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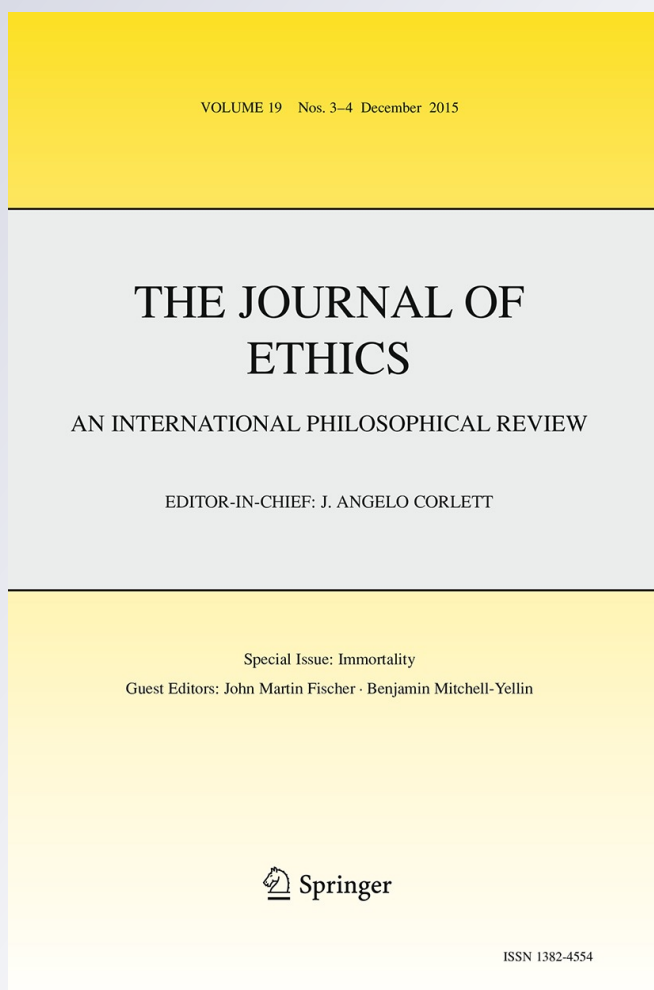
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Trivial Tasks that Consume a Lifetime: Kierkegaard on Immortality and Becoming Subjective

Mark A. Wrathall¹

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Abstract S. Kierkegaard argued that our highest task as humans is to realize an “intensified” or “developed” form of subjectivity—his name for self-responsible agency. A self-responsible agent is not only responsible for her actions. She also bears responsibility for the individual that she is. In this paper, I review Kierkegaard’s account of the role that our capacity for reflective self-evaluation plays in making us responsible for ourselves. It is in the exercise of this capacity that we can go from being subjective in a degraded sense—merely being an idiosyncratic jumble of accidental and arbitrary attitudes and affects—to being a subject in the ideal or eminent sense. The latter requires the exercise of my capacity for reflective self-evaluation, since it involves recognizing, identifying with, and reinforcing those aspects of my overall make-up that allow me to express successfully a coherent way of being in the world. Kierkegaard argues that taking immortality seriously is one way to achieve the right kind of reflective stance on one’s own character or personality. Thus, Kierkegaard argues that immortality as a theoretical posit can contribute to one’s effort to own or assume responsibility for being the person one is.

Keywords Kierkegaard · Subjectivity · Immortality · Responsibility

Kierkegaard (1992)¹ argues that our “highest task” is “becoming subjective.” Now we tend to think subjectivity comes naturally to us, and that the real challenge and

¹ Kierkegaard (1992) is, of course, one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, published under the name “Johannes Climacus.” One must always proceed with caution in attributing to Kierkegaard the positions espoused by his pseudonymous authors. In this paper, however, I am going to largely ignore the distinction between Kierkegaard, Climacus, and his other pseudonyms because (as will become apparent),

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genuine accomplishment for a human being is to become more *objective*. To our modern ears, steeped in centuries of striving for objectivity, “subjectivity” sounds like prejudice, bias, or even delusion. Kierkegaard, of course, is very much aware that his advocacy of subjectivity opens him up to criticism. In response, he writes:

People commonly assume that as far as being subjective goes there's nothing to it. Now, of course, every human being is in a way also somewhat of a subject. To become what one in any case is, yes, who would want to waste time on that, surely the most unrewarding of all life's tasks? Quite so, but just for that reason it is extremely hard, the hardest task of all, simply because every human being has a strong natural bent and urge to become something else and more. That is how it is with such apparently trivial tasks. It is exactly their seeming triviality that makes them infinitely hard, since the task itself does not beckon directly, in a way that promises support to the aspirant, and because the task works against him, so that it needs an infinite effort just to discover the task, i.e., that this is indeed the task, pains that one is spared in other respects. To think about simple things, things the simple soul also knows in this way, is extremely forbidding. (Kierkegaard 2009: 108; SKS 7: 122)²

So Kierkegaard insists that the apparently effortless and trivial task of becoming subjective is in fact the “hardest task of all.” After all, we already think we are subjects, and we are inclined in any event to believe that it is the development of objectivity that promises greater rewards in the form of the ability to better control and more successfully navigate the world around us. As a result, most of us do not even recognize that “this is indeed the task”—that the development of our inherent subjectivity is the most important project for us humans to undertake. But, or so Kierkegaard would like to persuade us, the proper intensification of subjectivity should be our most pressing concern. This is because, he argues, the development of subjectivity—properly understood as the process of becoming a true or genuine individual—enables us to assume moral responsibility for our way of being in the world.

In this paper, I want to begin to develop Kierkegaard's account of subjectivity. I will do this by trying to answer two questions: first, what exactly does it mean to intensify or develop our subjectivity to become a consummate individual? And second, by what means can we achieve this?

As to this latter question—the question how best to develop subjectivity—Kierkegaard (1992) suggests that we should devote ourselves to understanding four

Footnote 1 continued

the pseudonymous authors' claims about subjectivity and immortality are repeated, developed, or assumed by Kierkegaard in his journals and in several of the “Discourses” published under his own name.

There is one important difference, however, between the works published under Climacus's name and those published under Kierkegaard's own. In the latter, Kierkegaard develops and defends an essentially Christian understanding of immortality. This in no way repudiates the claims about immortality that Climacus makes. Rather, the essentially Christian account of striving for immortality that one finds in, for instance, Kierkegaard (1997) is a specific way of responding to the general problem that Climacus argues is posed for us by the thought of immortality. (See Sect. 3 below).

² SKS stands for *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, the new Danish critical edition of Kierkegaard's writings. For an electronic edition of SKS, see: <http://www.sks.dk/forside/indhold.asp>. Accessed 18 Nov 2015.

simple problems. These problems include: (1) what is the meaning of death? (2) what does it mean to be immortal? (3) how does one thank God? and (4) what does it mean to get married? In one sense, each of these problems is, at least at first glance, simple. Even a child knows what it means to get married or how to say a prayer of gratitude to God. But, like the problem of becoming subjective itself, such problems are only apparently simple. Once we understand them in all their richness and depth, we will see that they present us with tasks so challenging that they can consume a lifetime. (Kierkegaard 2009: 138f.; *SKS* 7: 153f.) For instance, truly to be married—to achieve a complete and satisfactory erotic and bodily expression of spiritual longings—that is a rare achievement indeed. In this paper, I will focus on only the second of the four “simple” questions—the question of the significance of immortality, and the associated task it presents me with: figuring out how to be immortal.

