringing your actions into conformity with this duty, not least by suppressing your natural impulses. This interpretation evidently lies behind much of the critical animus directed against *Works of Love*. Knut Løgstrup, for example, levels his central charge against Kierkegaard in no uncertain terms:

> *Works of Love* is a brilliantly thought out system of safeguards against being forced into a close relationship with other people … In Kierkegaard it is self-denial that makes up the content of the love of one's neighbour and differentiates it from passionate love … It is thus something like a grotesque coincidence that that relationship to the other person which is defined by passion and the relationship to one's neighbour have the same name.[40]

Løgstrup concludes that 'Kierkegaard has discredited the spontaneous life'.[41] But Løgstrup's premise is surely wrong. Kierkegaard does not suppose that self-denial is all there is to loving your neighbour. Consider, for example, the following:

> We seem to have forgotten that the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor's costume, or just like a traveller's cloak, so that each one individually should be on the watch and take care to have the outer garment's fastening cords loosely tied and, above all, free of tight knots so that in the moment of transformation the garment can be cast off easily … the inner glory of equality never or very rarely shines through as it continually should and ought … The one who will accept this understanding is on the point of loving the neighbour … But when a person in the infinite transformation discovers the eternal so close to life that there is not the distance of one single claim, of one single evasion, of one single excuse, or one single moment of time from what he in this instant, in this second, in this holy moment shall do—then he is on the way to becoming a Christian.[42]

In claiming that, for Kierkegaard, it is 'self-denial that makes up the content of the love of one's neighbour', Løgstrup confuses for the actual content of this love what is here clearly presented as a process of preparing for its expression. Kierkegaard's idea is that a certain work on oneself – the work of loosening the garments, as it were, of one's recognized roles and statuses – can give a person a new self-understanding which, if he or she is prepared to accept it, is able to bring one '*on the point of*

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40. Løgstrup (1997: 232-3).
41. Løgstrup (1997: 145).
42. Kierkegaard (*KW* XVI: 87–90).

loving the neighbour' and '*on the way to* becoming a Christian' (my emphasis). In other words, non-preferential love needs to be prepared for and cultivated. And Kierkegaard thinks this requires a painful process of 'dying to' the whole ethical milieu in which one finds oneself embedded. This then prepares the way for a 'moment of transformation' in which the other is rediscovered as, in the first instance, one's neighbour – and then in a new light as *also* spouse, friend, enemy, foreigner, colleague and the like.[43] But, as *Works of Love* emphasizes again and again, the neighbour cannot be loved 'at a distance'.[44] If it presupposes certain spiritual exercises, Christian love must nonetheless express itself *in concreto*, in the 'holy moment' of action.

Those critics who complain that *Works of Love* sets up a false dichotomy between immediate passion and reflective duty are thus liable to miss its implicit distinction between 'first' and 'second' spontaneity.[45] Kierkegaard's real contrast, I submit, is not between immediate and reflective love but between spontaneous preferential love and spontaneous non-preferential love; the aesthetic moment of *eros* and 'the holy moment' of *agape*. The idea of a 'second' or prepared for spontaneity – an 'acquired originality' as he elsewhere calls it – is crucial for understanding his discussion of the Good Samaritan, for example.[46] Kierkegaard holds that, in this parable, the Samaritan *expresses* his love by attending to the wounded man's needs, and doing so without evasion or 'one thought too many'.[47] But he also emphasizes that it is a *Samaritan* who helps in this way:

> The Levite and the priest were in a stricter sense the victim's neighbour, but they wished to ignore it. The Samaritan, on the other hand, who because of prejudice was predisposed to misunderstanding, nevertheless correctly understood that he was a neighbour of the assaulted man.[48]

In line with his overall account, Kierkegaard must therefore think that, prior to his immediate responsiveness to the wounded other's need, the Samaritan has undergone a process of disengaging with the 'us and them' mentality in which Jewish and Samaritan people stereotypically understood themselves in the milieu in which Jesus told the parable. The Samaritan dis-identifies with his prejudicial standing in relation to the wounded other, as fixed by the dominant ethos of his community. And

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43. Cf. Kierkegaard (*KW* XVI: 141–2).
44. Kierkegaard (*KW* XVI: 78–80; 89).
45. This distinction is widely invoked in Kierkegaard's writings. As M. Jamie Ferreira has shown, the distinction implicitly guides the 'Conclusion' of *Works of Love* (2001: 241). On the wider role of the distinction within this text, see Grøn (2003).
46. On 'acquired originality', see Kierkegaard (*KW* XIII: 149).
47. Cf. Løgstrup (2007): 76ff; Williams (1981).
48. Kierkegaard (*KW* XVI: 22).

this is what enables him, in the spur of the moment, to respond directly
to the other *as* his neighbour.

