

Article

# Kierkegaard on Hope and Faith

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**Abstract:** Faith, hope and love have often been classed together in the Christian tradition as the three “theological virtues”. Kierkegaard does not use that label for them, but he does have a good deal to say about all three. This paper starts by examining hope, arguing that there is an Aristotelian-style virtue relating to hope (a mean between wishful and depressive thinking) and that Kierkegaard could consistently recognize it as a secular virtue. However, his main discussions of hope as a positive state are in a religious context and relate it closely to faith and love; proper hope is a work of love and grounded in faith in God. I then argue that Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith, hope and love is, in many respects, close to Aquinas’ understanding of them as theological virtues (which differs in important ways from Aristotle’s account of a virtue) and that, therefore, it is appropriate to see Kierkegaard’s religious thought as lying within the tradition of virtue theory. The main difference between Aquinas and Kierkegaard here is that the former has an intellectualist and propositional account of faith which contrasts with the latter’s affective and existential view of it. This means that hope and love are both closer to faith for Kierkegaard than they are for Aquinas, meaning that he has a tight account of the unity of the theological virtues. I conclude by discussing how both faith and hope operate as antidotes to despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard; Aquinas; hope; faith; theological virtues; virtue ethics



**Citation:** Rudd, Anthony. 2023. Kierkegaard on Hope and Faith. *Religions* 14: 1458. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121458>

Academic Editors: Philip Goodchild, John Lippitt and C. Stephen Evans

Received: 28 August 2023  
Revised: 24 October 2023  
Accepted: 17 November 2023  
Published: 24 November 2023



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Faith, hope and love have commonly been classed together in the Christian tradition as the three “theological virtues”, this classification being mainly based on the authority of St Paul: “And now faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of them is love”.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard has a good deal to say about all three as crucial elements in the Christian life. In this paper, I will look at his account of hope and also at its relation to faith—though, it will turn out that he sees both as intimately related to love also. The question of how hope and faith relate for Kierkegaard is posed in an interesting way by *The Sickness Unto Death*.<sup>2</sup> This is a book about despair, and it might intuitively seem natural to think of hope as the opposite of despair. And Mark Bernier has indeed argued that, for Kierkegaard, “despair is essentially an unwillingness to hope” (Bernier 2015, p. 81). But, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard says relatively little explicitly about hope, while he claims that despair—considered to be an ontological state, rather than a mood—is equivalent to sin (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 77 and ff) and that *faith* is the opposite of sin and therefore of despair (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 82). But, if despair is defined in opposition to both faith and hope, then, as Bernier says, “it is unclear precisely how faith and hope relate to one another. Is one the necessary condition for the other? Is one of them superfluous?” (Ibid, p. 80) One might add other possibilities; perhaps, for instance, they are really just the same thing, seen from different perspectives? But, in order to address the question of how faith and hope relate, we first need to consider what faith and hope are.

## 1. Hoping Virtuously

I will start with hope (and will spend most of my time on it). Hope has, until recently, been a rather neglected topic in the secondary literature on Kierkegaard (but see now, for instance, Bernier 2015; Lippitt 2015; Fremstedal 2019, 2020). One might say that it has been rather neglected in the philosophical literature generally. It isn’t usually treated as a

virtue (or, at least, an important one) in traditions other than Christianity<sup>3</sup>, and, despite some recent discussion, it hasn't been considered much in contemporary secular virtue ethics (though, see, e.g., Bovens 1999; Milona 2019; Pettit 2004; Snow 2013). Whether or not hope (or hopefulness) should be considered a virtue, it is undoubtedly a psychological state, and it is important to be clear about the relationship between hope as a putative virtue and as a psychological phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Considered in the latter sense, it is generally agreed that hope is characteristically directed toward future events (or at least to events whose outcome is unknown to the hoper). According to what has become known as the "Standard Account"<sup>5</sup>, to hope for something is to desire a particular (unknown) outcome while considering it neither certain nor impossible. There is some dispute about how to spell out the second clause: is it really hope if I think the outcome overwhelmingly likely, even if not quite certain?<sup>6</sup> It seems generally agreed that it *is* still hope in the opposite case, where the desired outcome is hugely improbable, but not quite impossible, although there is debate about whether this ("hope against hope" as it is rather oddly called<sup>7</sup>) is either epistemically or morally legitimate.<sup>8</sup> As for the first clause, "desire" can mean anything from a passionate craving to a slight preference for one outcome over another in a matter about which one cares very little. Some have thought that to hope for something must involve more than a mere idle wishing for it, that hope must require some sort of substantial emotional investment in or some degree of active attention to the issue. There may be no determinate answer to these questions; it seems generally agreed that both clauses of the Standard Account are necessary for hope, while it is disputed whether they are jointly sufficient. We may have to accept that hope is a family resemblance concept with vague boundaries, which may be used differently—in more minimal and more expansive senses—in different contexts.

It is, however, interesting that the term "hope" can be used to express both confidence *and* a lack of it. Compare, "Yes, I'm very hopeful that she'll make a full recovery" with "Well, I *hope* she'll recover, but I don't know. We need to prepare for the worst". It is in the former, positive sense that we typically talk about someone being "hopeful", whether about a specific case or generally. Someone who has hopefulness as a general character trait does not just hope for a lot of things in the Standard Account sense.<sup>9</sup> (I call that "hopeSA" in what follows). We all have hopes in that sense, insofar as we care at all about uncertain outcomes. Rather, the "hopeful" person is someone who tends to look on the bright side, who tends to be optimistic.<sup>10</sup> In *this* sense, hope goes beyond the Standard Account and is an attitude which tends to expect the uncertain outcome it desires to happen; or, even when it is not directed to some particular outcome, expects things in general to work out well. Let us call hope, in this sense, "hopeE" (for expectancy); one may have hopeE for some particular case, but hopefulness as a character trait is a tendency to have hopeE as a sort of default setting as one's attitude to future outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

Hopefulness, in this sense, may not itself be a virtue, but there does seem at least to be a virtue relating to it. According to Aristotle's account, a virtue is a disposition in respect of a state such as fear or appetite that is a mean between extremes of excess and deficiency (Aristotle 2019, pp. 26–35 (Bk II, 5–9)). And it seems that one can be both excessive and deficient in hopeE. Wishful thinking involves supposing that something unlikely is in fact likely to happen just because one wants it to.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, what we might call "depressive thinking" involves supposing that nothing good could happen (or happen to me or us), even though it is quite plausible that it might. And—this is a related but not, I think, identical phenomenon—there is fearful thinking, where one is inclined to think that the bad things one can envisage are more likely to happen than they are.<sup>13</sup> If there are these dubious extremes, it seems there ought to be a mean between them, which would be the virtue of hoping well. Interestingly, Kierkegaard, in an early Upbuilding Discourse, "The Expectancy of Faith" considers versions of the two extremes. "The cheerful disposition that has not yet tasted life's adventures... expects to be victorious without a struggle." (Kierkegaard 1990a, pp. 19–20). This is contrasted with the attitude of "the troubled person"

who “expects no victory; he has all too sadly felt his loss.” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 20). Kierkegaard then considers what at first appears to be the mean between them, exemplified in “[t]he man of experience [who] frowns on the behaviour of both of these.” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 20). This character considers both attitudes to be exaggerations. Rationally, one should expect sometimes to get what one wants and sometime not, and avoid excess of both optimism and pessimism: “in happiness one ought to be prepared to a certain degree for unhappiness, in unhappiness to a certain degree for happiness.” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 20). This looks very sensible at first sight, but for Kierkegaard, such worldly wisdom remains unsatisfying. The young optimist might be reconciled to the idea that he may lose some things, but what about what really matters to him, “that one good that he could not lose without losing his happiness, could not lose to a certain degree without losing it totally” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 21)? Kierkegaard is suggesting that what lies behind this worldly wisdom is the cautious advice that, because anything might be lost, one should only care about anything “to a certain degree”. One should, so to speak, diversify one’s portfolio of emotional investments, so that one’s losses will always be moderate and likely to get recouped by gains elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard does not explicitly mention the response to this worldly wisdom of the “troubled person” who, we might suppose, has lost what was, for him, “that one good”; but one may suspect that he would find cold comfort in the suggestion that some other gains might compensate him, “to a certain degree”, for his loss.