In order to properly motivate Kierkegaard’s account of immortality (Sect. 2), and in order to appreciate the way in which the question of immortality can help us develop our subjectivity (Sect. 3), let us first look in more detail at the problem of subjectivity.

1 Subjectivity, Responsibility and Ownership

Why should we think that the “development” or “intensification” of subjectivity can legitimately be viewed as one of the central tasks of human existence? Let us begin by asking an even more fundamental question: what is subjectivity?

1.1 Subjectivity and Individuality

I suspect that what comes to mind immediately when we call something ‘subjective’ is some sort of radical mind-dependence. According to its first *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, subjectivity is “the fact of existing in the mind only.” The next entry defines “subjectivity” in a similarly inner, mental way as “consciousness of one’s states or actions.” One might take as a paradigm of the subjective in this sense private experiences of pleasures and pains, appetites, desires, motivations, urges, and drives.

But, less commonly, “subjectivity” is used—particularly in artistic contexts—in a way that does not imply radical mind-dependence. Something is subjective in this sense when its significance is defined by its relationship to a particular human subject. Such subjectivity is the result of an agent expressing herself in the world, and thus the subjective is not “in the mind only.” Subjectivity is there wherever objects, events, and situations present themselves in terms of the individuality of the agent involved in the situation. Think, for instance, of the distinctive qualities that define the works of your favorite artist—the exquisite iridescent colors of a Grünewald painting or the menacing growl of a Rammstein guitar riff. These are subjective in the sense that they are distinctively the expression of a particular subject. But there is nothing radically mind-dependent about them—indeed, Matthias Grünewald or Richard Kruspe only discover their style in a kind of conversation with the media of paint or sound. Their subjectivity thus depends on the world as much as, and has a worldly presence as real as, other familiar artefacts and things. In this second sense, then, “subjectivity” does

not mean “radically mind-dependent,” but rather “determined by or expressive of a distinctive individual.”

Developing this latter form of subjectivity is what Kierkegaard means when he recommends the development of subjectivity. He regards the radically mind- or consciousness-dependent forms of subjectivity as degraded versions of subjectivity in the genuine sense. They are what is left of genuine subjectivity when it is cut off or alienated from the full context of the worldly involvements and from the whole psycho-physical economy that gives them their particular significance. So when Kierkegaard acknowledges that every human being is “somewhat of a subject,” he means (as he puts it elsewhere) that “every man is endowed with individuality or distinctiveness by providence.” (Kierkegaard 1975b: 489; SKS 26: 346) And when he argues that the intensification of subjectivity is our highest task, he doesn’t mean I should lose myself in the private theater of consciousness. He means, rather, that I should develop my potential as an individual by clarifying what is distinctive about myself and learning to more perfectly express it in the world: “the meaning of life, then, should be to fulfill this distinctiveness, strengthened and matured in the collisions which it must generate in the world around it.” (Kierkegaard 1975b: 489; SKS 26: 346) In my “collisions” with the world around me, and in my interactions with other people, I am under constant pressure to conform to demands coming from outside me—to compromise or even shed what is particular to me in order the better to get in sync with the shared public, “objective” world around me:

human training is demoralizing, designed to teach a person the trick of not batting an eyelid, of not saying a word, of not doing the least thing without having the guarantee that many others before him have behaved in the same way. The point is to avoid all dangers, all collisions, all the strain bound up with being distinctive. (Kierkegaard 1975b: 489; SKS 26: 346)

Fulfilling my individual distinctiveness is thus the “hardest task of all” because it requires both learning to express myself in whatever worldly situation in which I might find myself [Kierkegaard calls this “comprehending infinite reality” (see Kierkegaard 1992: 39)] as well as learning and then developing what is distinctive about myself without the support of others. [Kierkegaard calls this ‘comprehending infinite responsibility’ (see Kierkegaard 1992: 39)] “To be subjective is regarded as something very easy,” Kierkegaard concedes. And in a certain sense, he agrees: “of course, every human being is a subject.” “But,” he concludes, to be “a genuine subject, to comprehend infinite reality and infinite responsibility—only a few accomplish this, perhaps not ten in each generation.” (Kierkegaard 1992: 39)

1.2 Subjectivity and Responsibility

But does understanding subjectivity as ‘expressive individuality’ resolve our concerns with subjectivity? We want our scientists and journalists to report the facts, undistorted by their individual character. It might be a measure of the strength of a society or culture how much idiosyncrasy in personal behavior it can tolerate. But even in individualistic, pluralistic, modern democracies, it is still widely considered an essential part of one’s development as an ethical and rational being to

shed a subjective take on certain vital matters in favor of acquiring public, shared, regularized or normalized modes of assessing and acting. We do not believe, for instance, that our moral obligations or legal rights and duties should turn on accidents of birth and endowment, or mood and feeling—on the color of your skin, on my having a headache, on the accent with which you speak, on my particular appetites and drives and desires, and so on. Far from encouraging a heightened subjectivity in such matters, Kierkegaard acknowledged, “the admired wisdom is this, that it is the task of the subject increasingly to divest himself of his subjectivity in order to become more and more objective. From this it is easy to see what this instruction understands by being a so-called subject of sorts: that by this it quite rightly understands the accidental, the tactless, the selfish, the cranky.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 109; *SKS* 7: 123) Let us call arguments to the effect that subjectivity undermines our ability to discern the truth and to govern our lives in rational and ethical ways “objectivist critiques of subjectivity.”

In response to objectivist critiques, defenders of subjectivity often appeal to what Kierkegaard would consider to be aesthetic factors. Those who achieve a clear expression of their own style of being in and engaging with the world are often—rightly, in my opinion—admired for their originality, creativeness, genuineness or authenticity, and non-conformist flair. In addition, the life of authentic individuality is generally considered to be more exciting or satisfying, because it can be lived with a passion that comes from pursuing the satisfaction of one’s subjective preferences—this is in marked contrast to the weaker motivational force that comes from cool, objective reflection on what is right or proper. Oscar Wilde, for example, argued for a kind of subjective individualism in which “one realises one’s soul only by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions, be they good or evil.” (Wilde 1905: 96) And he considered it “tragic” “how few people ever ‘possess their souls’ before they die. ‘Nothing is more rare in any man’, writes Emerson, ‘than an act of his own.’ It is quite true that most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation.” (Wilde 1905: 97)

The problem with an aesthetic defense of subjectivism is it forces one to weigh the aesthetic advantages of the subjective life against the dangers of subjectively-grounded decision making—namely, as we have seen, that important decisions will be based on prejudice, bias, and irrational desires.

