
*International Kierkegaard
Commentary*

Volume 5

Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses



edited by
Robert L. Perkins

MERCER UNIVERSITY PRESS

ISBN 0-86554-879-X

MUP/H654

International Kierkegaard Commentary
Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses
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Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements
of American National Standard for Information Sciences—
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813–1855.
[Atten opbyggelige taler. English]
Eighteen upbuilding discourses / edited by Robert L. Perkins.
pp. cm. — (International Kierkegaard commentary ; 5)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-86554-879-X (alk. paper).
1. Spiritual life—Christianity.
I. Perkins, Robert L., 1930–. II. Title. III. Series.
BV4505.K3713 2003
248.4—dc21

2003005535
CIP

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Good Faith

M. G. Piety

Kierkegaard is fascinated by the claim at I Peter 4:8 that "love hides a multitude of sins." He treats this issue repeatedly throughout his authorship but focuses on it particularly in two edifying discourses for which it is the title (EUD, 55-78). These are two of the loveliest and most moving of Kierkegaard's discourses, yet they appear to present an intractable philosophical problem. Kierkegaard claims that a loving vision "sees not the impure but the pure" (EUD, 61) and yet that "the love that hides a multitude of sins is never deceived" (EUD, 61). To assert that one can see no sin while never being deceived is to suggest that sin is not real. The reality of sin is, however, one of the basic tenets of Christianity, and it is a presupposition of the dialogue, which exhorts the reader to turn away from the "'evil eye [that] comes from within'" (EUD, 60) and "discovers much that love does not see" (EUD, 60). But if the Christian refuses to see in the world what he or she nevertheless posits must be there, Christian conviction looks either foolish or very much like the hypocritical self-deception Sartre identifies in *Being and Nothingness* as "bad faith."¹ That is, it would appear that in order to rescue faith from the charge that it is either foolish or hypocritical, one must choose between the veracity of a loving vision or the reality of sin.

Kierkegaard clearly wants to claim, however, both that sin is real and that a loving vision of the world is veridical. I will argue that it is, in fact, possible for Kierkegaard to reconcile these two apparently irreconcilable claims: that sin is real and that a vision

¹Jean-Paul Sartre, "Bad Faith," *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, new introduction by Mary Warnock (London: Routledge, 1991; orig. complete English translation: New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) 47-70.

that refuses to see it is not self deluded. I will argue that such a reconciliation is possible as a result of the combination of Kierkegaard's epistemology, his ontology and an ambiguity in the terminology of the original Greek text of I Peter. That is, I will argue that Kierkegaard's interpretation of what it means for a loving vision to "hide" sin makes the Christian neither a hypocrite nor a fool.

Introduction

There are two issues inextricably intertwined here: the epistemological and the ontological. So we need to look both at the interpretation of reality, or the "knowledge" of reality, to which a loving vision gives rise, and at the actual nature of the reality. Getting at the reality behind appearances has always presented difficulties to philosophers, and the present discussion is not immune to those difficulties. We are fortunate, however, in that we can make certain ontological assumptions. They may be mistaken, but to the extent that the discourses in question themselves make those assumptions, this possibility should not concern us. The particular assumption I have in mind is that sin is real, so our task is to examine first how a loving vision that does not see sin actually works as a vehicle for presenting reality and then whether this can be reconciled with the view that people are, in fact, sinful.

"Love is blind," observes Kierkegaard:

When love lives in the heart, the eye is shut and does not discover the open act of sin, to say nothing of the concealed act . . . When love lives in the heart, the ear is shut and does not hear what the world says . . . When love lives in the heart, a person understands slowly and does not hear at all words said in haste and does not understand them when repeated because he assigns them a good position and a good meaning. (EUD, 60-61)

How such a loving vision might work can be seen in the example of the relation between a hypothetical mother-in-law and daughter-in-law that Iris Murdoch describes in *The Sovereignty of Good*.² The

²Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) 17. See also David J. Gouwens's treatment of this example in *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 203-204.

mother-in-law feels some hostility toward her daughter-in-law. She feels the girl is "lacking in dignity and refinement," that she is "brusque, sometimes positively rude, [and] always tiresomely juvenile."³

Murdoch explains, however, that the mother-in-law is "well intentioned," and that she thus endeavors to see her daughter-in-law in a more favorable light. She tells herself that she is "old fashioned and conventional," perhaps even "prejudiced and narrow minded." She endeavors to see her daughter-in-law in a more favorable light and "discover[s]" that she is "not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on."⁴

Murdoch does not say that it is love that alters the mother-in-law's vision of her daughter-in-law. In fact, she asserts that the mother-in-law's more positive interpretation of her daughter-in-law is the result of "careful and just *attention*."⁵ Such an assertion would appear to preclude that the unfavorable assessment could have been correct. Yet it could have been correct. Christianity assumes that people are far from perfect. From the perspective of Christianity, it must thus be possible that the daughter-in-law really was brusque, rude and "tiresomely juvenile." So "is the woman indeed seeing the girl truly, or is she self-deceptively sacrificing her critical discernment in this new judgment of her daughter-in-law?"⁶

Murdoch's example is fairly innocuous. The mother-in-law's judgments of her daughter-in-law are primarily concerned with points of etiquette, not ethics. What some people find brusque or rude others would find appealingly straightforward. It seems reasonable to suppose that a person can be *willfully* indifferent to how her behavior is received by others and that such willful indifference could be considered unethical. Most of the time, however, what passes for rudeness is actually an unintentional failure to appreciate the nuances of various social situations. Different social or cultural situations, or different personalities or

³Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

⁴Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 17-18.