This analysis of the options from early in Kierkegaard’s work seems, in a way, to be repeated in *Sickness*, where the despair of the one whose sense of possibility is unconstrained by a sense of necessity<sup>15</sup> is contrasted with the determinist or fatalist who is crushed by a sense of necessity which closes off all possibility. (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 35–37; 37–42). But both are further contrasted with the “philistine-bourgeois mentality” which “thinks that it controls possibility, that it has tricked this prodigious elasticity into the trap or madhouse of probability” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 41). This worldly wisdom always seeks to calculate probabilities and tries to limit and adjust emotional commitments accordingly. From all of this, it might seem that Kierkegaard rejects the idea that there is an Aristotelian-style mean in respect of hope. What he goes on to recommend in the Discourse is something apparently quite different—the expectancy of faith, “which certainly does surpass even youth’s most joyous hope” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 21) and which therefore looks to be an extreme, not a mean. But he quickly goes on to add, “even if not exactly as you suppose.” (Kierkegaard, p. 21). The difference is that faith, as opposed to youthful optimism, looks to the eternal and has confidence that, by looking to the eternal, as a sailor looks to the stars from a stormy sea, it can steer a path through whatever the future may bring (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 19). The object of faith and hope here (and they are not clearly distinguished) is not some particular, contingent, desired-for event, but simply that “the eternal” will stand by and guide the believer, no matter what happens. The youthful optimist “speak[s] of many victories, but faith expects only one” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 21). And since the eternal is necessary, while temporal particulars are contingent, “the person who expects something particular can be deceived in his expectancy, but this does not happen to the believer.” (Kierkegaard 1990a, p. 23).

We will come back to Kierkegaard’s religious account of hope, which is at least intimately connected with faith. But it seems there is still more to be said at the secular level. Kierkegaard identified two unsatisfactory extremes (too much and too little hopefulness) and a sort of pseudo-mean. But if wishful and depressive/fearful thinking are both vices,<sup>16</sup> can’t there be—and shouldn’t there not be—a proper mean, even if we stay at the secular level and don’t (yet) invoke the eternal? I think we can identify and recognize such a mean, although it is hard to decide what the right name for it is. (I am using “hope” for occurrent states and “hopefulness” for a character trait, and both can be either good or bad.) The virtue concerned with hope, as we can rather awkwardly call it, involves looking clear-headedly at the likelihoods of desired outcomes and refusing to either exaggerate or minimize them, despite the temptations to do so. This virtue has especially to do with outcomes that are in part but not wholly under our control. If they are wholly under our

control, we should just bring them about instead of sitting around and hoping for them.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, we can, of course, hope for things that are not under our control or ability to influence at all; and I think there is virtue in avoiding excessive optimism or pessimism in respect to them (a sort of emotional maturity, a sort of honesty). But one can most obviously think of the virtue relating to hope as something that enables one to flourish in cases where one is actively engaged in a pursuit with an uncertain outcome. Here, wishful and depressive/fearful thinking may both lead us astray, the former by making us oblivious to problems and dangers, and the latter by reducing our energy and motivation and making us oblivious to real opportunities. We should, however, note that this virtue is like courage in that it enables one to do better at pursuing one's ends, *whatever they may be*; this applies to bad ends and projects, as well as to good ones. Though I think there is truth in the doctrine of the unity of the virtues, it should not be taken to deny that there are genuinely courageous (rather than merely reckless) villains. Similarly, a villain may have the virtue in question here. But—again as with courage—that does not mean that it is not a virtue, a genuine human excellence.

One might think that the virtue in question involves proportioning one's expectations of an outcome to its objective probability. This should not, however, be confused with the worldly wisdom about which Kierkegaard was so scathing. For one might still ardently desire something one recognizes to be unlikely to happen and may (where this is possible) still actively pursue it. But the person with the virtue mentioned above would do so without illusions. He or she would have hopeSA but not hopeE in such cases. (The virtuous person would *sometimes* have hopeE, but only when the evidence warranted such confidence.) One problem with this account is the familiar psychological point that overestimating our chances of getting something may encourage us to try harder to do so and thus actually make it more likely that we succeed.<sup>18</sup> So, severely tying our expectations to objective probabilities may actually impede our flourishing. Another problem is that, much of the time, it is impossible to precisely calculate what the probabilities of an occurrence are anyway. (Not being a determinist, I think that they are often objectively indeterminate, so this is not just an epistemological limitation.) So, there will often be a wide range of possible expectations that cannot be shown to be objectively unreasonable. Despite this, though, there are plenty of cases where people are pretty clearly engaged in either wishful or depressive/fearful thinking, and so it does still seem reasonable to think that there is a virtue which consists in the ability to steer between those extremes. And I would suggest that we can think of it as a particular adaptation of Aristotelian *phronesis*, precisely because it is the ability to make the right judgement where there are (often) no exact, quantifiable rules to follow.

I noted above that not only can one hopeE for a particular outcome, but that hopefulness can also be a general attitude to life, a positive sense of openness to the future, which expects good things (or things that one can turn to the good—it needn't be merely passive) and so approaches the future with enthusiasm rather than hesitancy or timidity. A hopeful person, in this sense, may plausibly be thought to notice opportunities or possibilities which the glum or fearful might miss, as well as having a generally buoyant, positive attitude to life. This sense is nicely captured in Emily Dickinson's lines:

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all.<sup>19</sup>

The "tune" (the general attitude) is upbeat; circumstances may give it "words" (a particular content, a specific outcome that is hoped for), but they are taken up into a previously existing generally hopeful approach to life. There seems something attractive, desirable, about such a positive, buoyant attitude to life, although some qualifications are called for. Such an attitude would certainly need to be restrained by the realism and honesty which are needed to avoid it tempting one into wishful thinking in particular cases.