Kierkegaard, however, accepts neither the aesthetic defense of subjectivity nor objectivist critiques of it. Against the latter, Kierkegaard offers a two-part response. First, he accepts the point of objectivist critiques—we should not allow arbitrariness, selfishness, and cranky idiosyncrasy to trump ethical obligations. But, second, he argues that, without subjectivity, there is in fact no moral responsibility. There is a distinction to be drawn, after all, between good outcomes—happenings in the world that we would regard as beneficial—and doing good—performing an action because it is the right thing to do.³ What makes me a morally good agent is not that

³ Of course, to do good it is not necessary that in addition to intending to achieve whatever end I do intend, I also have an occurrent intention to do good. But it is important that I act in the light of the good—that the meaning of situations shows up for me as normatively structured.

my body plays some role or other in producing an event in the world that coincides with the outcome that an objective code of conduct would endorse. Rather, it is that my actions express who I am, so that in acting it is *I* complying with what *I* evaluate as good. This requires a development of subjectivity, because it depends on my being responsible for who I am and what I do. Thus, Kierkegaard argues that,

in relation to the good as well as to the evil, to the demonic as well as to the religious, *it is a matter of being a substantial ego—that is, a substantial egoity, subjectivity*. The majority of men do not have sufficient subjectivity for Governance really to get a hold on them, and therefore they become in the most profound sense neither good nor evil, but a mixture. The same egoity who is a despot, a tyrant, a great figure of that sort, can be a truly religious person—but in that case this egotism is crushed and placed under God in unconditional obedience—The lives of most men are like the grass—only the trees catch the storm, and they experience a great deal, but the grass experiences practically nothing. (Kierkegaard 1975b: 39; SKS 21: 239)

To be capable of either true goodness or true evil—to be capable of moral responsibility in general—Kierkegaard argues that I must be a “substantial ego.” That means that I must have a character of my own from which my actions issue. As we have already seen, Kierkegaard was dismissive of most moral training, precisely because it aims not at the development of subjectivity, but rather at getting each particular person to defer to what others do. He was particularly critical of the moral instruction of the Christian churches of his day:

Christianity has been abolished by the ubiquitous relegating of personality into the background... Instead of doctrine being the objective and my *I* a personal appropriating of it and that as a consequence I speak in the first person in actuality, I am supposed to get rid of my *I* and speak objectively. For that which should rule in the world must not be God, who acts upon the *I*, but should be an objectivity, an abstraction, to which the individual *I*'s relate like leaves to a tree, like animals to a species. (Kierkegaard 1975b: 350; SKS 22: 319)

Rather than drilling a response into her, or programming her like a robot, Kierkegaard argued that ethical training should aim at getting the particular person to appropriate the teachings into her personality. As Climacus puts it in the *Postscript*, “the ethical is meant... for individuality, and so much so that it is only in himself that each individual genuinely and essentially grasps the ethical... While in one sense the ethical is infinitely abstract, in another it is infinitely concrete and the most concrete thing of all, because it is dialectical for each human being precisely as this particular human being.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 129; SKS 7: 144)

Becoming objective by effacing my subjectivity is deferring to what “they” say I should do—doing what one does, and thus acting in the name of others, rather than for myself. “The majority of men,” Kierkegaard notes in his journals, “are truncated *I*'s; what was structured by nature as the possibility of being sharpened to an *I* is quickly truncated to a third person.” (Kierkegaard 1975b: 363) Their motivation in allowing themselves to be “truncated” arises from anxiety over the responsibility that truly subjective action brings. “We shudder,” Kierkegaard notes,

“at the strenuousness of having to be the primitive I—and so we become third person.” (Kierkegaard 1970: 438) Becoming “third personal” is becoming objective—the opposite of being subjective. It means having publicly shared, “objectively” verifiable, reasons or causes compelling us to act, and thus being relieved of the burden of being responsible for our decision.

Kierkegaard’s ultimate reason for resisting objectivism, then, is not aesthetic but ethical in a broad sense. “Being a single individual is... for a human being... the only true and its highest meaning, and higher accordingly than any other meaning” (Kierkegaard 2009: 124–5; *SKS* 7: 139), because only an individual is capable of bearing responsibility for her actions. But if we agree with Kierkegaard’s assessment, do we have to resign ourselves to accept the risk of irrationality and illegitimate bias as the cost of moral responsibility? Kierkegaard himself in fact agrees with the objectivists on the need to “cast off” “the accidental, the tactless, the selfish, the cranky, etc.” But “the way to do this,” Kierkegaard claims, “is to become subjective, i.e., truly to become subject.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 109; *SKS* 7: 123) And that, Kierkegaard notes elsewhere, “is no mean achievement.” He explains: “generally we get one of two things—either an objective something, an objective piece of furniture that is supposed to be a human being, or we get a jumble of accidental occurrences and arbitrariness.” (Kierkegaard 1975b: 364; *SKS* 26: 265) That is, typically either we abandon subjectivity and seize hold of some objective standard of behavior, becoming in the process an “objective piece of furniture that’s supposed to be a human being.” Or we embrace subjectivity, but sink into a degraded form of subjectivity—“the jumble of accidental occurrences and arbitrariness.”

How, then, does one become a true subject or a genuine individual?

1.3 Kierkegaard’s Moral Psychology

Let me begin with a very brief, perilously simplified, review of Kierkegaard’s account of the structure of character or personality—his “moral psychology,” so to speak. To be a human being, a self, Kierkegaard claims, is to be “a relation that relates itself to itself.” (Kierkegaard 1980: 13; *SKS* 11: 129)

Kierkegaard refers to the elements that are related to each other as “moments.” Moments are the essential components of our psychology that impel us to move or act. Rather than analyzing our psychological constitution in terms of discrete types of mental states (beliefs, desires, urges and drives, etc.) or of faculties (reason, appetite, spiritedness, etc.), each of which performs a distinct function in the production of action (say setting a goal versus determining the best way to reach the goal), Kierkegaard categorizes the moments in terms of the characteristic way in which they impel us. For instance, certain “moments,” be they beliefs, desires, drives (what have you), tend to “volatilize” the self—to take me beyond my concrete, established pattern of existence. Wishes, aspirations, transcendental thoughts, imaginings, etc., would on Kierkegaard’s taxonomy count as “infinite” moments. Other moments bring us back to the facts of our concrete existence (for instance, the desire to conform to social expectations, or hunger); these would be classed as “finite” moments. (see, for example, Kierkegaard 1980: 30f.; *SKS* 11: 147f.)

The moments thus sort themselves into complementary pairs of types—chief among these being “eternal” and “temporal” moments, “infinite” and “finite” moments, “free” and “necessitated” moments, and “psychic” and “somatic” moments (referred to collectively as the “soul” and the “body”). The psychic and somatic moments are likely to be the most familiar to contemporary analytic philosophers of mind—these are elements of our makeup which respectively move us in consideration of reasons (the soul) or sensibility (the body). In virtue of our psychic moments, we are responsive to and take into account an assessment of the good in the broadest sense. In virtue of our bodily or somatic moments, we are responsive to and take into account pleasures and pains in the broadest sense.

So when Kierkegaard states that ‘the self is a relation that relates itself to itself,’ the moments are the *relata* that make up the self. The relation they stand in is a “synthetic” one. A “synthesis” is a relationship in which the significance of each of the factors is determined in terms of the other. As Kierkegaard puts it, there is a “dialectic inherent in the self as a synthesis” such that “each constituent is its opposite.” (Kierkegaard 1980: 30; *SKS* 11: 147) A process is dialectical when the significance of each participant in the process is drawn out and established by its interaction with the other participant(s). In the synthesis, “each constituent is constantly its opposite” (Kierkegaard 1980: 30; *SKS* 11: 147, translation modified by author), not in the sense of a simple identity, but rather in the sense that each is permanently marked as an expression of the other. In a human being, for instance, the body, with its perceptual organs and organic processes is synthesized with a soul, with its rationality and purposiveness. The result is that we do not exist as mere bodily beings. We are not mere conglomerations of matter, causally interacting with other physical objects in the world. But nor do we ever have conscious states completely abstracted from our bodily immersion in a particular world. Every perceptual encounter with the world is already structured and informed by my psychic grasp of the meaning of things. And even the most abstract, conceptual act of mental contemplation—for instance, thinking about a mathematical formula for a geometrical figure—is informed by a sense of what it would be to encounter bodily such a figure in space. More generally, all our evaluations with respect to the good and assessments of reasons are informed by a sense of the pleasure or pain that will result from one action as opposed to another. Thus, in its most fundamental, immediate form, the human body-soul synthesis is already *sensuousness*—which is neither mere bodily sensation nor pure psychic cognition, but a sensibility inflected by intentions, beliefs, or purposes.