⁵Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

⁶Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 204.

levels of sensitivity in individuals can mean that what is inoffensive behavior in more familiar contexts can become offensive behavior in less familiar ones.

Kierkegaard's concern is not etiquette, but ethics. Still, Murdoch's example is useful in that it provides us with a template for a more substantive example. Let's assume that the daughter-in-law actively dislikes her mother-in-law and makes no attempt to conceal this. On the contrary, she takes every opportunity to insult her mother-in-law and to flaunt in her face that she has supplanted her in her son's affections.⁷ What if the mother-in-law is a Christian and thus endeavors to see her daughter-in-law lovingly? Can she really give her daughter-in-law's behavior a "good meaning"? She accepts, after all, that people are sinful. She may endeavor to see her daughter-in-law's slights as unintentional, but won't she be aware, on some level, that she is deceiving herself about her daughter-in-law's true character or about the significance of her behavior? So why does Kierkegaard assert that "the love that hides a multitude of sins is never deceived"?

It is possible to argue that what Kierkegaard means when he says that "the love that hides a multitude of sins is not deceived" is that in the *"infinite conception of love . . . to be deceived simply and solely means to refrain from loving, to let oneself be so carried away as to give up love in itself and to lose its intrinsic blessedness in that way"* (WL, 236; italics in original). There is no question that Kierkegaard is primarily concerned with "deception" in this sense, that is, in what one could call the ontological rather than epistemological sense. The difficulty is that however compelling this view is, it leaves the question of epistemological deception essentially unanswered. But if the Christian is deceived in the ordinary sense, it appears that she will be subject to the dialectic of what Sartre famously identifies in *Being and Nothingness* as "bad faith," and if that turns out to be true, then it would appear that the Christian would be deceived in the more profound sense as well. That is, bad faith is self-deception. The Christian, if subject to this dialectic, would appear to be hypocritically claiming to himself or herself to

⁷Compare Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 204.

view others lovingly while, in fact, continuing on some level to condemn them.

Bad Faith

Sartre did not discover the phenomenon of self-deception, but his is one of the clearest articulations of it; hence it provides a nice framework for laying out what would appear to be difficulties inherent in Kierkegaard's concept of Christian faith. "Bad faith," asserts Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, is faith that decides first the nature of truth.⁸ That is, it decides what truth is before observing reality rather than discovering what it is as the result of such observation. This would appear to be precisely what Christianity does, according to Kierkegaard. Christianity decides that we should view others as inherently lovable, yet it also posits sin, which would appear to make people unlovable. That is, it appears to command us to see what may not always be there (i.e., a lovable nature) as well as not to see what is there (i.e., sin).

"Love is blind," observes Kierkegaard, and a person becomes increasingly blind the more he or she loves. Yet Kierkegaard insists that such blindness is not an imperfection.

Or did love become more imperfect when, having first deceived itself by refusing to see what it nevertheless saw, it finally did not even see it anymore? Or who concealed better—he who knew that he had hidden something or he who had forgotten even that? To the pure, all things are pure, declares an old saying, and does not thereby suggest an imperfection in the one who is pure. . . . Or was it an imperfection in the one who is pure that he, having first kept himself unspotted by the impurity by refusing to know [*vide*] what he nevertheless knew (*vidste*), finally did not even know anything more about it? (EUD, 59)

But can one become truly ignorant of the fact that one is "deceiving"⁹ oneself in this way? Sartre argues that this is not

⁸Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 68.

⁹I have used quotation marks here because it is not yet clear whether one is, in fact, deceiving oneself.

possible.¹⁰ Self deception is a lie told to oneself. The difficulty, however, as Sartre puts it, is that

[T]he one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know it very exactly *in order* to conceal it more carefully—and this not at two different moments, which at a pinch would allow us to reestablish a semblance of duality—but in the unitary structure of a single project.¹¹

It is for this reason that “bad faith,” according to Sartre, cannot actually “succeed in believing what it wishes to believe.”¹² On some level, the person in bad faith knows that he is trying to hide something from himself. He accepts, on some level, what he is trying to reject, and he *knows* that he is doing this. That is why Sartre calls this type of activity “bad faith.” He argues that some consciousness of what one is hiding from oneself must always be present or the deception will not be effective. One has to know where to erect the screen, so to speak. One has to remember why the screen is there (i.e., what is behind the screen), otherwise one might inadvertently move it and expose the “truth.”

The problem for the Christian is that it would appear that hiding the multitude of others’ sins would require that he in fact be aware of those sins in order more effectively to obscure them. That is, it looks like the Christian will have to be aware of others’ sins in order to know precisely where to erect the screen that would hide them. But if the Christian is aware, on some level, of others’ sins, even while resolving not to see them, then it would appear that he or she is in bad faith. It is difficult, at first glance, to imagine how Kierkegaard is going to avoid this problem.

Untangling the Knot

I believe Kierkegaard does avoid the problem of bad faith. There are three strands, or cords, to Kierkegaard’s defense against

¹⁰See n. 8 above.

¹¹Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 49.

¹²Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 70.

he charge that a loving vision is in bad faith. The first is his epistemology, the second is his ontology and the third is what one could call the indeterminacy of translation.