Now, as Kierkegaard was no doubt aware, such phrases as 'acquired
originality' and 'second immediacy' carry an air of paradox, evoking the
self-defeating maxim, 'be spontaneous!'. But we can make sense of his
view in this regard if we attend to the way he describes loving your
neighbour as a two-stage process.[49] In the first stage, individuals strive
towards a certain global stance towards the ethical milieu in which they
find themselves embedded. This is the work of 'dying to', where this
means trying to resist being defined solely by one's recognized roles and
statuses. When sufficiently carried through, this process can lead to a
transformed self-understanding in which individuals rediscover their ethi-
cal standing merely *qua* human. By itself, however, this first stage no
more than clears the ground. In the second stage, individuals then spon-
taneously respond to concrete situations in ways that express their trans-
formed self-understanding: for example, through unreflective acts of
mercy. At no point in this process is anyone supposed to act sponta-
neously directly as a result of trying to do so.

This process is then supposed to effect a transformation, not only in
one's understanding of others but also, crucially, in one's *self*-understanding.
Prior to this process, we naturally understand ourselves through the forms of
intersubjectivity which make up our ethical milieu. And this is one way we
develop our sense of ethical self-worth. So much is well captured in Hegel's
account of *Sittlichkeit*. But Kierkegaard further supposes that, through the
two-stage process just outlined, it is possible for us to enter into a quite dif-
ferent mode of ethical self-understanding. Moreover, he maintains that what
needs to be repeated, if we are to achieve constancy in non-preferential love,
is this very process of self-transformation. For, he thinks this process is not
once-for-all but itself needs to be repeated, not least given our tendency to
derive our sense of ethical self-worth from our recognized roles and statuses.
Very plausibly, this is just what he thinks is required for constancy in Chris-
tian love: this ongoing process of self-transformation.

It is natural to describe the upshot of this process, as I have done, in
terms of 'rediscovery'. But we should not saddle Kierkegaard with the view
that, before being inducted into communal ethical life, we are all somehow
already paragons of Christian virtue. Rather, the relevant thought is that a
person's ethical identity merely *qua* neighbour is ontologically prior to, and

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49. Cf. Kierkegaard's formula that the Christian ideal is '*partly a requirement of inwardness
and partly a requirement of continuance*' (*KW* XVI: 130, Kierkegaard's emphasis). My descrip-
tion of the two stages of self-transformation is intended to track this contrast. The require-
ment of inwardness means resisting being defined by one's place in any given ethical
order; the requirement of continuance is then to outwardly express this kind of inward-
ness, in time and in 'the very small things, the purely everyday things' (ibid: 133).

implicit within, her standing within any more determinate context of mutual recognition. Correlatively, this transformed self-understanding allows individuals to retrieve ethical possibilities latent within their preferential relationships. Friend, colleague or fiancée can now be rediscovered as, first and foremost, one's neighbour. I shall briefly return below to the question of how far these ideas rely on theological assumptions. But Kierkegaard makes quite clear his own view that, if we are to keep ourselves in non-preferential love, we shall need to understand ourselves and each other via the 'middle term' of our mutual relationship with God. For, he thinks that it is just in this way that we can learn to regard ourselves and each other as originally and equally loved, irrespective of our standing within any worldly order of recognition.

Let me underline two key implications of Kierkegaard's view of what is required for constancy in non-preferential love. Firstly, this could never merely be a matter of repeatedly readjusting to change within a given context of mutual recognition. For, such repetitions presuppose the very ethical context that needs to be disrupted if our common humanity is to shine through. Kierkegaard makes this implication more or less explicit:

> Of course, a certain social courtesy, a politeness towards all people, a friendly condescension towards inferiors, a boldly confidant attitude before the mighty, a beautifully controlled freedom of spirit, yes, this is culture—do you believe that it is also loving the neighbour?[50]

The question is of course rhetorical. The ethics of perfectibility within a local context of recognition-relationships is exactly what needs first to be loosened up if the inner glory of human equality is going to 'shine through' our spontaneity in action.[51]