To say that my moments are always synthesized is not to say that they are always coherently integrated with one another. Indeed, Kierkegaard thinks that the fundamental human condition is one in which, within our overall mental economy, there are *contradictory* or *incompatible* moments—that is, we all possess attitudes, affects and aims which impel us to move in a way that, in certain key moments of our lives, will frustrate or cancel out the way other attitudes, affects or aims incline us to be moved.⁴ For Kierkegaard, this default human condition—being a collection of potentially

⁴ Indeed, Kierkegaard’s formal definition of “sin” is a condition in which “the synthesis is posited as a contradiction.” (Kierkegaard 1980a: 49; *SKS* 4: 354).

contradictory moments (attitudes, beliefs, drives, motivational states, etc.)—is the existential truth contained in the Christian doctrine of the fall. (see Kierkegaard 1980a) But the claim seems rather more phenomenological than dogmatic. That is, it seems to capture an experiential truth about what it is like to be an active, desiring agent in the world—namely, that we find ourselves at odds with ourselves, desiring to do things which would frustrate our aspirations, feeling things (perhaps guilt, regret, shame) which mar the carefree pursuit of our appetites, and so on.

But that brings us to one final key aspect of Kierkegaard's moral psychology. The self is "a relation [of synthesized moments] that *relates itself to itself*." Implicit in this claim are two key points: first, no particular way of synthesizing the moments is necessary. I can establish in many different ways the particular configuration of moments that characterizes me. Second, I can myself play a role in the organization of the moments that make up the particular person that I am—I can take a stand on my own personality or character.

Anxiety is, for Kierkegaard, the most fundamental way in which we relate ourselves to ourselves. In anxiety, I sense that the particular way my moments are structured involves a contradiction that could, under certain circumstances, render me incapable of acting. The more likely those circumstances are to obtain, the greater my anxiety.

It is in these key points that one finds Kierkegaard's answer to the questions with which I concluded the last section. To be a genuine individual, "truly to become subject," I must myself play a decisive role in bringing coherence to the moments that make up my being. The distinction between a genuine and a degraded form of subjectivity will then appear as the distinction between a coherent, successfully integrated self, and a self which is moved to act without regard to whether the moments currently impelling the action belong to a coherent individual personality. The task of subjectivity amounts to the task of taking responsibility for who I am by achieving an integrated economy of motivations, attitudes, drives, affects, aims etc. But how am I to do that? How am I to develop my subjectivity into such an integrated, coherent whole?

1.4 Developing Subjectivity

Before looking at Kierkegaard's answer, let us consider another approach that is, in some respects, quite similar to Kierkegaard's. Harry G. Frankfurt, like Kierkegaard, locates what is distinctive about human beings not in our faculty of reason per se, but in our capacity to relate to, endorse, and affect the organization and configuration of our moments—in Frankfurt's terminology, in the formation of second-order volitions (desires, that is, that relate essentially to other desires). "Besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that," Frankfurt observes, human beings "may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are... No other animal than man... appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second order desires." (Frankfurt 1971: 7) Frankfurt, like Kierkegaard, sees this capacity to relate ourselves to ourselves as a precondition for moral responsibility. (Frankfurt 1971: 18)

Also like Kierkegaard, Frankfurt uses this capacity for self-evaluation as the basis for distinguishing between what (following Kierkegaard's lead) I have been referring as "degraded" and more genuine forms of subjectivity. Someone is subjective in the degraded sense when she is moved by whatever subjective desires she is most strongly inclined to pursue, without concern for whether she can or should endorse those desires. Frankfurt calls such people "wantons": "the essential characteristic of a wanton is that he does not care about his will. His desires move him to do certain things, without its being true of him either that he wants to be moved by those desires or that he prefers to be moved by other desires." (Frankfurt 1971: 11) But because a human subject is also capable of reflecting on these desires and deciding whether "he wants a certain desire to be his will" (Frankfurt 1971: 10), a more eminent form of subjectivity or personhood is possible. When an agent "wants the desire to X to be the desire that moves him effectively to act," Frankfurt says that the agent has a "second-order volition." In forming second order volitions, the agent "has made this will his own." (Frankfurt 1971: 20) Thus, the reflective subject is able to resolve contradictions in her economy of attitudes by endorsing and identifying himself "with one rather than with the other of his conflicting first-order desires. He makes one of them more truly his own and, in so doing, he withdraws himself from the other." (Frankfurt 1971: 13)

At first blush, this proposal seems to achieve what we were after. It offers a clear way of distinguishing between eminent and degraded forms of subjectivity, and it also explains how we can resolve contradictions inherent in our "default condition" in order to arrive at a coherent, integrated character as a subject.

But upon reflection, this solution is more problematic than it appears at first blush. If I own and take responsibility for my actions and my first order desires through a second-order volition, one might wonder, how do I own those second-order volitions? Frankfurt himself acknowledges that "there is no theoretical limit to the length of the series of desires of higher and higher orders; nothing except common sense and, perhaps, a saving fatigue prevents an individual from obsessively refusing to identify himself with any of his desires until he forms a desire of the next higher order." (Frankfurt 1971: 16) If, like Kierkegaard, one is interested in knowing how to take responsibility for oneself, this is an unsatisfactory answer, for it suggests that I am identified with my attitudes unless and until I actively refuse to identify with them. But this seems precisely not to take responsibility for them. Rather, it is to acquiesce in being saddled with them—and thus risks falling back into a kind of degraded subjectivity. Perhaps in recognition of the weakness of such a response, Frankfurt introduces the notion of a "decisive" identification. In contrast to an ordinary volition, Frankfurt suggests that I can identify myself so conclusively with a first-order volition that this act of identification will "terminate such a series of acts [of higher and higher order desires and volitions] without cutting it off arbitrarily." (Frankfurt 1971: 16) Frankfurt explains: "when a person identifies himself *decisively* with one of his first-order desires, this commitment 'resounds' throughout the potentially endless array of higher orders... The fact that his second-order volition to be moved by this desire is a decisive one means that there is no room for questions concerning the pertinence of desires or volitions of higher orders... The decisiveness of the commitment he has made means that he has decided that no further question about his second-order volition, at any higher order, remains to be asked." (Frankfurt 1971: 16)

Frankfurt's solution to the problem of regress, then, highlights the inadequacy of the answer he gave to the initial problem of owning or taking responsibility for our actions. As Gary Watson has pointed out, the act of identification was purportedly performed through the formation of a second-order volition. But in fact, Frankfurt is forced to acknowledge, it is not the performance of a *higher order* act which explains "why or how a particular want can have, among all of a person's 'desires', the special property of being peculiarly his 'own'." (Watson 1975: 218–219) Rather, it is the performance of a *decisive* act. But what makes an act decisive in this sense? Frankfurt does not tell us.⁵ And thus, from Kierkegaard's perspective this answer once again risks collapsing into an arbitrarily willful and thus degraded form of subjectivity.