The Epistemological Cord

What would it mean to be aware of another's sin? "Love," says Kierkegaard, "is to be known by its fruits" (WL, 15). This suggests that there should be some sort of unequivocal external expression of sin. We assume there is such an expression to the extent that we make moral judgments primarily based on people's actions, on what we can observe of their behavior, or on what we know about them. Yet according to Kierkegaard, this is precisely what we should *not* do. "Only half-experienced and very confused people," he argues, "think of judging another person on the basis of knowledge [*Viden*]" (WL, 231). "Is it not so," asks Kierkegaard, "that one person never completely understands the other? But if he does not understand him completely, then of course, it is always possible that the most indubitable [*Utvivlsomme*] thing could still have a completely different explanation that would, note well, be the true explanation" (WL, 229).¹³

It is not *what* one does, according to Kierkegaard, that determines whether one behaved well or ill, but *how* one has done it. It is how a thing is done that is "essential" (WL, 13) on his view. One can do works of love," he asserts, "in an unloving, yes, even in a self-loving way, and if this is so, the work is no work of love at all" (WL, 13). "There is no work," he asserts, "not one single one, not even the best, about which we unconditionally dare to say: The one who does this unconditionally demonstrates love by it. It depends on *how* the work is done" (WL, 13).

This may seem, at first, like an extreme claim, but it is actually relatively uncontroversial. Cynics have long been fond of pointing out that even the most apparently altruistic behavior could simply be a concealed expression of self interest. A mother-in-law, for

¹³The Hongs actually have "indisputable" where I have "indubitable." The former is the more idiomatic expression but the latter is a more literal translation of *Utvivlsomme* (see *A Danish-English Dictionary*, ed. J. S. Ferrall and Thorl. Gudm. epp [Copenhagen, 1845] 356) and conveys more effectively the subjective nature of the original.

example, may endeavor to appear loving in her relations with her daughter-in-law out of fear that if she did not, she would alienate her son, or out of a desire to appear to others to be a good person. Even if one accepts, however, that there is no unequivocal expression of goodness, it would appear that there are at least unequivocal expressions of evil. Mother Theresa may not actually have been a saint,¹⁴ but Hitler, one may object, was certainly evil.

Kierkegaard is emphatic, however, that the uncertainty that characterizes positive judgments characterizes negative judgments as well and that "even something that appears to be the vilest behavior could be pure love" (WL, 228). "It has been said," he observes,

that some day in eternity we . . . shall with amazement miss this one and that one whom we had definitely expected to find there; but will we not with amazement also see this one and that one whom we would have summarily excluded and see that he was far better than we ourselves, not as if he had become that later, *but precisely in that which made the judges decide to exclude him.* (WL, 234; emphasis added)

"[Y]ou can credit even the worst person," asserts Kierkegaard, "with the good, because it is still possible that his badness is an appearance."¹⁵ There is no way to know, from a person's behavior alone, whether that behavior emanates from love or from sin. "[O]ne honest, upright, respectable, God-fearing" person, asserts Kierkegaard, "can under the same circumstances do *the very opposite* of what another human being does who is also honest, upright, respectable [and] God fearing" (WL, 230, emphasis added).

¹⁴See Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Theresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995) and Matt Cherry, "Christopher Hitchens on Mother Theresa (Interview)," *Free Inquiry* 16 (1996) accessed at <http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/hitchens_16_4.html>.

¹⁵WL, 228. I have witnessed putative Christians object that this sounds nice, but that it cannot be applied universally. Terrorists, they argue, for example, are clearly evil. Christ, they explain, did not understand this because he did not have to deal with terrorism. Such a view seems, however, in the words of Kierkegaard, something "both to be laughed at and to be wept over" (WL, 242).

This does not mean, of course, that the Christian should give characters like Hitler, or suicide bombers, a free rein. To love does not mean to do whatever the beloved wants. "If your beloved or friend," asserts Kierkegaard, "asks something of you that you, precisely because you honestly loved, had in concern considered would be harmful to him, then you must bear the responsibility if you love by obeying instead of loving by refusing a fulfillment of the desire" (WL, 19-20).

We have a responsibility to stop Hitler, or the suicide bomber, just as we would have a responsibility to stop Abraham from what would appear to any observer to be the imminent murder of his son, not because we know these people to be sinful, but because their actions would appear to be harmful. It is possible, after all, to harm others even while one intends to help them.¹⁶ The difficulty is that the intentions of others cannot be objects of direct observation.¹⁷ We must act to stop what would appear to us to be harm, or what we define socially and politically as a "crime," but must refrain from judging the criminal in a moral sense.¹⁸

¹⁶Many people who appear to be genuinely moral will, for example, defend war as an attempt to help the enemy by liberating them from an oppressive dictator. That is, they will defend killing people as a means of helping them. More charitably, one could say that they will defend, in a utilitarian manner, killing some innocent people to help what they hope will be more innocent people. Other people, however, who also appear to be genuinely moral, often find such a position morally repugnant.

¹⁷I disagree here with Jamie Ferreira's suggestion in *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's "Works of Love"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) that our inability "to infallibly determine motivation" is not inconsistent with the claim that there is a point at which "mitigating explanations" can be "falsified" (175). There is no such point for Kierkegaard. Certainly some mitigating explanations can be falsified but others would still be possible. Mitigating explanations are *always* possible. To explain an action is not the same thing, however, as to justify it. It is, after all, possible to actually harm someone one is trying to help. The intention to help can explain how the harm came to be done. It does not, however, justify the harm. The difficulty, I would argue, with Ferreira's position is that she conflates "excuse" with "explanation" (175), which is to say that she confuses explanation with justification.