There is still the phenomenon of “hope against hope” in cases where one hopes although the outcome is acknowledged as extremely unlikely. Should the virtuous person only hope<sub>SA</sub> in such cases (that is, desire and even work for the outcome but without much expectation)? Or is hope<sub>E</sub> (the expectation of a positive outcome) legitimate? If they are to be distinguished from mere wishful thinkers, then the putatively virtuous hopers against hope must be under no illusions about the objective improbability of the desired outcome. Nonetheless they hope<sub>E</sub> for it. One cannot of course simply *choose* to believe that X will happen, even though one knows it to be objectively unlikely. But if one finds oneself with a positive feeling, intuition, expectation, despite knowing the objectively poor odds, should one just dismiss such intimations as illusory? This might seem like the case of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, who knows the improbability—even, Johannes *de silentio* says, the impossibility—of what he desires (that Isaac will live) but still not only desires but believes it. “The knight of faith. . . acknowledges the impossibility and in the very same moment he believes the absurd, for if he wants to imagine he has faith without passionately acknowledging the impossibility. . . he is deceiving himself” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 47). Or it might seem like the situation of the person considered in *Sickness* who is “brought to his extremity, where, humanly speaking, there is no possibility” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 38). Such a person can only be saved from despair if he can come to believe, against all rational calculation, that there *is* a possibility, a way out of his apparently hopeless situation. “This is the battle of faith, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 38). But, as Kierkegaard is at pains to stress in both books, this is the attitude of *faith* and, specifically, the faith that, for God, all things are possible. To still have hope even in extreme situations, to believe that there are still possibilities, is not a baseless grasping at straws, since it rests on the belief that the empirical facts are not all that there is.<sup>20</sup> Can there be a secular analogue of this attitude? It seems hard to see how there could be. There may sometimes be practical reasons for thinking it psychologically better for people in extreme circumstances to keep hope alive (see Fremstedal 2019), but can that be compatible with truthfulness? If you know that the empirical odds are all against you, and if you don’t believe in anything more than the empirical, wouldn’t trying to keep your hopes up not amount to self-deception?<sup>21</sup>

I think this worry applies generally, not only in extreme cases. I have talked about the desirability of a state of existential buoyancy, which is independent of specific conditions. But isn’t that unreasonable, dishonest, even, unless one believes that reality is, at bottom, benign, that it gives one grounds for a generally positive attitude toward life? Aren’t philosophers like Schopenhauer, Sartre and Camus, for whom the world is indifferent to human desires, merely consistent in disprizing hope? Or, even if we think they go to excess in their pessimism, shouldn’t a consistent secularist at least reject *hopefulness* as a general attitude to life? Shouldn’t one only hope<sub>E</sub> in specific cases where the evidence gives good reasons for thinking the hope will be realized? To reiterate, such a person need not be displaying a “philistine-bourgeois mentality”, for he or she may combine a deep emotional yearning for an outcome with a tough realism about its likelihood. Indeed, as John Lippitt notes, the Knight of Infinite Resignation in *Fear and Trembling* combines a passionate emotional commitment to the longed-for goal, with a careful, hard-headed estimation of the (un)likelihood of it being realized (Lippitt 2015, p. 126). The lad who realizes that he will never marry the princess does not deceive himself with wishful thinking any more than he abandons his love. And Abraham’s faith is explicitly contrasted with what Johannes *de silentio* treats as “the despicable hope that says: One just can’t know what will happen, it could just possibly be. . .” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 37) Faith goes beyond but includes Infinite Resignation, and Infinite Resignation has already dismissed these “travesties of faith” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 37). I would suggest, then, that Kierkegaard would not approve of those who, *without faith*, allow themselves to hope<sub>E</sub> beyond what the empirical evidence permits.<sup>22</sup> And he would also disapprove of the person who becomes so despondent that he or she fails to see anything positive or any real possibilities. He could, thus, I think, allow for a secular virtue, which is a genuine mean between wishful and



depressive thinking, and which keeps emotional commitments and vulnerabilities alive. (The merely “philistine-bourgeois” way of emotionally numbing oneself would be a sort of caricature of the true virtue, not a real mean between the extremes, but a shoddy, lukewarm compromise.) But this secular virtue is not, of course, the attitude that Kierkegaard actually commends. To his account of hope as a specifically religious virtue, I now turn.

## 2. Kierkegaard on Eternal Hope

We have already seen enough to indicate that hope in the sense in which Kierkegaard commends it is at least very closely linked to faith. In *Works of Love*, he has a discourse on the theme “Love Hopes All Things” (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 246–63), and in *For Self-Examination*, he treats hope, faith and love as “gifts of the spirit” (Kierkegaard 1990b, pp. 81–85). In these discussions, hope is specifically Christian hope, and Kierkegaard, like Aquinas, follows the Christian tradition generally by associating it closely with both faith and love. Like Aquinas again, Kierkegaard distinguishes hope as a natural human emotion or psychological state from specifically Christian hope. “In every human heart there is a spontaneous, immediate hope [which] can be more robust in one than another” (Kierkegaard 1990b, p. 82), but death sets a final limit for all such natural human hopes. Christian hope is “eternity’s hope” that gives us hope even beyond the point at which the natural human understanding thinks all hope ends. Hence, Kierkegaard says, it is “hope against hope”, explaining that Pauline phrase as indicating that it is a hope that defies normal human hope, characterized as that is by its limits: “the hope of the life-giving spirit is against the hope of the understanding.” (Kierkegaard 1990b, p. 82–83).

Hope here pertains specifically to the hope of eternal life beyond death. In *Works of Love*, the emphasis is somewhat different (though compatible). There, Kierkegaard distinguishes true hope from something “we often call. . . hope that is not hope at all, but a wish, a longing, a longing expectation now of one thing, now of another, in short, an expectant person’s relationship to the possibility of multiplicity.” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 250). By contrast, true hope is defined as follows: “To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is to hope, which for that very reason cannot be any temporal expectancy but is an eternal hope.” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 249). Here, as in *For Self-Examination* and “The Expectancy of Faith”, “eternal” hope is being contrasted with temporal hopes<sup>23</sup>, but Kierkegaard is not in fact denying that true hope has to do with temporality. He rejects the idea that true hope is “an eternal moment”, as if it “were at rest, in repose” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 249). Rather, “to hope is composed of the eternal and the temporal” and “when the eternal is in the temporal, it is in the future.” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 249). According to *Sickness Unto Death*, a human being is a synthesis of the eternal and the temporal,<sup>24</sup> and for a temporal being, the relation to the good is a continuing task and therefore one which always has the future in view. I cannot avoid the moral challenges that tomorrow may bring either by looking back on my past accomplishments or by resting in a quasi-mystical eternal present. However, we are eternal, as well as temporal, and so too is authentic hope. Worldly “hope” is directed to possibilities that may or may not be realized; true hope, by contrast, “can never be deceived, because to hope is to expect the possibility of the good, but the possibility of the good is the eternal.” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 250). Here, “the eternal” (or simply, God) is the unchanging basis for the possibility of the good being realized in the temporal world—for instance, in my life or yours. For Kierkegaard, it is essential that it is *love* that hopes all things, which is to say, hopes in the properly Christian sense; only one who loves in the proper way can hope in the proper way. And what the properly loving person hopes for is the realization of the good in all persons. That includes me, of course; and this (aiming at the realization of the good in me) is what proper self-love consists in. What is hoped for is each person turning to the good, relating properly to the eternal and thus achieving his or her *telos*. And because God is unchangeable and beneficent, there is a firm ground for hope in the realization of the good in this sense.

One might wonder whether, strictly speaking, it makes sense to say one should have *hope* in God. If one person says to another, “I hope you’ll do the right thing”, that would

normally be taken to imply some doubt in the matter; similarly, it might seem, with “I hope God will be gracious to me”. For Kierkegaard, God’s grace is indeed constant and universal, not arbitrary or changeable. So, the hope is not that God will be gracious (we do not need to *hope* for that) but that we will realize our *telos* through responding to that grace. Faith in God, we might say, is the ground for hope for humans. Kierkegaard firmly insists that we should have hope for every person to realize the good, and never give up hope for anyone. The loving person “lovingly hopes that at every moment there is possibility, the possibility for the good for the other person.” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 253). This goes beyond the most basic kind of hopeSA (desire + uncertainty) in that it involves a strong emotional investment and concern, but also in that it is *hopeful*—trusting that, because of God’s grace, and because of the ineradicable longing for the good that exists in all of us<sup>25</sup>, salvation remains a real possibility even for those who seem the worst of people.<sup>26</sup> This is true even when the person who seems the worst to me is myself; it is a crucial aspect of the virtue of hope that we should never lose hope for our own salvation. Hence, hope, in this sense—for others and for myself—is a form of hopeE.