There is, moreover, a second problem, acknowledged implicitly by the language of "resounding throughout the potentially endless array of higher order desires."⁶ This is that subjectivity in the eminent sense is not ultimately concerned with desires or actions piecemeal, but with forging a consistent and coherent identity that can encompass the whole of my particular attitudes and affects. To achieve genuine subjectivity, then, I need a clear sense of the subject I want to be so that this can serve as a background against which to perform the reevaluation. Without this broader sense of self, I am left with a myopic view of particular actions, desires, and volitions and thus I have no guarantee that my evaluation will contribute to making me the individual that I want to be. There must be some prior vision of who I am or ought to be which guides me in my identifications, some prior sense of self with which my choices can resound. But how do I achieve such a guiding vision?

We have learned this much from Frankfurt, then: responsibility for my actions involves a certain ownership of my desires and volitions, and thus a certain regard not just for what I do on any given occasion, but also for who I am as a whole. Frankfurt is right, I think, to highlight the fact that being a person involves the capacity for reflecting on and taking a stand on one's character traits. What I want in addition is an account of how I can do this—how can I take a decisive stand on my existence that will resound throughout the potentially endless possibilities for action? And what is more, how do I prevent this stand from being an exercise in degraded subjectivity—just a rearranging of the "jumble of accidental occurrences and arbitrariness" that characterizes the self in its default state?

⁵ Frankfurt's later effort to address this issue seems to me to only clarify the inadequacies of his original answer to the problem. To provide "help in coping with an alleged difficulty in hierarchical analyses of the self," Frankfurt introduces the notion of satisfaction. "A person's identification with some desire," Frankfurt explains, does not consist "simply in the fact that he *has* a higher-order desire by which the first desire is endorsed. The endorsing higher-order desire must be, in addition, a desire with which the person is *satisfied*." (Frankfurt 1992: 14) But "satisfaction with one's self requires... no adoption of any cognitive, attitudinal, affective, or intentional stance. It does not require the performance of a particular act; and it also does not require any deliberate abstention." (Frankfurt 1992: 13) As intriguing as this suggestion is, it seems to me essentially to concede Watson's point. No higher order act can produce the kind of identification we are after.

⁶ This is reiterated in "The Faintest Passion": "satisfaction is a state of the entire psychic system – a state constituted just by the absence of any tendency or inclination to alter its condition." (Frankfurt 1992: 13) Thus, identification requires that any particular attitude be viewed against the background of a sense for the whole self.

Kierkegaard's "trivial task" of understanding immortality is offered as one means of orienting myself to myself in such a way that I can become coherent: "the very moment I am conscious of my immortality," Kierkegaard claims, "I am absolutely subjective." (Kierkegaard 2009: 145; SKS 7: 160) In the remainder of this paper, I want to try to make sense of this claim.

2 Kierkegaard and "The Thought of Immortality"

In our secular age, it might seem a matter of purely historical interest that Kierkegaard once actually hoped to ground significant philosophical conclusions on something as speculative and superstitious as faith in immortality. But the way Kierkegaard uses the thought of immortality does not actually require that we believe in our immortality. Indeed, he considers belief and all the questions that surround belief—questions of proof, of evidentiary support, of inferential justification, and so on—as distractions from the real significance of the thought of immortality:

What extraordinary metaphysical and logical efforts have been put forth in our time to produce a new, exhaustive, and absolutely correct proof, combining all earlier proofs, of the immortality of the soul; and strangely enough, while this is taking place, certitude declines. The thought of immortality has in itself such power, such incisiveness in its consequences, such responsibility in even just positing it, that it might perhaps transform the whole of life—and that induces fear. And so one saves and soothes one's soul by straining one's mind to produce a new proof.⁷

So the desire to shift the discussion of immortality into a metaphysical or epistemological register is, on Kierkegaard's diagnosis, a symptom of a deep uneasiness with the thought of immortality. By posing it as a question for or against which arguments can be advanced, evidence can be mustered, justificatory arguments can be articulated, we can keep the thought of immortality at a psychologically safe distance. Thus, in his *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard refuses either to argue for immortality or to critique arguments against immortality on the grounds that such giving and asking for reasons amounts to nothing more than an intellectual game in which "the thoughts come and go, and even the most decisive ones pass by the soul" without leaving a trace. (Kierkegaard 1997: 202; SKS 10: 211) Instead, he pursues a "discourse about immortality" that "aims to violate... private security; it intends to disturb peace of mind. It is like an assault... it does not want to *demonstrate* anything at all." (Kierkegaard 1997: 202; SKS 10: 211)

But all this makes Kierkegaard's "thought of immortality" something of a paradox. It is presented as a kind of thought experiment that I can participate in without needing to believe in it. In fact, I am actively discouraged from considering arguments that might support or strengthen a belief in the immortality of the soul. And yet, I am to take the thought so seriously that I feel disturbed, assaulted, and

⁷ Kierkegaard (1980a: 139; SKS 4: 439 translation modified by author). I am indebted to Brian Söderquist for his help translating the original Danish text.

anxious enough to engage in a project of remaking my character and taking responsibility for my self. How can a thought experiment do all that?

Let us begin by considering the content of this particular thought experiment. At its most fundamental level, immortality involves all the problems that surround metamorphosis—the problem of understanding how an individual can endure across significant changes in her character, existence, form of life, and so on. These are, of course, questions that one can entertain, quite apart from one's religious beliefs or hope for a life beyond death. Indeed, in one sense metamorphosis is a rather mundane experience. For example, a friend recently sent me a photograph dating from, as near as I can guess, 1986. In the photograph is a much younger version of me. Judging from the double-decker bus in the background, I am in London. I am dressed in a British Army Jacket (which still hangs in my closet), jeans, and cheap white gym shoes. I stand in the middle of a crowd, flashing a peace sign, surrounded by people carrying bullhorns and banners calling for an end to apartheid and racism. I have no recollection of the day in question, nor of ever having participated in an anti-apartheid rally (although I'm glad I did). I have only the vaguest sense anymore of what it was like to be that kid in the picture. My ambitions, hopes, pleasures, passions, dispositions, vocabulary, habits, companions, practices have all changed. Am I the same person? If so, why? The problem of immortality is in its simplest and barest elements a way of taking up such questions.

There is a long history in philosophy of tackling such questions through thought experiments, often posed in dramatic, fantastical forms: would I be the same person if I were beamed through the Star Trek transporter to the surface of another planet? Would I still be the same person if woke up in the body of a parrot? In many ways, such thought experiments are not essentially different from imagining the soul leaving the body and drinking from the river Lethe when entering Hades. Or imagining myself as a resurrected being brought forth to stand before the judgment bar of God. To think the thought of my immortality is to wonder what it would take to persist as the person I am beyond the horizon of death, and the changes that death necessarily imposes on me. As such, it can be a valuable tool for trying to isolate what is essential to me as the individual I am.