¹⁸It is, of course, possible to argue that characters like Hitler and suicide bombers are simply insane and that moral categories thus do not apply to them. The prevailing opinion of the psychiatric community is unsurprisingly that Hitler was seriously disturbed. See, e.g., "A Psychiatrist Looks at Hitler," *Lancet* 238

Epistemologically, Kierkegaard's position is that we never really know the motivation behind other people's actions. A person's actions, viewed independently of their motivation, will yield nothing conclusive as to their deeper significance.¹⁹ We may know *what* people do, but we can't ever be certain *why* they do it. "[K]nowledge of this kind," asserts Kierkegaard, "is equivocal, explains now this and now that, and can mean the opposite" (EUD, 86).²⁰ This is, in fact, precisely what we saw in Murdoch's example of the relationship between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. One and the same set of actions will support two radically different interpretations. The interpreter will likely be more strongly inclined in one of these directions, but this, asserts Kierkegaard, says more about him or her than it does about the person whose behavior is being interpreted.²¹ The mother-in-law's revised judgment of her daughter-in-law is not the result of any change in the daughter-in-law's behavior, but of a change in the mother-in-law's attitude. The same behavior simply receives a different interpretation.

(1940): 44-77; P. Hopkins, "Observations on Some Criminal and Pathological Traits in Dictators," *Journal of Criminal Psychopathology* 4 (1942): 243-51; Bolterauer Lambert, "War Adolf Hitler eine originaere Fanatikerpersoenlichkeit?" *Sigmund Freud House Bulletin* 13 (1989): 12-20; Edleff H. Schwaab, *Hitler's Mind: A Plunge into Madness* (Westport CT: Praeger, 1992); and Desmond Henry, Dick Geary, and Peter Tyrer, "Adolf Hitler: A Reassessment of His Personality Status," *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* 10 (1993): 148-51. Such a characterization of mass, or serial, killers is controversial, I would argue, only if one confuses explanation with justification. It should make no difference, however, to the Christian whether the "criminal" is insane, wicked, or merely confused. The Christian has a responsibility to act to prevent what would appear to him or her to be harmful behavior as well as to refrain from condemning, or unnecessarily harming, the agent of such behavior.

¹⁹Compare Anthony Rudd, "Believing All Things: Kierkegaard on Knowledge, Doubt, and Love," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1999) 121-36, and Marilyn Piety, "Kierkegaard on Knowledge" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1995; UMI Dissertation Services, ISBN 0-612-03775-5) 269.

²⁰Compare WL, 230-31.

²¹Compare "[W]hen knowledge in a person has placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium and he is obliged, or wills to judge, then who he is, whether he is mistrustful or loving becomes apparent in what he believes about it" (WL, 231).

One could thus argue that, from an epistemological point of view, a loving vision does not literally refuse to see what it nevertheless saw. That is, to the extent that sin is not *what* one does but *why* one does it, sin cannot ever have been an object of observation. One "saw" another's sin only in the sense that one imputed it to the other on the basis of his or her behavior. One "sees" sin because one decides to see it. The loving vision simply makes a different decision from the unloving one. The mother-in-law of our example does not thus have to hide her knowledge of her daughter-in-law's sinfulness from herself. Even if the daughter-in-law were actually trying deliberately to hurt her, this was not something the mother-in-law could have known. What she knows is simply that it was possible to judge her daughter-in-law in an unloving way and that that is what she had initially done.

Kierkegaard asserts, however, that it is indeed possible truly to discover sin. He illustrates this with the hypothetical example of a man who is genuinely loving in the Christian sense but whose wife is not. The wife loves her husband, however, in what Kierkegaard calls the "preferential" sense²² and "just because she loved him she would discover how he had been sinned against in a multitude of ways. Injured and with bitterness in her soul, she would discover every mocking glance; with a broken heart she would hear the derision—while he, the one who loves, discovered nothing" (WL, 288). What the wife discovered, according to Kierkegaard, she discovered "with truth" (WL, 288). She was able to discover how her husband had been sinned against in the sense that her assumptions in this regard correspond with the facts, not in the sense that she knows, or can directly observe, the sins of those who wrong her husband. She can "see" how her husband is sinned against in the sense that through her bitterness, she imputes nefarious motivations to the actions of others and happens to be correct. "An understanding of [*Forstand paa*] evil," asserts Kierkegaard, "involves an *understanding* with [*er . . . i Forstaaelse med*]

²²The difference between preferential love and genuine Christian love is a frequent theme of Kierkegaard's. See, e.g., EUD, 320, and the entry under "preferential love" in the index to *Works of Love*.

evil" (WL, 286).²³ She has truly discovered evil in the fortuitous sense that a clock that has stopped truly states the correct time twice a day. That is, sin is out there, according to Christianity, hence if one is to go about imputing it to others one will invariably occasionally be correct.²⁴

Kierkegaard also asserts, however, that "in a certain sense [*i en vis Forstand*], the one who loves can know [*Vide*] whether someone deceives him, but by refusing to believe it, or by believing all things, he keeps himself in love and in this way is not deceived" (WL, 239).²⁵ This would certainly appear to suggest that a loving vision is disingenuous, or that the Christian is really a hypocrite. The key to unraveling this apparent contradiction with what Kierkegaard says throughout his authorship about the ethical-religious indifference of knowledge concerns the qualification "in a certain sense [*i en vis forstand*]." That is, one "knows" one is deceived in what I have elsewhere identified as the loose sense in which Kierkegaard uses the expression "know."²⁶