For Kierkegaard, hope for oneself and hope for others are inseparable since they are both expressions of love. “Earthly understanding thinks that one can very well hope for oneself without hoping for others and that one does not need love in order to hope for oneself”. But, on the contrary, “without love [there is] no hope for oneself; with love [there is] hope for all others—and to the same degree that one hopes for oneself, to the same degree one hopes for others, since to the same degree one is loving.” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 260). Proper hope for oneself is hope for one’s salvation, for one’s coming to rest transparently in God. Selfish hope for oneself (like Cesare Borgia’s hope to become “Caesar” by gaining military and political power in Renaissance Italy—see Kierkegaard 1980a, p.19) wasn’t real hope for himself (or an expression of real self-love), as it didn’t pertain to the realization of his *telos* of a proper God-relationship. When we are commanded to love our neighbours as ourselves, it is implied that we need to love ourselves in the right way—that is, to desire and work for the realization of the good in us, for a proper relationship to God (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 22–23). Proper self-love is thus inseparable from the love of God (without which I cannot fully be a self<sup>27</sup>), and it is inseparable from the love of other people, for to love God and to love oneself aright is to love all creation and desire it to reach its *telos*.

Hope, when considered in this sense, is the basis for what I called above a general attitude of “existential buoyancy”, a generally hopeful attitude toward the future. The faith that “for God all things are possible” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 38) should not be confused with the naïve providentialism which thinks of God “like the fond father who indulges the child’s every wish” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 78) so that, with God’s help, I can count on things always turning out the way I would like. (Wishful thinking doesn’t become any more virtuous for being linked to an immature religiosity.) The hope is, rather, that whatever particular circumstances I meet with—desired or otherwise—can become occasions for strengthening my selfhood and my relation to God. What, though, is the relation between this religious hope and the particular hopes we do of course have for particularly worldly goods?<sup>28</sup> Though it isn’t hard to find in some of Kierkegaard’s rhetoric a tone of pietistic disdain for worldly goods, it wasn’t until the end of his life that this attitude took him over. *Works of Love* does not, when properly understood, reject friendship, romantic love or other “preferential” loves;<sup>29</sup> similarly, his insistence that true hope is for people to attain their *telos* (the proper God-relationship and, ultimately, eternal life with God) does not mean that Kierkegaard thinks that there is anything wrong with hoping for particular worldly goods for ourselves or for others. It would indeed be unloving not to do so; and his praise of those who love without being able to provide any practical assistance does not mean that Kierkegaard thought that such assistance, when it was practicable, was unimportant.<sup>30</sup> Still, for Kierkegaard, the most important thing for anybody is for that person to overcome despair by becoming fully a self through relating properly to God. And so, *that* is what someone who loves that person (whether the person is myself or another) should primarily hope for for the person in question. Whether, apart from that, a person achieves some goal

that he or she supposes will make him or her happy is a secondary—which is not to say an unimportant—matter. And, from Kierkegaard's perspective (or Aquinas' or Aristotle's), one can only know what will really benefit someone (and therefore what one should hope for for them) if one understands what their ultimate *telos* is. Becoming "Caesar" is not what someone who really loves Cesare Borgia should hope for for him.

Mark Bernier argues that Kierkegaard's view is that "For authentic hope to become realizable, earthly hope needs to die." (Bernier 2015, p. 115). However, Bernier claims that this is not as other-worldly or ascetic as it sounds. What is meant by earthly hope here is a sort of higher-order hope that getting the particular temporal goods one wants will bring fulfilment and will unify the self. This, for Kierkegaard, is an illusion. But this is not to say either that our particular worldly hopes *will* fail; or that they may not be proper in their own right, or that they will not bring us *any* satisfaction if they are realized. (So, it is not a Schopenhauerian pessimism according to which hopes as such are delusive.) But insofar as our particular hopes are legitimate, they need to be reconfigured in a different outlook from that of "earthly hope"; they need to be oriented by eternal hope. And, according to Bernier, eternal hope—the hope for the good—is also a higher-order attitude, since what it is directed toward, "the possibility of the good. . . is something of a higher-order possibility that manifests within temporality through other lower order (mundane) possibilities." (Bernier 2015, p. 141). To hope for the good is not to hope for one more thing, like a promotion at work or a new car; it is an overall orientation of one's life which gives a criterion for which particular hopes are legitimate and which are not, for how intently I should pursue them, for how I should respond if they are disappointed, etc.

### 3. Kierkegaard and Aquinas on the Theological Virtues

Is hope (in the sense outlined above) a virtue for Kierkegaard? Although he does not use the language of virtues much, I think Kierkegaard is, in effect, a virtue theorist.<sup>31</sup> For Aristotle, a virtue is a good character state; it is a disposition, so it is a stable and enduring state, not a passing mood or emotion. It reliably produces good actions in the relevant circumstances. It is a state that is necessary for persons to achieve their goals (their non-trivial ones, at least), and, more fundamentally, it is necessary for persons to reach their *telos*—to achieve *eudaimonia* (flourishing) through the realization of their distinctively human potentialities. A virtue is a human excellence, and, as such, it is necessary for *eudaimonia*, not as a means to a distinct end, but as a constituent of it. To properly develop the virtues is itself part of what it is to flourish as a human being (see Aristotle 2019, pp. 1–47 (Bks I.1–III.5)). Hope for Kierkegaard is certainly a stable disposition (as are the love and faith which are inseparable from it); the loving person hopes all things and hopes always (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 248). Hope expresses itself concretely in our temporal lives; not always in overt actions (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 258) but certainly in those where possible and appropriate. Hope plays an integral role in attaining the human *telos* (though, of course, Kierkegaard understands what that is very differently from Aristotle). And it isn't simply a means to a distinct end; hope is a necessary expression of love, and to love properly *is* our *telos*.

Despite these structural similarities, hope, faith and love for Kierkegaard are distinctly unlike Aristotelian virtues in several respects. (And, of course, Aristotle himself did not consider them to be virtues.) Firstly, faith, hope and love all characterize the self as it stands in a specific relationship (to God) rather than simply being dispositions internal to the subject, as e.g., temperance and courage are. One might think of justice in Aristotle as an essentially relational virtue, but it is the disposition to behave justly to those with whom one interacts, whoever they are; it is not essentially about the relationship to a particular other. (Of course, love and hope are virtues that we are supposed to exercise in dealing with our "neighbours"—that is, with anybody we encounter; but they are grounded in and defined by our relationship with the one specific "Other"—God.<sup>32</sup>) Secondly, Kierkegaard clearly does not think of them as means, relative to vices of excess and deficiency. One can never have too much faith, too much love or too much hope. (Even if one's hope



for the salvation of a depraved person was disappointed and that person was “eternally lost” (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 262) that would not, Kierkegaard insists, mean that the hope in question had been “put to shame”, shown to have been excessive. We should always keep hoping and hope for everybody (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 260–63.) Finally, the virtues, according to Aristotle, are developed in us through good upbringing, although we also have the responsibility to further train ourselves in them through performing the actions that a virtuous person would do until they become habitual to us (Aristotle 2019, pp. 21–26 (Bk II, 1–4)). But for Kierkegaard, as we have seen, faith, hope and love are “gifts of the spirit”—which does not, however, mean that we don’t need to work at developing them.