But it is still hard to see how a mere thought experiment can generate the kind of anxiety that would motivate me to take responsibility for and transform myself. The thought of immortality does however have one important difference from more mundane or philosophico-science-fictionary ways of posing the problem of metamorphosis, and this difference may prove relevant to the impact the thought has on our self-understanding. The Captain Kirk who materializes on the surface of planet Gideon is just as prone to death as the Kirk who disappeared in the *Enterprise* transporter room. And if he finds his existence miserable, he can choose to end it or at least figure out a way to distract himself from the misery for his “threescore years and ten.” (*Psalms* 90: 10) With the metamorphosis out of a mortal body, by contrast, comes the prospect of an endless existence. If I find myself “raised incorruptible” (*1 Corinthians* 15: 52), if my “mortal must put on immortality” (*1 Corinthians* 15: 53), there is no way out should I find such an existence intolerable.⁸ There is at least the potential for considerable

⁸ This, presumably, is why St. Paul concludes in *1 Corinthians* 15: 56 that “the sting of death is sin”—that is, that death is to be feared not because it extinguishes life, but because following death we are consigned eternally to the miserable condition of being sinful.

alarm and anxiety in the thinking of such thoughts. Of course, the anxiety I experience is probably directly proportional to the subjective probability I attach to the likelihood of my actually being immortal. I will return to this problem below.

2.1 Inherently Unsuitable for Eternity?

For now, let us bracket the questions whether I do or should feel anxiety as a result of simply thinking the thought of anxiety, and consider whether anxiety over the prospect of an eternal existence could motivate changes in my understanding of and relationship to myself. The answer to that question will hinge on the sources and character of the anxiety that is produced. For instance, one might experience anxiety over an immortal existence because of uncertainty about the effects of the dramatic changes that will inevitably occur in my surroundings over aeons. Given a long enough time line, planetary disasters and cosmic events of all sorts are almost certain to render it impossible for me to live a satisfying life. I, as a deathless being, might well witness the annihilation of my planet, solar system, galaxy, and so on, only to continue on eternally in an infinite void. However horrible such an experience would almost certainly be, thinking about it would do little to motivate me to remake or transform my whole life now, let alone inspire me to take responsibility for myself. First, many of the most catastrophic cosmic events—say, an event like the sun swallowing the earth as it expands to the size of a red giant—lie billions of years in the future, and are thus too remote from my present concerns to generate much motivational force. Second, it does not matter what kind of person I am; these cosmic events will happen whether I take responsibility for myself or not.

But consider another class of arguments, which I refer to as the “inherently unsuitable for eternity” genre of arguments. Members of this genre focus not on the external circumstances but on the psychological effects of an eternal life, and they echo in many respects Kierkegaard’s discussions of immortality. One of the most influential contributions to this genre is Bernard Williams’s claim that, after a few centuries of repeating the same activities over and over again, we inevitably would grow intolerably bored with our existence. Thus, Bernard Williams concludes, to be prone to death is to be *felix opportunitate mortis*—“lucky in having the chance to die.” (Williams 1973: 100)

Simone de Beauvoir (1955) focuses on the affect of indifference rather than boredom. While indifference and boredom are often treated as synonyms, one can see their distinctness in situations where I am indifferent about which of several activities to engage in but bored by none of them. I might, for instance, be indifferent about whether to spend Saturday afternoon watching a football match or riding my bike, but find both alternatives fun and engaging. Indifference threatens not so much my *enjoyment*, but the *significance* of the activities in which I engage. If I am truly indifferent, it simply does not matter that I chose to watch the match instead of ride my bike. Of course, an immortal has more time than we do to get bored with many things that seem to us inexhaustibly interesting. But, de Beauvoir suggests, certain activities and affairs (falling in love, participating in political turmoils and intrigues, etc.) could continue to engage an immortal no matter how

many times he or she had participated in previous similar affairs.⁹ The true threat posed by immortality on her account, then, is not boredom. It is a growing indifference that threatens to strip every decision of its weight or significance. From the mere fact that “I could not risk my life” any longer, I would immediately become indifferent to many things that were previously of paramount significance. (de Beauvoir 1955: 339)

Moreover, once de Beauvoir’s protagonist has seen human affairs repeatedly cycle through the same patterns without any genuine progress—something that apparently takes only seven or eight centuries—he loses the ability to look forward in anticipation to, hope for, or fear the future. He grows increasingly indifferent to the choices he makes—and thus existence loses for him the very character that makes it worthwhile.

In a new contribution to the genre, Iain Thomson and James Bodington have argued that, in an infinity of time, I would necessarily experience things which I could not possibly prefer to death. For instance, they argue that an immortal would have to “cycle through” an “unending succession of defining life-projects,” including those which are “morally despicable or otherwise abhorrent.” (Thomson and Bodington 2014: 257–258) Since none of us could rationally “choose immortality knowing they were fated to such hells,” they conclude that “the endless life of an immortal would necessarily fail to qualify as a life worth living. (Thomson and Bodington 2014: 259)

But despite similarities in many respects to Kierkegaard’s discussion of immortality, these arguments and thought experiments obscure rather than clarify the insight Kierkegaard seeks. Arguments in this genre are advanced for the purpose, not of inspiring in us anxiety and dread at the prospect of our immortality, but rather of convincing us “what a good thing it is that we are not [immortal].” (Williams 1973: 82) de Beauvoir ends her novel emphasizing the immortal Fosca’s envy of his mortal companions, who “knew... that it was important to be alive.” Fosca concludes, paradoxically, that the mortals are more alive than he is. (de Beauvoir 1955: 339) Similarly, Thomson and Bodington conclude that “living with death remains preferable to the alternative.” (Thomson and Bodington 2014: 259) Given this purpose, it is crucial for arguments in this genre to establish their claims in the modality of necessity. I cannot conclude with certainty that a mortal life is to be preferred to an immortal one unless I know that immortality will necessarily undermine the very things that make my life worthwhile.¹⁰

⁹ “Forever the same, forever different” is her protagonist’s frequent refrain. The differences are what entice him to once again get engaged in the affairs around him. But the sameness ultimately leads to indifference. See also Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014) on the distinction between self-exhausting versus repeatable pleasures.

¹⁰ Demonstrating the modality of necessity is, not surprisingly, the weakest aspect of works in this genre. See Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014) for a series of arguments calling into question different versions of what they have helpfully dubbed the “Necessary Boredom Thesis.” For Williams and de Beauvoir, an obvious obstacle to establishing the necessity is that so much of the argument depends on sharing their intuitions about a counter-factual hypothetical—that I have lived through and experienced *ad satietatem* everything that a being like me might care to experience.

Thomson and Bodington take a different tack. They posit the proposition: “If it is possible for an event to occur, then even an extremely unlikely event is *certain* to occur, given infinite time.” (Thomson and

For Kierkegaard's purposes, by contrast, that modality of necessity actually destroys the efficacy of the thought experiment. Recall that Kierkegaard is after a thought that will both inspire anxiety *and* motivate me to take responsibility for myself and for transforming my life. In fact, inspiring anxiety is in the service of providing the motivational force. If I do not want to be morally despicable, indifferent to the course of life, or profoundly and eternally bored (and I do not), showing me that immortality would necessarily doom me to such a fate will undoubtedly make me anxious. But if the consequences are truly inevitable, that will by the same token undermine my motivation to transform my life or take responsibility for who I am.