But if it is not possible to know, in the strict sense, whether a particular action is loving or sinful, why does Kierkegaard insist that "love is to be known [*skal være kjendelig*] by its fruits"? (WL, 15). Does that not suggest a yardstick by which we could measure the goodness of others? The answer is no and no. First because it does not follow, according to Kierkegaard, from the fact that love

²³The Hongs actually have "knowledge" both places where I have substituted "understanding." The Danish expression *Forstand paa* is more accurately translated, however, as "an understanding of." The Hongs do actually translate *Forstand* in the sentence immediately preceding the one in question as "understanding." The Danish expressions normally translated into English as "knowledge" are *Viden* and *Erkjendelsen*. See *A Danish-English Dictionary*, ed. J. S. Ferrall and Thorl. Gudm. Repp (Copenhagen, 1845) 364 and 71, respectively; also see Piety, "Kierkegaard on Knowledge."

²⁴Compare this with Kierkegaard's claim that someone who has an understanding with evil can "discover" evil even where it does not exist (WL, 287).

²⁵I have altered the Hongs' translation here to make it more accurate. The Hongs omitted the qualification "certain" (*vis*) and apparently mistook the article *en* ("a" or "an") for the adjective *een* ("one") (see Ferrall-Repp, *Dictionary*, 69 and 65, respectively). They have also confusingly translated *Viden* as "be aware of" (see n. 23 above).

²⁶See Piety, "Kierkegaard on Knowledge," 34-40, 139-98.

always be lurking in the background of the consciousness of the mother-in-law, undermining her confidence in her judgment. This possibility may even incline the mother-in-law, once she has reformed her vision of her daughter-in-law, in the direction of arrogant self-congratulation, which is to say, in the direction of self-love in what Kierkegaard would call the negative sense.²⁹ If this is the case, then Christian conviction would still be equivalent to "bad faith."

The problem of bad faith is that the "deceived" and the "deceiver" are the same person. It is not difficult to deceive someone else, but it would appear impossible, for the reasons stated above, to deceive oneself. One has to know what one is hiding from oneself in order to be able to hide it effectively. The mother-in-law of our example is not literally hiding her daughter-in-law's sins, because it is clear, according to Kierkegaard, that these sins cannot ever have been an object of observation. What the mother-in-law is "hiding" from herself is that her daughter-in-law's behavior could just as well support a negative interpretation as the positive interpretation she is now giving it. That is, she is "hiding" from herself the objective uncertainty in her subjective conviction that one of the possible interpretations of her daughter-in-law's behavior is correct and the other is not.³⁰ It would appear, however, that she cannot entirely obscure to herself the possibility that the *other* interpretation is correct and that no matter how exemplary her loving vision is, it is not accurate.

The ontological cord of Kierkegaard's defense against the bad faith charge is that the person who "saw the sin" and the person who no longer "sees" it are, in an important sense, different people. One becomes a "new person" when one becomes a Christian.³¹ Christianity thus reestablishes the duality of the

²⁹The distinction between positive and negative self-love is a frequent theme of Kierkegaard's. See, e.g., WL, 17-24.

³⁰This is, in fact, what I believe Kierkegaard means when he says in the *Postscript* that "[a]n objective uncertainty held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness is the truth" (CUP, 1:203). That is, for love to hold fast to the uncertainty is for love to obscure it in its positive embrace (κάλυξ from καλύπτω; see the section entitled "The Indeterminacy of Translation" below.

³¹Compare *Philosophical Fragments*, 30-31.

"deceiver" and the "deceived" that Sartre argues is essential for successful "deception." The person who "saw" others' sins is not the same person as the person who does not see them.

The difficulty with this attempt to rescue the loving vision of the Christian from the charge that it is in bad faith is that even the transformed individual accepts the reality of sin. This would appear to imply that however genuine a particular loving judgment might be, the Christian would be driven to mistrust these judgments in a general sense. But if one mistrusts a loving vision in general, how can one rely on it in a particular instance? If sin is out there in the world, then it could be *anywhere*, even right here in the most apparently innocent act.

Kierkegaard's response to this objection would be that to mistrust love is itself a sin and that the true Christian is so preoccupied with rooting sin out of himself or herself that there is simply no time to find it in others. The claim of Christianity that everyone is in fact sinful has no more than abstract significance for the true Christian. He keeps "the straying thoughts in the bonds of love by the power of conviction" (EUD, 82). The person who is entirely preoccupied with rooting out his or her own sin does not refuse to see what he or she nevertheless sees. The true Christian cannot "see" sin in others because no time is left to direct his or her gaze outward in that sense.³²

How would the eye [Øie] that loves find time for a backward look, since the moment [Øieblik, glance of a eye] it did so it would have to let its object go! How would the ear that loves find time to listen to the accusation, since the moment it did so it would have to stop listening to the voice of love! (EUD, 74)

And when this is true of a person, that person is indeed no longer the same person who actively hid the sins of others from himself or herself. Such a person does not have to hide others' sins. The true Christian has become "blind."