So, hope, faith and love are not strictly Aristotelian virtues. But that doesn’t mean that we should not think of them as virtues at all. Aquinas gives a broadly Aristotelian account of what he calls “natural” virtues, but he gives a significantly different account of faith, hope and love (charity—*caritas*) as “supernatural” or “theological” virtues. They are still, Aquinas insists, virtues, since they are habits or dispositions that are necessary to our achieving the happiness or beatitude that is our *telos* (ST I-II, LXII, 1). But, in addition to the “natural” happiness that can be comprehended by reason alone, we are intended by God for a further and higher happiness, which is the vision and love of God (ST I-II, LXII, 1) The theological virtues differ in kind from the moral and intellectual virtues, since those have objects that can be comprehended by human reason, while “The object of the theological virtues is God Himself” (ST I-II, LXII, 2). They are thus, as noted above, intrinsically relational states and not just relational in general; instead, they are principles of relation specifically to God. The theological virtues are not defined as means between opposing vices in the Aristotelian sense: “we can never love God as much as he should be loved, nor believe or hope in Him as much as we should” (ST I-II, LXIV, 4).<sup>33</sup> However, Aquinas does allow that, “in an accidental way and on our part, a mean and extreme can be found in theological virtues” (ST I-II, LXIV, 4). For instance, “Hope is a mean between presumption and despair when considered in relation to us. . . . But there cannot be too much hope in relation to God, whose goodness is unlimited” (ST I-II, LXIV, 4 ad 3). Furthermore, unlike the moral and intellectual virtues which are developed by habituation, the theological virtues “cannot be caused by human acts whose principle is reason, but only by divine operation in us” (ST I-II, LXIII, 2). So, in these three ways of differentiating faith, hope and love from Aristotelian virtues, Kierkegaard and Aquinas seem to be in agreement.

Aquinas states that “man’s happiness or beatitude is of two kinds. . . . One kind is proportioned to human nature, which man can arrive at by the principles of his nature. The other kind is a happiness surpassing man’s nature, which man can arrive at only by the power of God” (ST I-II, LXII, 1) This might seem to suggest a “two-level” account of the natural and the supernatural—the idea that our nature is complete as it is, and a “supernatural” destiny is gratuitously added onto it by God. However, I think this impression is, overall, misleading. Aquinas does not believe that the “natural” ethical life is satisfactory by itself or that it can bring real happiness. On the contrary, he argues that no purely finite goods can really satisfy us: “nothing can bring the will of man to rest except the universal good. This is not found in any created thing but only in God. . . . Hence only God can satisfy the will of man” (ST I-II, II, 8). Furthermore, Aquinas argues that even the moral virtues cannot be had in full measure unless they are directed by love/charity, for that is what inclines us to our ultimate end, and it is only on that basis that I can really exercise prudence (Aquinas’ equivalent of Aristotle’s *phronesis*), which is necessary for all the other virtues (ST, I-II, LXV, 2). Kierkegaard’s sharp (at times) distinction between the ethical and the religious might tempt us to interpret him as having a two-level view. But, for him, the ethical is in the end unstable and unable to stand alone apart from the religious. Indeed, one could say that the whole of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous literature dealing with the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages of life could be regarded as a commentary on the passage from Aquinas just quoted above (or on Augustine’s famous “You [God] have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine 1991, p. 3), which was, no doubt, in Aquinas’ mind also.). So far, then, it seems that what we have

seen of Kierkegaard's and Aquinas' understandings of hope, faith and love are compatible; and so, it seems reasonable to say that, in Kierkegaard's understanding of them, they are (theological) virtues, albeit distinct from Aristotelian virtues in the ways we have seen.

Both Aquinas and Kierkegaard see hope, faith and love as very closely connected. However, if we compare their accounts of the interrelation of the theological virtues, some significant divergences between them start to emerge. According to Aquinas, hope and charity are virtues of the will, while faith is a virtue of the intellect (see ST, I-II, LXII, 3). "Faith is a habit of the mind. . . making the intellect assent to what is non-apparent" (ST, II-II, IV, 1). The will plays an important role, since it is the will, rather than reason, that moves the intellect to assent, but the assent itself remains an act of the intellect (ST, II-II, II, 1 ad 3; II-II, IV, 2), and its objects are propositions. Although the object of faith (God) is simple, we know even simple things (at least in this life) only discursively, so via propositions (ST, II-II, IV, 2). However, faith becomes "lifeless", i.e., *mere* propositional assent, if it is without charity (ST, II-II, IV, 4). Since faith is essentially "a perfection of the intellect" (ST, II-II, IV, 4), faith that becomes lifeless remains the same habit as the formerly living faith (it has not changed its essence), but, severed from its connection with charity, it ceases to be a virtue. To be a virtue, faith, must involve both the intellect firmly holding on to the truth and the will being directed by the love of God to maintain that faith and live it (ST, II-II, IV, 5).

Faith has a certain priority over the others since one needs faith in God in order to love Him and hope from Him. "For we cannot tend to something by appetitive movement, whether by hope or love unless it is apprehended by sense or intellect. Now the intellect apprehends by faith what we hope for and love. Hence in the order of generation, faith must precede hope and charity" (ST, I-II, LXII, 4). Since Aquinas also says that the habits of faith, hope and charity are "infused simultaneously" (ST, I-II, LXII, 4), this cannot be a temporal priority; the point is that faith is conceptually a necessary condition for the others. But in "the order of perfection" charity comes first since (as we have just seen with faith) the others "are formed by charity and thus acquire the perfection of virtue" (ST, I-II, LXII, 4). Charity is more fundamental than the others because it is the attitude that seeks or desires God for His own sake, while faith and hope are attitudes to God as providing benefits—truth, in the case of faith; and happiness, in the case of hope (ST, II-II, XVII, 6). So, faith and hope (as we have just seen in the case of faith) can exist without charity, but without it, they are not really virtues (ST, I-II, LXV, 4). Faith and hope have a certain imperfection, since faith believes what it does not see and hope desires what it does not have (ST, I-II, LXII, 3, ad 2). Charity, in this life, needs faith and hope since we do not yet enjoy union with God (ST, I-II, LXV, 5). But there will be no place for faith or hope in heaven (ST, I-II, LXVII, 3-5), while charity will remain there (ST, I-II, LXVII, 6).

Hope is a fixed disposition to trust in God for one's future good and, specifically, for one's eternal happiness (i.e., the enjoyment of God) (ST II-II, XVII, 2). Hope depends on faith, since I cannot hope for anything till I know what it is I am hoping for (ST II-II, XVII, 7). And, in a certain sense, hope is prior to charity; I start by obeying God through hope of reward (and fear of punishment), but this self-interested "love" of God turns into charity (pure, disinterested love of God) as I develop spiritually. Thus, "hope leads to charity" (ST II-II, XVII, 8), but in this life, it is not simply replaced by it. The desire is purified, but since what is desired (union with God) still lies ahead, hope remains the appropriate attitude. But, as with faith, it is by becoming infused with charity that hope becomes a real virtue. Interestingly, Aquinas distinguishes hope from love by arguing that the former "regards directly one's own good and not that which pertains to another" (ST II-II, XVII, 3). This appears to be a significant difference between his view and Kierkegaard's insistence that hope for oneself and hope for others are inseparable. However, Aquinas continues: "Yet if we presuppose the union of love with another, a man can hope for and desire something for another man as for himself" including the other's eternal salvation. And "it is the same virtue of hope, whereby a man hopes for himself and for another" (II-II, XVII, 3). This makes the difference between Kierkegaard and Aquinas less stark than it initially appears

to be, but there does still seem to be a difference insofar as Aquinas sees hope as being primarily and essentially for oneself.