2.2 A "Subjective" Approach to Immortality

Put more generally, the problem is that arguments of the "inherently unsuited for eternity" sort make my particular character right now irrelevant to the conclusion. Such arguments are, in Kierkegaard's terminology, "objective," when they need to be "subjective." A "subjective" take on immortality is what Kierkegaard alludes to in saying that immortality needs to be thought in a way that will give me "a definite sense of *my* immortality."¹¹ So instead of asking "is there something inherent in the type 'human being' that makes it unsuited for immortality?", the question to ask is "am *I* suited for immortality?" It is a question that must be asked in the first person, and must be answered by considering my own character: "the question of immortality," Kierkegaard writes, "is a question of inwardness, which the subject by becoming subjective must put to himself. Objectively, the question cannot be

Footnote 10 continued

Bodington 2014: 253) From this proposition, they conclude things like: "if we can become a person we would now despise one step at a time,... then in the infinity of time, it will happen." (Thomson and Bodington 2014: 258) Now, whatever merit the proposition might have with regard to "hard facts"—wholly intrinsically characterized states—it seems to me that it does not apply to sequences of events where the order or timing of the sequence is definitive of the sequence. In fact, the proposition must be false because there are impossible sequences that, at some initial point, are both possible. For example, it is possible that I could flip a coin every day between now and the end of my life, and it would come up heads every time. It is also possible that I flip a coin every day between now and the end of my life, and it will come out heads 50 % of the time. And it's also possible that next Thursday I will decide that this is a stupid experiment and never flip another coin again for the rest of my life. Suppose that, in fact, the latter is what happens (after getting tails 5 days in a row). So while the first two sequences were both possible when I decided to start my coin-flipping experiment, neither possibility in fact happened. And if it turns out I am immortal and live for an infinite time, that does not change a thing. What was once possible became impossible and no amount of time will ever change it, let alone make it certain to occur. (I am indebted to Michael Nelson for helping me to clarify my thoughts on this subject).

Now it seems to me that becoming morally abhorrent step-by-step is a sequence of the sort where the order of events matters. And thus, at least on the face of it, it is not obvious why an immortal (who in other respects is like me) is condemned to cycle through a stage of moral odium. While it might now be a genuine possibility for me to become a despicable person, it might also be the case that something will happen next Thursday to preclude me from ever becoming such a person. At the very least, I cannot conclude that I am *certain* to become a despicable person from the mere conjunction of the current possibility and an immortal's life-span.

¹¹ See Kierkegaard (1997: 207; SKS 10: 215, translation modified by author).

answered at all, for it is not one that can be put objectively.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 145; *SKS* 7: 160)¹²

While Kierkegaard does not (and cannot) offer a general account of the conclusions to be drawn by thinking through immortality, he does think that we can identify certain recurring features in any serious effort to project oneself imaginatively into immortality. And while there are as many possible reactions to the thought of immortality as there are people, there are certain common types of response that are particularly relevant to clarifying the nature of subjectivity.

Two intimately related problems recur in any serious effort to understand what it would mean if I were immortal. First, I have to figure out what is essential to me as a particular being, so that I can tell whether I would continue to exist across the changes I am likely to undergo as my life is extended into eternity. This is a vital question because, as Williams puts it, “it should clearly be *me* who lives for ever.” (Williams 1973: 91) The question of immortality thus forces me to determine whether there is more to who I am than the particular desires, volitions, or habits that are focally important to me now. There is something “ludicrous,” Kierkegaard argues,

when people who have halftoyed with everything in fantasy, and been everything possible, ask the clergyman one day with concern whether they will actually stay the same in the beyond—never having been able in this life to be the same for a fortnight, and having gone through every transformation as a consequence. Immortality would be an extraordinary metamorphosis indeed if it could transform such an inhuman centipede into the eternal identity with itself, which is what ‘being the same’ means. (Kierkegaard 2009: 147; *SKS* 7: 162)

And so the first task that the problem of immortality presents me with is to determine: do I have enough of a character that it even makes sense to wonder whether I am still the same? If I do not, then “it is a futile, an indolent, a flabby thought to desire a life after death in the sense of a long life” (Kierkegaard 1997: 208; *SKS* 10: 216).

Second, to imagine myself as living an immortal life requires me to determine whether my character is centered on something that will be eternally worthwhile—

¹² This claim might strike one as rather hyperbolic—surely there is an objective fact of the matter whether a given individual is immortal or not. In saying that the question is subjective, as we know by now, Kierkegaard doesn’t mean that it’s up to each individual to make him- or herself immortal through a sheer act of will. Instead, Kierkegaard should be seen as following out the consequences of the fact that immortality involves my continuity as the person that I am. The subjective character of the question of immortality follows if we accept that what individuates a particular as a person is, in the words of John Locke, that “it is *self to itself*.” (Locke 1997: Book II, chapter xxvii, §10).

Leaving aside the particulars of John Locke’s account of personal identity (Locke argues that it turns on consciousness only—a proposal that Kierkegaard would reject), we can see Kierkegaard as embracing this same principle. I am immortal, because only I am in a position to tell if I am self to myself. This is a metaphysical or constitutive claim, not an epistemic claim. That is, the point is not that nobody else has access to the necessary evidence to determine whether I persist. The point instead is that I am the one who, by determining my identity, determines what it means for me to persist. And likewise, only I can really determine how the prospect of immortality should effect me. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes, “the consciousness of my immortality belongs to me alone.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 145; *SKS* 7: 160).

an aim worth pursuing forever, an affect worth having forever, and so on. If not, there is built into my identity a kind of despair—a recognition that I only contingently want to be who I am. Williams makes a similar point in requiring of any account of immortality that “the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all.” (Williams 1973: 91) That is, truly to have now an immortal existence is to be able, at all points in the future, to see my actions as oriented toward and expressing the same aims that I now have. Kierkegaard has a variety of names for this ideal—for instance, “uniting the moments of life in simultaneity” (Kierkegaard 2009: 292; *SKS* 7: 318), or experiencing “the moment as the eternal.” (Kierkegaard 1980a: 90; *SKS* 4: 393) That immortality only makes sense if my identity is founded on an eternally valid pursuit is the existential truth that Kierkegaard finds in the Christian doctrine of the judgment that ushers us into immortality:

Immortality is judgment. Immortality is not a continued life, a continued life as such in perpetuity, but immortality is the eternal separation between the righteous and the unrighteous; immortality is no continuation that results as a matter of course but a separation that results from the past. (Kierkegaard 1997: 205; *SKS* 10: 214)

This formulation is slightly misleading. Kierkegaard is not denying that immortality involves a continuation of life—if I am immortal, then “life indeed continues.” (Kierkegaard 1997: 208; *SKS* 10: 216) The point is rather that the mere continuation of life does not amount to immortality. The other potentially misleading aspect of this passage is its unapologetically Christian language of righteousness and unrighteousness. This might lead one to think that immortality hinges on complying with some dogmatic, pre-given, objective standard of rightness and wrongness. From Kierkegaard’s perspective, that would be precisely to get things backwards. What is “right” is what can give meaning or weight to a life eternally—that is, “the eternal is the difference between right and wrong” (Kierkegaard 1997: 208; *SKS* 10: 216) and not the other way around. Right and wrong are not specified prior to discovering which normative distinctions could ground my individual style of projecting into eternal life. Kierkegaard in fact mocks the idea that anyone could find a meaningful immortality in conforming to any objective standards of conduct—even religious ones: “such a molded man, this deleterious mimicking, thinks, of course, that he, too, is immortal—guaranteed by the fact that he is conducting himself exactly as many others before him conducted themselves.” Kierkegaard concludes that “a man’s whole salvation lies in becoming personality” (Kierkegaard 1975a: 3225; *SKS* 26: 346), meaning that I need to find in my personality and my individual way of pursuing meaning something that provides a normative distinction that I can embrace eternally.