It is natural at this point to object that what I have described is the ideal of Christian existence, an ideal which Kierkegaard himself emphasizes is never perfectly instantiated in the life of any

human being, no matter how passionate his or her commitment to the truth of Christianity. The Christian is not without sin, and to the extent that the Christian continues to be sinful, it would appear that he or she is capable of seeing sin in the world. The Christian is, in a sense, able to see sin in the world. What the Christian sees "in the world" is not other people's sin, however, but his or her own. That is, Kierkegaard's epistemology precludes that one could ever *literally* have seen other people's sin. One simply *supposed* one saw it when one was confronted with behavior that mirrored behavior one knew in oneself to be an expression of sin.³³

The "open act of sin" was never there to be discovered in others, not because it was not there, but because our relation to others is such that their sin is epistemologically inaccessible to us. We *think* we see it, but what we see, according to Kierkegaard, is, in fact, our own sin, the sin of choosing to see others unlovingly.³⁴ "It does not depend then," explains Kierkegaard, "merely on *what* one sees, but what one sees depends on *how* one sees" (EUD, 59, emphasis added).

Love does not "hide" sins, according to Kierkegaard, in the sense that their multiplicity is "just as great whether the understanding discover[s] it or not. . . . [T]hen it would be equally true that the understanding discovered the multiplicity of sin and that love hid it, but one would not be more true than the other" (EUD, 62). But one *is* more true than the other according to Kierkegaard. The perspective from which sin is seen as repugnant, or as an expression of something inherently unlovable in the sinner, and the perspective from which it is not seen as repugnant or inherently unlovable are not equally valid perspectives. Love's version is veridical. "What is it," asks Kierkegaard, "that is older than

³³One cannot, according to Kierkegaard, hide one's own sins from oneself (see, e.g., WA, 182).

³⁴Not everyone would call what they would take to be expressions of the inherently unlovable nature of others as expressions of "sin." Kierkegaard could use this term with impunity because the overwhelming majority of his readers were either Christian (at least in the nominal sense) or Jewish. It is of no consequence, however, what one calls expressions of what Kierkegaard would call "sin." It is all ontologically the same thing, regardless of the name one gives it. It is thus sin one "sees" whether one calls it that or not.

everything . . . that outlives everything . . . that is never changed even though everything is changed? It is love" (EUD, 55).

When someone who is not Christian (or who is only nominally Christian) revises his or her vision of another to see that person more positively, he or she is indeed in bad faith, because the revision is arbitrary. Viewed objectively, people are neither inherently lovable nor inherently unlovable. They just *are*. A loving judgment has no more validity than an unloving one. Whether people appear lovable or contemptible would depend on one's mood, whether one was having a good day or a bad day. One could endeavor to see people consistently one way or the other, but one would always be aware that one's vision of them was merely a production of one's own design.

On the other hand, the Christian is distinguished from someone who is not Christian in that the judgments of the Christian have a foundation which those of the latter lack. The Christian is committed to the view that others are lovable. That commitment is not arbitrary, but the natural consequence of the conviction that God is love, that *everyone* is loved by God and that everyone is thus *lovable*. The Christian loves others out of gratitude for the fact (or what is taken to be the fact) that *he* or *she* is loved.³⁵ The Christian endeavors to see others as lovingly as God sees them out of a conviction that this is the way they are *supposed* to be seen, not simply because it is good to be loving but because the view that others are lovable *must be correct*.³⁶

³⁵Compare Gouwens's claim in *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* that "The Christian life is joyful gratitude in performing the works of love" (196).

³⁶My position here is similar to Gouwens's view when he claims that "[w]ithout ignoring evil, love 'hides' the multiplicity of sins *in light of a larger imaginative vision of the other person*, one that 'hopes in love' for them 'that the possibility of the good means more and more glorious advancement in the good from perfection to perfection or *resurrection from downfall or salvation from lostness* and thus beyond' " (Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 206, and WL, 237; italics added). But there is an important difference, I would argue, between my interpretation and Gouwens's. The "larger imaginative vision" of which Gouwens speaks is certainly part of a loving perspective. Gouwens's account makes it appear, however, that a loving vision loves a person *despite* his sin for what he *could be*, whereas I am claiming that a loving vision loves others *as they are*, sin and all.

The Christian may succumb occasionally to feelings of his or her own unworthiness, or unlovableness. When one does not oneself feel loved, one has de facto loosened one's grip on the conviction that God is love. Thus when the Christian lapses into feelings of unworthiness or harsh self-recrimination, those feelings may express themselves in harsh judgments of others. The Christian has something, however, that the person who is not Christian does not have. The Christian has the memory of his or her encounter with divine love. That is, the Christian has the memory of feeling loved by God, of the belief that God *is* love and that God thus loves everyone equally. This memory serves for the Christian as an impetus to renew his or her faith. But the renewed faith that rejects negative judgments of others does not literally *hide* facts from the believer. The facts in question are something the Christian freely admits: I failed to see others as lovable because I doubted that I was loved. This is the sense in which the Christian is a new person. Not that the believer has suddenly become perfect, or incapable of sin, but in the sense that he or she has had an experience the person who is not Christian has not had—the experience of feeling loved—and this has yielded a new understanding of his or her experience, an understanding that does not hide any part of that experience. The Christian freely admits even his or her own sins.