The most obvious contrast between Aquinas' views and Kierkegaard's, though, is in their differing views of faith. Although for Aquinas, merely propositional faith is not a virtue, faith *is* essentially propositional, and this propositional assent is a precondition of the charity which is needed to turn faith into a genuine virtue. For Kierkegaard, throughout his work, faith is primarily a kind of trust. This has been emphasized by John Davenport, who argues that "[a]s a kind of trust, faith is a practical rather than merely doxastic attitude; the agent does not merely assert the ideas. . . as propositions but stakes the meaning of his life on them".<sup>34</sup> Of course, faith for Kierkegaard has content (see, [Kierkegaard 1992, I, p. 380](#)) and can even be expressed propositionally ("God is love", "Jesus Christ was both human and divine", etc.). But, according to Johannes Climacus (I am assuming throughout this discussion that Climacus can here be taken as speaking for Kierkegaard), the distinctive claims of Christianity (as distinct from the generic "Religiousness A") are paradoxical, so that the propositions in which they are stated are utterly repellent to the objective intellect. It is not simply that we should (as Aquinas insists) respond to the doctrine of the Incarnation with life-changing love, rather than dispassionate intellectual comprehension; rather, the Incarnation is impossible for us to think through on the intellectual plane; there, we can simply do nothing with it. The only way to grasp it is existentially. This is why "Christianity is not a doctrine but an existence-communication" ([Kierkegaard 1992, I, p. 570](#)). The impossibility of thinking through the paradox pushes us away from seeking to *understand* it (which involves holding it at an intellectualizing distance) and forces us instead to *live* in the light of it:

Suppose that Christianity does not at all want to be understood; suppose that, in order to express this and to prevent anyone, misguided, from taking the road of objectivity, it has proclaimed itself to be the paradox. Suppose that it wants to be only for existing persons, and essentially in inwardness. . . which cannot be expressed more definitely than this: it is the absurd, adhered to firmly with the passion of the infinite. ([Kierkegaard 1992, I, p. 214](#))

This still leaves more generic religious claims such as the existence of God (considered abstractly or generally, and not in a specifically Christian sense, as Trinity) and immortality. Aquinas does not consider such beliefs to be the province of faith since he thinks that they can be proved by natural reason. Climacus does not think that the belief in God or immortality is paradoxical, "absurd", as the specifically Christian beliefs are, but he also doesn't think they can be proved; indeed, the very project of attempting to do so is, he thinks, misconceived in principle. Trying to prove immortality is like trying to paint Mars wearing the armour that renders him invisible ([Kierkegaard 1992, I, p. 174](#)). Immortality does not, as such, conflict with reason (as the idea of the "god in time" does), but it can still only be grasped first-personally as the prospect (and challenge) that *I* will live forever. To slip into the mode of asking whether some objectively specified entity called "the soul" can exist apart from the body is to abandon the first-personal stance from which the question of immortality makes sense. Similarly with the existence of God. Kierkegaard is clear that we all have a natural innate sense of, orientation to and need for the eternal, the good—in a word, for God. But to move from this sense of my own existence as bound up with God's in order to adopt the sideways-on stance of objective metaphysical reasoning will not only lead to no decisive conclusion, but will take me away from the knowledge of God that I have in my subjectivity to contemplate a conceptual idol (As Martin Buber would later argue, God can only be apprehended in the mode of I–Thou; God is the only Thou that can never be apprehended as an It.<sup>35</sup>).

For Aquinas, faith is a virtue of the intellect, and hope a virtue of the will. Kierkegaard makes no use of such a faculty psychology<sup>36</sup>, and his existential rather than intellectual understanding of faith reduces the contrast that Aquinas makes between hope and faith. However, it can still be said that faith is a precondition of hope for Kierkegaard, as for

Aquinas, albeit in a rather different way. What Kierkegaard calls “the expectancy of faith” in the Discourse of that name seems hard to distinguish from “true hope” in *Works of Love*; but faith’s expectancy (true hope) is an aspect or an expression of faith itself—it is the attitude that one who has faith in God takes to uncertain future events. In *Works of Love*, it is faith in God’s goodness that is the ground for hope for all persons. According to Gene Fendt, Kierkegaard’s view is that

Insofar as faith believes God, believes in God and believes that God makes good, it is distinct from hope which is an expectation of the good for both oneself and one’s neighbor. But insofar as faith believes that God makes good, it is inseparable from the hope which expects the good for both oneself and one’s neighbor. If the first (faith) is given up, then the second (hope for both oneself and others) is ipso facto given up (Fendt 1990, p. 168).

I think Fendt is basically right: faith for Kierkegaard is the fundamental trust in God that grounds our hope for ourselves and for others. Hence, faith is a precondition for hope.<sup>37</sup> But it is a matter of one affective state following on another, rather than an affective state (hope) following on an intellectual one (faith). Kierkegaard’s rejection of the idea of a purely intellectual faith also means that faith (trust) in God is for him an aspect of love for God, rather than an intellectual preliminary to it. Faith, as a trust in God is rooted in love for God, and love/faith, in this sense, is the ground for hope for all persons. It is also the ground for the love of one’s neighbour (i.e., any and every human being), which is why that is a universal and obligatory, rather than a particular and preferential, love.<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard thus has a fairly tight account of the unity of the theological virtues.

#### 4. Hope, Faith and Despair

I started this essay with the puzzle that, while *Sickness Unto Death* presents faith as the opposite of despair/sin, it might seem more intuitive to oppose hope to despair in this way. What is (psychologically) called “despair” and (theologically) “sin” is basically an ontological state in which the self fails or refuses to synthesize itself by failing or refusing to relate properly to God. Particular morally wrong acts emerge from this state of psychical or spiritual disharmony (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 81–82). The opposite state, “when despair is completely rooted out”, is that in which, “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 14). Kierkegaard’s concern to understand sin and its opposite as ontological states of the self, rather than simply in terms of good or bad actions, is certainly something that connects him to virtue theory in general. However, as the argument of *Sickness* continues, Kierkegaard insists that “the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 82), and the formula for the state in which despair is rooted out is now explicitly presented as the definition of faith: “Faith is that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 82).<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard’s point here is that both the problem and the solution have to be understood in religious, not in merely ethical, terms. I think that we can take “virtue” here to refer to an ethical outlook based on human self-sufficiency, along the lines of the “first ethics” mentioned in *The Concept of Anxiety* which was “shipwrecked” on the realization of human sinfulness (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 17, 20). It attempts, with only limited success, to treat the symptoms of a sickness which it does not really understand. Here again, Kierkegaard is pretty much in agreement with Aquinas, for whom an ethics based purely on the “natural virtues” can recognize neither the depths of our problem (sin) nor the height of our ultimate *telos* (eternal happiness). This is why, as I noted above, Aquinas doesn’t really have a “two-level” theory; for him, even the natural virtues only become fully virtues once they are informed by the theological virtues—primarily, by charity (ST, I-II, LXV, 2).