Secondly, repetitions of non-preferential love are not under the direct control of the will. They can be cultivated but not brought about by *fiat*. In its fully religious form, the thought here is that we depend on divine grace for the possibility of 'abiding in love'. But the phenomenon can also be described in human terms, with reference to our dependencies on human others.[52] Consider, for example, Shakespeare's Lear. In the

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50. Kierkegaard (*KW* 16: 60).
51. In my view, these points tell against attempts to enlist Kierkegaard to the cause of so-called 'narrativist' theories of personal identity, not least in the wake of Galen Strawson's much-discussed contrast between 'Diachronics' and 'Episodics' as types of temporal temperament (see Strawson (2004): see also Davenport (2012); Rudd (2012); Stokes (2010)). Judge Wilhelm no doubt has a good claim to being a narrativist and, *par excellence*, the Diachronic type. But in my view, the Judge signally falls short of what, in *Works of Love* and elsewhere, Kierkegaard presents as the true requirements of ethical constancy.
52. For an expressly non-theological account of grace as an ethical concept, see Pettigrove 2012: 126 ff.

'burning shame' of the way he has shunned Cordelia and 'stripp'd her from his benediction', Lear lacks the resources within himself to love.[53] What draws him out, and potentially restores his capacity to love, is the moment when Cordelia graciously pleads once again for his blessing: 'O, look upon me, sir,/And hold your hand in benediction o'er me./No, Sir, you must not kneel'.[54] By covering the multitude of his sins, and by inviting him to recover his role as her father – but also, more fundamentally, his relationship with her simply as a fellow human being – Cordelia's love brings Lear to himself. She offers him the possibility of a metamorphosis of potentiation.[55]

We can now spell out the ethical analogy with Kierkegaard's model example of an actress in crisis. Just as this actress finds herself at a loss how to project herself in her aesthetic context, so we can find ourselves at a loss how to move forward ethically. And just as she responds to the crisis she faces by trying to resist being defined as an actress solely by her audience's expectations, so as ethical agents we can try to resist being defined solely by our place within any given order of mutual recognition. Moreover, just as our actress acquires a transformed aesthetic self-understanding through the process in which she retrieves the possibilities latent in her first reprisal of Juliet, so our ethical self-understanding can be transformed through a process in which we retrieve the possibilities latent in our preferential relationships with others. Finally, just as the actress can try in this way to move forward, but is in no position to bring about her transformation through sheer willpower, so repetitions of non-preferential love can be prepared for and cultivated, but not brought about by *fiat*.

We can now also explain why Kierkegaard presents the Christian ideal as both highly demanding and yet suitable to specify a 'second ethics'.

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53. *King Lear* (4.3.48–53). In his journals, Kierkegaard identifies Lear's tragic flaw with the king's distorted orientation to love, as already exposed at the outset of the play by his 'wish curiously and selfishly to dissect' the loves of his daughters (2011: 107). Kierkegaard thus anticipates Cavell's influential reading of *King Lear* as a tragedy of 'the avoidance of love' (1976).

54. *Ibid* (4.7.57–59).

55. This is one way to understand the Gentleman who, in terms that approach the religious, tells Lear he has a daughter 'who redeems nature from the general curse' (4.6.195). To be sure, the redeeming potential of the moment of Cordelia's supplication quickly appears to be lost, as Lear retreats to a fantasy in which this moment is itself prolonged indefinitely, 'by an almost reflexive repetition of its actions' (McCoy (2003: 52)): 'We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage/When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,/And ask of thee forgiveness'' (5.3.10–12). As Cavell observes, 'Lear is reborn, but into his old self' (1976: 340), the old self of the avoidance of love. But, as Cavell also observes, the genuine possibility was there, through Cordelia's gracious love, for Lear to do 'what every love requires, put himself aside long enough to see through to her, and be seen through' (*ibid*: 301).

Conceived as the task of cultivating non-preferential love, 'dying to' one's recognized roles and statuses is no mean achievement. To the extent that we derive our sense of self-worth from such roles and statuses, this can only mean a painful process of self-denial. On the other hand, Kierkegaard also thinks this is a quite different order of task from any striving to become a paragon of perfected humanity, according to our best theory of human flourishing. Demanding although it is, the Christian ethical ideal assumes only the power to own up to our fundamental human equality and solidarity, as Kierkegaard would say, 'before God'. Indeed, this possibility is perhaps attested even by the all-too-human Falstaff who can exclaim, 'tush, man, mortal men, mortal men'.[56]

It should be clear that, in this view, the 'second ethics' is not a *substitute* ethics. It is not a fall-back moral code for the weak or slavish. Rather, it is a rediscovery of our ethical standing prior to our being recognized as citizen, friend, colleague, fiancé and the like. On Kierkegaard's account, the possibility of the second ethics rests on the availability of such rediscovery – even when, like the Young Man in *Repetition*, we find our ethical lives otherwise at a standstill.