To say that “love hides a multitude of sins,” to the extent that it is interpreted epistemologically, is thus to speak figuratively. The sins of others cannot, strictly speaking, be seen, and one's own sins are something the Christian strives actively to confront. No sin escapes God's detection, so love does not literally hide sins even from God. “God in heaven,” asserts Kierkegaard, “is not halted by any deception . . . his thought is vivid and present . . . it penetrates everything and judges the counsels of the heart” (EUD, 66).³⁷ It does hide them figuratively, however. It “hides” the purported sins of others that, to an unloving vision, seem all pervasive. In an analogous fashion it “hides” one's own sins from oneself in that it deprives them of their sting. This is presumably what Kierkegaard means when he says that “the comfort is precisely this—that love

³⁷Compare EUD, 78.

is able to live in the same heart in which there is a multitude of sins and that this love has the power to hide the multitude" (EUD, 72). Conviction that one is loved makes the sins recede in importance in the face of the love that surpasses all understanding. "But when love takes it from him, then love indeed hides it" (EUD, 74). But if they are no longer important, then they are no longer sins in the traditional sense. Now you "see" the sin, and now you don't. That is how love "hides" sins.

The Indeterminacy of Translation

We have so far looked to Kierkegaard's ontology primarily as a means of supporting the view that the Christian faith is not "bad faith." That is, we needed to reestablish the duality of the knower and the known, or of the Christian and the knowledge that the phenomena of the behavior of others could just as well support negative as positive interpretations, in order to rescue the Christian from the charge that he or she is a hypocrite. We are not yet in a position, however, to rescue Christian faith from the charge that it is foolish. The Christian may sincerely "see" other people as loveable, but it is hard to imagine that they, to the extent that they are sinful, could actually *be* lovable.

I mentioned in the introduction to this essay that I believed Kierkegaard exploits an ambiguity in the original Greek text of I Peter to help the reader to a more profound understanding of Christian truth. This ambiguity provides a key, I believe, to rescuing the Christian from the charge that he or she is a fool. We must thus turn, at this point, to a consideration of the Greek text.

"[T]he apostolic word,"³⁸ asserts Kierkegaard, is not "deceitful" or "poetic," "but a faithful thought, a valid witness, which in order to be understood must be taken at its word [*maa tages efter Ordet*]" (EUD 59).³⁹ It is not "just a rhetorical expression," asserts Kierke-

³⁸I have corrected the Hongs' translations here. The Danish is *det apostoliske Ord* (SKS, 5:69). *Det* is the singular article, not the plural. The plural would have been *de apostoliske Ord*. This is important because "the apostolic word" (as opposed to "words") has the connotation of a promise or an oath.

³⁹This is a difficult expression to translate. The Hongs have "literally" where I have "at its word." [*Efter Bogstaven*, or "according to the letter(s)," is the locution that was commonly translated into English as "literally" (see Ferrall-

gaard, "to say that love hides a multitude of sins, but it is truly so" (EUD, 62). It is not immediately apparent, however, what it means to say that it is really true rather than just a figure of speech, that love hides a multitude of sins. "Apostolic speech [*Tale*]," Kierkegaard observes, is different in both form and content from "all human speech" (EUD 69).

The reference to love's hiding a multitude of sins comes at I Peter 4:8. The Greek term that is rendered as "hide" (*skiuler*) in the authorized Danish translation of this passage is *καλύπτει*, the third person present indicative conjugation of the Greek *καλύπτω*. "Hide" was an acceptable translation of this expression during the period of Kierkegaard's writings,⁴⁰ and it was indeed translated this way in the authorized Danish version of the New Testament. Notably, however, "wrap" ("*tilhyller*"),⁴¹ "encompass" or "surround" ("*omgiver*"),⁴² "embrace" and even "comprehend" ("*omfatter*")⁴³ were also acceptable translations.⁴⁴ The average Dane would not have been aware of this, of course. The average Danish theology student would have, however, which means that Kierkegaard would have.

Repp, *Dictionary*, 40), but the Danish text actually reads *maa tages efter Ordet*. I could not find this locution in any of my three nineteenth-century Danish-to-English dictionaries. Neither is it to be found directly in Christian Molbech's *Dansk Ordbog* ("Danish Dictionary") (Copenhagen, 1859). *At tage en paa Ordet* means "to take one at his word" (Ferrall-Repp, 231) as does *at tage en ved hans ord* (see Christian Molbech's *Dansk Ordsprog* ["Danish Proverbs"] [Copenhagen, 1850] 168). Kierkegaard has *efter* where one would expect to find either *paa* or *ved*. *Efter* was often used interchangeably, however, with both *paa* (see Molbech, *Dictionary* 1:404) and *ved* (see Molbech, *Dictionary* 2:383). The most reasonable translation would thus appear to be the one I have substituted for the Hongs's. It is possible Kierkegaard chose *efter* instead of either of the more common prepositions because of its connotations of imitation (*Efterfølgelse*). That is, it is possible he means to suggest that in order to understand "the apostolic word," we must take it as a promise that brings with it the obligation to live according to it, or to "hide," through our own love, the sins of others.

⁴⁰See *Græsk Dansk Ordbog* ("Greek-Danish Dictionary") ed. Paul Arnesen (Copenhagen, 1830) 704.

⁴¹See Ferrall-Repp, *Dictionary*, 328.

⁴²See Ferrall-Repp, *Dictionary*, 222.

⁴³See Ferrall-Repp, *Dictionary*, 221.

⁴⁴See Arnesen, *Ordbog*, 704.