For Aquinas, charity remains in the blessed in heaven, while faith and hope do not. It is interesting that, by contrast, Kierkegaard uses “faith” for the state in which we realize our *telos* by “resting transparently” in God. But, as noted above, faith in and love for God are so closely interconnected for Kierkegaard that “faith” here must include love also. (The right relation to God is one of love.) But it is curious that Kierkegaard’s definition makes



faith the achieved state in which “despair is completely rooted out.” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 14). Faith, so understood, is a great rarity, if it even exists at all in this life. Anyone who is “not wholly [a true Christian]. . . still is to some extent in despair.” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 22). This makes a striking contrast with Luther, for whom we have faith despite being sinners. For, if despair is sin, someone in whom despair is “completely rooted out” is no longer a sinner. Moreover, faith understood in this way seems to be different from faith in Kierkegaard’s other works. The trusting faith in God discussed in “The Expectancy of Faith” and which underlies “love’s hope” in *Works of Love* seems to be something which ordinary imperfect persons can still exhibit. “Faith” in *Sickness* is our *telos* and since, as we have seen, true hope for Kierkegaard is the hope that we will reach our *telos*; we could say that the proper object of hope is that we will come to have faith. But, in “The Expectancy of Faith” and *Works of Love*, faith is the presupposition of hope. So, unless we take *Sickness* to be repudiating the teaching of the earlier works, we would seem to have a vicious circle. I think the problem is that Kierkegaard is using “faith” in two different senses.<sup>40</sup> To make his overall position consistent, we need to distinguish between Faith (with an uppercase “F”) as the achieved state of synthesis and faith (lowercase “f”) as the stance of those struggling to reach that state. “Faith” then appears as the *telos* of the faith of the still imperfect.<sup>41</sup> If Faith is the *telos*, then faith, hope and love—inextricably interconnected, as we have seen above—are the primary virtues which we need to struggle toward Faith, or, to put it another way, to root out the despair that lurks in all of us sinners.

We can now, I think, see how to resolve the issue from which I started: how to understand the relation of faith and hope in *Sickness*. In ordinary usage, to despair is to experience all of one’s present circumstances and future prospects as bleak, as offering no likelihood of one’s attaining the goods for which one yearns. Hope thus looks like the opposite to or antidote for such a state. But, for Kierkegaard, despair is an ontological state of disharmony in the self, of which the self may not be aware, or only dimly aware, and it might seem much less obvious that hope as such is the opposite of despair in this sense. However, hope, as we have seen, is for Kierkegaard the hopeE that I (like everyone else) will achieve my *telos* of self-unification through resting in God, and this is based on faith (trust) in God. And hope, in this sense, is indeed essentially opposed to (Kierkegaardian) despair and is necessary to resist it. So, the despair of weakness (see Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 49–67) needs to be combatted by the hopeE that one will achieve Faith. But while the weak despairer plausibly has too little hope, it would seem wrong to say that the one who despairs in defiance has too much hope. (We do not have an Aristotelian mean structure here.) It would be better to say that the actively defiant person (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 68–70) has the wrong kind of hope (in him- or her- self) while the passively defiant person—who has lost hope in his or her own powers but refuses any way out of despair that would require humbly relying on another (ultimately, of course, on God)—could also be said to have too little hope or, rather, to have deliberately refused hope (see Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 70–73). So, again, to avoid despair—whether that of weakness of defiance<sup>42</sup>—we need to hope in the right way, that is, to hope for the achievement of the good in ourselves through trust in God. But this hope is not something that can be separated from faith or love.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians, 13: 13 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> I shall throughout be treating this work as only “weakly” pseudonymous and as a reliable expression of Kierkegaard’s own views.

<sup>3</sup> There is some discussion of it in Plato’s *Philebus*, and Aristotle considers it in relation to courage (Aristotle 2019, pp. 48–50 (Bk III.7)). I am not aware of discussions of hope as a virtue in Confucian ethics.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas has distinct discussions of hope as a “passion” (ST I-II, XL) and as a theological virtue (ST II-II. XVII-XXII). References to Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* are given using the conventional system of citation by Part, Question, Article and, (where relevant)

reply. So, e.g., ST, I-II, LXII, 3, ad 2 refers to the First Part of the Second Part (Prima Secundae), Question 62, article 3, reply to the second objection. This system of reference applies to any edition; I have used the translations from the edition (Aquinas 1964–75) translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1964–75) except where I have used the translations by John Osterle of the extracts from the Summa that he has published as (Aquinas 1983) and (Aquinas 1984).

5 See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hope/> (accessed on 31 July 2023) for a useful overview.

6 Aquinas thinks not; he argues that hope must be for what is believed to be a good that is possible, but “arduous and difficult to obtain” (ST I-II, XL, 1).

7 The phrase is derived from St. Paul, who uses it of Abraham in Romans 4: 18.

8 For a defence of it, see Fremstedal (2019).

9 I leave it open whether that requires just the two basic clauses noted above, or some sort of further emotional investment as well.

10 In what follows, I will use “hopefulness” for this general trait and “hope” to refer to a particular occurrent state. However, “hope” has also become firmly established as the name for the theological virtue which I discuss later in the essay, and I will be using the term in that sense there. I hope that the context will make clear the sense in which I am using “hope” in each case.

11 This distinction between hopeSA and hopeE has some similarities with, but differs from, Pettit’s distinction between “Superficial” and “Substantial” hope. His “superficial hope” is, basically, hopeSA, but his “substantial hope” is a consciously willed strategy: “Hope will consist in acting as if a desired prospect is going to obtain or has a good chance of obtaining” (Pettit 2004, p. 7).

12 Or, at least, thinking it more likely than a cool objective assessment of probabilities would suppose.

13 Note that the fearful and even the depressive thinker can still hopeSA—that is, desire an outcome that is supposed to be neither certain nor impossible. It would at least be a very extreme kind of depressive thinking that had lapsed into such apathy as to cease to even desire anything or to think that literally nothing that was desirable had any chance at all of happening.

14 Hence, John Lippitt has compared this “man of experience” to the “frogs in life’s swamp” in *Fear and Trembling* who encourage the lad who is hopelessly in love with a princess to forget her and consider “the rich brewer’s widow” as a better match. See (Lippitt 2015, p. 126; referencing Kierkegaard 1983, p. 35).

15 This character might be the naïve young optimist, who is not aware of being in despair or might be someone who is consciously in despair at being lost in possibilities which are never actualized.

16 It might be, though, that to call such states “vices” is excessively moralistic and condemnatory. (One should sympathize with the depressive, and the wishful thinker might, in some circumstances, seem more comical, or even charming, than depraved. And, indeed, Kierkegaard does seem to take those attitudes to the two characters he imagines; he is much harsher to the “man of experience”). But wishful and depressive/fearful thinking certainly seem to be undesirable character traits, inimical to human flourishing, and to that extent they fit the philosophical concept of a vice. Insofar as they tend to lead the one who has them away from a truthful estimate of the probabilities of events, they can certainly be considered intellectual vices. And, as such, they have a moral component, since the intellectually vicious tend to make misjudgments that may bring harm to others, as well as themselves. And there are certain forms, at least, of depressive and wishful thinking—an attitude (on the one hand) of wallowing in gloom and using it as an excuse for apathy, and (on the other) of feckless irresponsibility—that do seem to be appropriate targets for moral condemnation.