Let us draw together these threads. Kierkegaard affirms the possibility of ethical constancy. But, *pace* Kant, he doubts that reflective moral rule-following is enough to secure this possibility. Furthermore, *pace* Hegel, he doubts that a person's ability to evolve within a dynamic context of ethical life – 'the metamorphosis of continuity' – is adequate to the threat of breakdown that can arise from feelings of ethical exclusion and powerlessness. Kierkegaard's positive account of ethical constancy emerges from his idea of a 'second ethics'. The first ethics holds us answerable to the unforgiving standard of what can be recognized as an outstanding human life; the second, to a form of love that expresses our common humanity. But the second ethics remains highly demanding. For, it requires a continual effort to resist being defined as ethical agents solely by our recognized roles and statuses. Moreover, if this effort is not only to leave us still stranded, we may also find ourselves dependent on moments in which, like Lear, we are drawn out by another.

How serious an obstacle to the philosophical reception of this account are its religious dimensions? One might complain that the account relies, for its motivation, on a theologically committed view of human beings as inherently sinful. There is no denying that Kierkegaard takes seriously the notion of sin. In my view, however, all that is needed for the account to be well-motivated is that human beings are vulnerable to radical crises in their ethical self-understanding. Such vulnerability is amply

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56. *King Henry IV Part I* (4.2.74–75). For a fine discussion of this passage in Shakespeare, as attesting to Falstaff's recognition of a common humanity, see Gaita (2004: 24ff).

illustrated by Shakespeare's Falstaff, or Gloucester, or Lear.[57] And it is already implied by the parallel with Kierkegaard's discussion of a crisis in the life of an actress that his account of such vulnerability does not in general presuppose theological doctrines (although it may help to explain their force). But one might still complain that his antidote – loving your neighbour, living in the light of our common humanity – presupposes Christian commitment, or at least a religious sensibility. On this, the jury is perhaps still out. Some philosophers are committed to trying to capture, in fully secular terms, an idea of our common humanity, not merely in (deontic) terms of equal dignity and respect, but in terms of our being equally worthy of a kind of love: in Raimond Gaita's terms, an idea of our 'preciousness' just as human beings, conceived as a secular analogue to the idea of our sacredness.[58] For his part, Kierkegaard will insist upon our need for God as the 'middle term', so that we can come properly to regard ourselves and each other in the light of God's equalising, non-preferential love. Adjudicating between these views is no doubt a large and further task.

What I do hope to have brought out in this essay is the way Kierkegaard's thinking about repetition is alive to the question of ethical constancy. We have seen how his work takes up a broadly Hegelian critique of the cognitivist view in which ethical constancy reduces to a matter of individuals repeatedly applying rules. But we have also see how, against the community view, he thinks that, in the face of certain kinds of crisis, ethical constancy requires a process in which individuals continually rediscover their ethical standing merely *qua* human. Rather than being a matter of reflective rule-following, or of narrating a continuous practical identity within one's ethical community, Kierkegaard insists accordingly on the need for the 'metamorphosis of potentiation'. This more radical form of repetition, I have argued, is what he thinks is needed if we are to find an abiding place in our lives for the spontaneous love of the neighbour.[59]

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57. This Shakespearean cast is of course incomplete. For his part, Kierkegaard will also cite Macbeth as a 'psychologically masterful' portrait of sin–consciousness (see *KW* XIX: 106, 110; *KW* VIII: 146).

58. Reiterating his disavowal of religious interpretations of his own appeal to 'saintly love', in the preface to the second edition of *Good and Evil*, Gaita writes: 'The reader will have noticed that I am also acutely conscious that 'precious' is a word that sometimes sounds precious. 'Sacred' is so much better … I am not religious, however, so I cannot use it' (2004: xxvi). Compare Cavell's ambivalent response to Christianizing readings of *King Lear* (1976: 317 ff). See also Gaita (2013); Mulhall (2011).

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School of Philosophy and Art History
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park
Colchester CO4 3SQ
dpwatts@essex.ac.uk

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