What does it mean to "comprehend" sin? The Christian, according to Kierkegaard, assigns a "good meaning" to the behavior of others. It seems worse than foolish, however, to call sin "good." It would seem downright dangerous and certainly not how God would want us to view sin. "Good" can have a variety of meanings however. The mother-in-law of our example need not be blithely ignorant of the fact that her daughter-in-law is actively trying to hurt or humiliate her. Comprehending such behavior may see it as stemming from her daughter-in-law's own pain and confusion. She may see her daughter-in-law as simply "lashing out blindly at what seem[s] to [her] a cruel world."⁴⁵ A "good" interpretation may mean forgiving her because she knows not, in the deepest sense, what she does. Is that not, after all, the very plea the crucified Christ made to God on behalf of all human beings, including his executioners? Christianly understood, sin does not make one unlovable. That God loves us, sin and all, is the message of Christianity. Even willfully hurtful people are thus lovable. To see them as otherwise is indeed to see sin, but not *their* sin—rather one's own.

"When love lies in the heart," asserts Kierkegaard, "a person . . . does not hear words said in haste and does not understand them when repeated because he assigns them a good position and a good meaning" (EUD, 60-61). Not to understand "words said in haste" because one "assigns them a good position and a good meaning" (EUD, 60-61) means not to understand those words the way *the world* understands them, as an expression of an inherently unlovable nature, but to see them as expressions of pain and confusion. The understanding sees sin as repugnant, as condemnable; love does not.

Love does not, of course, see sin as something positive. God loves people, one could argue, in a manner analogous to the manner in which animal lovers love animals. Animal lovers love all animals, regardless of how attractive or well behaved they are. The animal lover does not despise the vicious animal. Some animals, he or she acknowledges, are a threat to others and must either be isolated or "put down." These animals are the objects, however, of

⁴⁵Rudd, "Believing All Things," 135.

special sympathy and sorrow, not contempt or condemnation. From this perspective, even characters such as Hitler, or suicide bombers, are thus properly objects of Christian love.

This does not mean that sin is not real. Sin may be defined as the failure to love, and the one who fails to love fails to receive love—not because love is not given, but because the one who refuses to love refuses to accept it.⁴⁶ To fail to see others as lovable is *ipso facto* to fail to believe that they are loved by God which, in turn, is to fail to believe that God *is* love and this, finally, is to fail to believe oneself loved by God. That is sin, to refuse to accept that God is love. Damnation, whatever else it might also be, is the failure, as the result of this refusal, to *receive* the love God offers⁴⁷ and continues to offer even in the face of one's refusal to receive it.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Kierkegaard's concern in the two discourses entitled "Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins" was clearly more ontological than epistemological. His concern, I would argue, is not primarily with knowledge, in the propositional sense, of sin but with knowledge in the acquaintance sense, or with what love *does*, substantively, or

⁴⁶Compare this to Kierkegaard's claim at the beginning of the *Fragments* that the truth (i.e., love) is not withheld from one but that one *excludes oneself* from it (PF, 15).

⁴⁷This is what I take Kierkegaard to mean when he says that "God is actually himself this pure like for like, the pure rendition of how you yourself are. If there is anger in you, then God is anger in you; if there is leniency and mercifulness in you, then God is mercifulness in you" (WL, 384). That is, God does not himself condemn you because, as Martin Andic points out, "to characterize God as relentless to the relentless seems to contradict the notion that God is Love that is perfect and equal and loves everyone, just and unjust, saint and sinner alike" (Martin Andic, "Love's Redoubling and the Eternal Like for Like," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, 11). God does not condemn a person for failing to love; that person condemns himself. The unloving person condemns himself or herself to a loveless world and all God's efforts to rescue such a person will be to no avail if he or she refuses to be rescued.

⁴⁸Compare this to Kierkegaard's claim that the person who has lost the condition for understanding the truth "himself has forfeited and *is forfeiting* the condition" (PF, 15; emphasis added).

ontologically, with the sins with which it is presented.⁴⁹ Love comprehends sin not in the sense that it knows *that* some particular individual has sinned. It comprehends sin in the sense that it encounters the sin, or grasps it, in the embrace of the sinner. Love embraces a person with his or her sin.

I believe Kierkegaard wanted to emphasize the apparent contradiction in an epistemological reading of I Peter 4:8 and in this way to point the reader in the direction of an ontological rather than an epistemological reading. His project was edification rather than elucidation.⁵⁰ Contradictions can often be edifying. That is part of the thinking behind the Buddhist *koan*.⁵¹ That is, confronting the apparent contradiction in the claims that "love hides a multitude of sins" and that yet it is "never deceived" could impel the reader to a new understanding of the text, a new perspective, a perspective from which the apparent contradictions in the earlier perspective are resolved. This new perspective would involve what we could call an ontological, or spiritual reading. Such a reading would be an expression of Christian faith, an expression of God's love. Had Kierkegaard intimated, however, that the claim "Love hides a multitude of sins" was not essentially an epistemological claim, but an ontological or spiritual one, he would have risked his reader's interpreting this to mean that it was true only in a sense, or to a certain degree; and this was emphatically *not* what he meant! Love, according to Kierkegaard, does not "kind of hide," or "sort of hide" sins. It "hides" them absolutely in its all encompassing embrace. And yet it is never deceived, because enveloped in the embrace of love is precisely where sins belong.

⁴⁹I have treated the theme of the difference, for the Christian, between propositional knowledge and substantive knowledge more fully in both my dissertation (see n. 19 above) and in "Kierkegaard on Religious Knowledge," *History of European Ideas* 22/2 (1996): 105-12.

⁵⁰Compare this with Rudd's claim that "Kierkegaard wishes to separate clarification clearly from edification" (Rudd, *Believing all things*, 132).

⁵¹A *koan* is a question that has no rational answer. A classical example is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"