17 Of course, I may properly hope that I can pass an exam or run a marathon, but in such cases, I am hoping that I do in fact have the abilities needed. It would—normally—be odd for an able-bodied person to say “I hope for a drink of water” when there is a full glass of it just in front of him or her.

18 See Bovens (1999). It should be said that this point should not be taken too far; it won’t help if we overestimate our chances of success so much that we think we do not even need to bother to make much effort.

19 From <https://poets.org/poem/hope-thing-feathers-254>, accessed on 24 August 2023.

20 See Wittgenstein: “To believe in a God is to believe that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 74).

21 Pettit thinks one can deliberately choose to act as if an outcome was more probable than it is and claims that this need involve no self-deception: hoppers “set themselves to act and react as if things were otherwise than the evidence suggests they are or as if they were more firmly established than the evidence shows. But people can do this quite openly and honestly.” (Pettit 2004, p. 10). Such a person would be, as it were, intermediate between the hero who still struggles for an outcome without hopeE for it and the person who lapses into wishful thinking. I must admit that I am not really convinced that it is possible to form plans and attitudes as if something were more likely than it is without becoming deceived about that likelihood.

22 Of course, people who have such irrational hopes may find themselves unable to shake them off, even when they recognize them as irrational. And this might lead some of them to question their starting assumption that the empirical facts *are* all that there is. In other words, such “irrational” hopes might be taken as intimations of something beyond the empirical, which would provide some grounding for hopes that would not make sense in purely empirical terms. For some suggestive, if opaque, reflections on this theme, see Marcel (1978).

23 Hopes wrongly so called, of course, according to Kierkegaard here; however, in *For Self-Examination*, he does not deny that “the hope of the understanding” really is a sort of hope.

- 24 Kierkegaard (1980a, p. 13). Of course, the problem is that the synthesis, as it stands, is incomplete, not fully realized.
- 25 See, in particular, Kierkegaard (1993, Part One, “An Occasional Discourse”).
- 26 Kierkegaard had, in any case, in the preceding discourse in *Works of Love*. “Love Believes All Things” argued that we should always try to think the best of people, to consider how the appearance of someone else’s depravity might be misleading.
- 27 Full selfhood is only realized through the self resting transparently in the power that established it, i.e., God. See Kierkegaard (1980a, p. 14).
- 28 Kierkegaard, as we saw, claimed that one should not really use the term “hope” for “an expectant person’s relationship to the possibility of multiplicity”, but we typically do, and even Kierkegaard himself was not, as we have seen, consistent in sticking to his own stipulation about how to use the word.
- 29 As was once widely supposed; see, e.g., George (1998). For arguments that Kierkegaard is not hostile to friendship or romantic love as such, see Ferreira (2001, Chaps. 3–6; Krishek 2009; Lippitt 2013, Chap. 4); however, these authors disagree amongst themselves about how exactly Kierkegaard understands the relation between preferential and neighbour love.
- 30 See the discourse “Mercifulness a work of love even if it can give nothing and is able to do nothing” (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 315–30). But this discourse takes it as unproblematically true that those who *can* help *should* do so. As Lippitt notes, “the centrality of the parable of the Good Samaritan to [*Works of Love*] makes clear” that love requires us to provide practical, physical help to others where we can (Lippitt 2013, p. 77).
- 31 I am thus siding with Robert Roberts (see Roberts (2022) for a thorough account of Kierkegaard as a specifically Christian virtue ethicist) and against Sylvia Walsh, who argues that Kierkegaard’s radical Lutheran theology puts him outside the virtue ethical tradition (see Walsh 2018; see also Dalsgaard 2015).
- 32 One might say that there is a virtue of marital love (Aristotle does not; Kierkegaard does not say so directly, but I think one can see the letters of Judge William as attempting to delineate such a virtue), which would have essentially to do with one’s relationship to a single other (one’s spouse). But, of course, for each different individual, the virtue would concern that individual’s relationship with a different person, so the virtue as such is not defined in terms of any one specific individual. Faith, hope and love are defined essentially as virtues of a relationship with one specific Other.
- 33 Although we should note that, for Aristotle, virtues, while means in one sense, are extremes in another (Aristotle 2019, pp. 29 and 34 (Bk II, 6, 9)); one can never be too courageous, though one can be too ready to rush into danger.
- 34 Davenport (2008, p. 206). Davenport is primarily concerned with *Fear and Trembling* in this essay but takes himself—rightly, I think—to be explicating Kierkegaard’s own view of faith. See also (Davenport 2015).
- 35 Buber (1958, p. 112). Whether all metaphysical theorizing *must* take this sideways-on form—and whether classical metaphysics *has* always so taken it—are further questions. For Plato, the ascent through the Forms to the ultimate Form of Goodness/beauty is driven by eros, a passionate personal need and desire. For an account of how Aquinas’ “Five Ways” to show God’s existence can be seen as “directions for the mind in meditation”, rather than dispassionate objective proofs, see Ward (2002, pp. 54–56).
- 36 I think, though, that many of Aquinas’ insights can be translated out of this unhelpful framework.
- 37 Bernier also sees faith as a sort of precondition for hope, but in a rather different way. He holds that “faith is a willingness to hope, wherein the self secures a ground for the possibility of hope” (Bernier 2015, p. 212), But this perhaps suggests too narrow a view of faith, and “willingness to hope” may make it sound too voluntaristic.
- 38 This is why it is a *commanded* love—see Kierkegaard (1995, pp. 17–44). Does Kierkegaard’s emphasis here on the injunction “you *shall* love” mean that he is committed to a “divine command theory” of morality? Stephen Evans has argued that Kierkegaard does have a divine command theory, but not of the classic Ockhamist kind (see Evans 2004). According to Ockham’s view, God’s commands are ultimately inscrutable, and I obey them simply out of love for God (this is the one “natural” non-commanded element of Ockham’s ethics, as it needs to be on pain of circularity). So, according to this view, my (commanded) love of neighbour is based directly on my love of God. But Kierkegaard, on Evans’ view, does not think God’s commands are inscrutable or arbitrary; they are based on God’s essential nature as Goodness itself. He commands us to love other people because He has created them as beings of intrinsic value, which are thus worthy of love. If we were perfected saints, we would be motivated to love others simply by our perception of their worthiness; as sinners, though, we need the obligation laid upon us by a divine command to give us a further source of motivation. Though I am generally sympathetic to Evans’ view, I have argued (Rudd 2015) that the intrinsic worthiness of others creates the obligation to love them, without further need for explicit divine commands. But that worthiness is itself derived from God’s goodness, which is the basis for our love of God.
- 39 Note that the vague “the power which established” the self from the first formulation has been replaced by the specific “God”.
- 40 Indeed, Kierkegaard’s usage is not even consistent within *Sickness*. In a remark I quoted above, he describes the struggle to believe that, for God, all things are possible as “the battle of *faith*, battling madly, if you will, for possibility” (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 38). But “faith” here, which is in the thick of the struggle against despair, cannot be identical with the Faith that is the achieved state of synthesis.
- 41 In *For Self-Examination*, Kierkegaard imagines himself in conversation with Luther, admitting that he does not have faith but still describing himself as a “believer” (Kierkegaard 1990b, pp. 17–18). This is essentially the distinction that I am making for Kierkegaard here, though it has to be said that it does not cut much ice with the imagined Luther (Kierkegaard 1990b, p. 18).

- <sup>42</sup> Although Kierkegaard insists that this is not a simple dichotomy, there is weakness in defiance and defiance in weakness (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 49).

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