Suppose, for example, that I think the thought of immortality and realize that I find intolerably boring the prospect of endlessly repeating the activities that now give structure to my life. For Kierkegaard, that is just the beginning of the inquiry. The next question is: what does my inevitable boredom show me about my character or personality? Perhaps I have allowed my life to consist in the pursuit of what

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin calls “self-exhausting” pleasures rather than defining myself in terms of “repeatable” pleasures. Or, perhaps I need the constant distraction of novelty to make it tolerable to go on being myself, as I lack a true passion for being the person that I am. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list of possibilities. But, in general, Kierkegaard would suspect that those who are persuaded by “inherently unsuited for eternity”-type arguments are confessing to a kind of despair. “The formula for all despair” Kierkegaard argues is “to despair over oneself,” or, more precisely, “in despair to will to be rid of oneself.” (Kierkegaard 1980b: 20; SKS 11: 135) Arguments of the “inherently unsuited for eternity” variety are persuasive to the degree they convince me that, within some finite time limit, I will no longer be able to tolerate being who I am. If I am lucky I will not reach that limit while I am still alive but, for Kierkegaard, that does not change the fact that the arguments persuade me that ‘I want to get rid of myself:’

no matter how much the despairing person avoids it, no matter how successfully he has completely lost himself... and lost himself in such a manner that the loss is not at all detectable—eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his condition was despair and will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self, and it will become obvious that he was just imagining that he had succeeded in doing so. (Kierkegaard 1980b: 21; SKS 11: 13613–7)

This is the reason that the mere thought of immortality can give rise to anxiety. I need not have an actual belief in my immortality (that is, I do not need to attach any degree of subjective probability to the prospect of my own immortality). It is enough that, in seriously projecting myself with my actual attitudes, affects, and aspirations into an immortal existence, I discover that my existence is structured by a kind of despair. That discovery can produce in me an anxiety independently of my belief in my own immortality. The anxiety, of course, will be intensified to the degree that I do believe in my immortality. But it does not require it.

For Kierkegaard, then, entertaining the thought of immortality not only reveals something to me about how I understand my self, but makes salient to me my affective relationship to my life: I learn whether I am well disposed enough toward who I am that I could imagine projecting myself forward indefinitely.¹³

3 Immortality, Responsibility, and Enhanced Subjectivity

Let me close with some concluding remarks on the questions of subjectivity—questions which have been in the background of the discussion of the thought of immortality. We wanted to know: what is that in virtue of which we can say that some particular set of moments (attitudes, dispositions, affects, etc.) constitutes a subjectivity in the eminent sense—a genuine individual? How will this avoid the

¹³ In this respect, Kierkegaard’s approach to immortality is similar to Nietzsche’s thought of the eternal recurrence, which poses the question “how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently?*” (Nietzsche 2001: §341).

morally unsavory aspects of an intensified subjectivity? And how can I take a decisive stand on my existence? In Sect. 1, we saw that the moments that make up my character or personality need not only to be synthesized with each other, but also must function coherently together. Otherwise, I am not a true subject, but a mere jumble of accidental and arbitrary attitudes. True subjectivity requires some way of owning my moments, and integrating them into a functioning economy of attitudes, affects, aims, and so on. In Sect. 2, we explored Kierkegaard's suggestion that the "thought of immortality" can help in the project of getting a sense for my being as a whole by giving me a stance or perspective from which I can try to clarify what is essential about myself. What it shows me is the need to incorporate an eternally normative dimension into my character. From this, Kierkegaard concludes that subjectivity in the eminent sense is found in the person who achieves diachronic stability in her character. She forges a style from the particular collection of attitudes, dispositions, affects, etc., that she inherits as accidents of birth and upbringing. And she succeeds in expressing this style in the ever-changing circumstances she encounters in the world.

Projecting myself into eternal life is, then, a tool for focusing my attention on the style of personality that is (or that I want to be) essential to being me. And the experience of anxiety in the face of the thought of immortality helps me better discern whether a) I have a genuine passion for an unconditional good (in the sense that it appears to me to be eternally pursuable), and b) I am so structured (i.e., my moments are synthesized in such a way) that I can coherently pursue this good. Anxiety thus also helps me take responsibility for myself, because by showing me the limitations of my ability to be myself, it gives me a focus as I endeavor to better establish or clarify my character.

For Kierkegaard, Socrates is the prime example of someone who used the thought of immortality to transform or remake his life. Socrates, Kierkegaard notes, based his life on the thought that it is "fitting for a man to risk the belief" in the immortality of the soul. (Plato, *Phaedo* 114d) "If the soul is immortal," Socrates reasoned,

it requires our care not only for the time we call our life, but for the sake of all time, and that one is in terrible danger if one does not give it that care. If death were escape from everything, it would be a great boon to the wicked to get rid of the body and of their wickedness together with their soul. But now that the soul appears to be immortal, there is no escape from evil or salvation for it except by becoming as good and wise as possible, for the soul goes to the underworld possessing nothing but its education and upbringing. (Plato, *Phaedo* 107c–d)

That thought of immortality defined for him the philosophical life, for "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (Plato, *Phaedo* 64a) by "free[ing] the soul from association with the body as much as possible" (Plato, *Phaedo* 65a).

On Kierkegaard's reading, the arguments Socrates offers for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* are a kind of afterthought to his passionate embrace of forging a life that could be lived without despair:

Socrates did not first try to gather some proofs for the immortality of the soul in order that he might then proceed to live, having faith on the basis of these proofs. The situation was just the reverse—he said: The matter of immortality, of whether it exists, concerns me so much that I unconditionally venture to stake the whole of my life on it, as though it were the most certain thing of all. That is how he lived. (Kierkegaard 2014: 48; SKS 23: 51)

Because the focus was on achieving responsibility for himself—a responsibility that he enjoyed in this life—Socrates in fact could be indifferent to the question whether he was literally immortal: “Socrates could not prove the immortality of the soul; he simply said: this matter occupies me so much that I will order my life as though immortality were a fact—should there be none, *eh bien*, I still do not regret my choice, for this is the only matter that concerns me.” (Kierkegaard 2014: 433; SKS 23: 425)

Kierkegaard concludes that, like Socrates, we need to find in our existing personality a passion for something that could serve as an eternal normative principle to form the basis for a coherent style of engaging with the world:

what a great help it would already be in [Christendom] if there were someone who spoke and acted like that: I do not know whether [Christianity] is true, but I will order my whole life as though it were, stake my life on it—then if it proves not to be true, *eh bien*, I still do not regret my choice, for it is the only matter that concerns me. (Kierkegaard 2014: 433; SKS 23: 425)

But Kierkegaard warns that the example of Socrates is of limited value—it “can be applied to the situation of becoming a [Christian]” only if “used cautiously.” (Kierkegaard 2014: 48; SKS 23: 51) The problem is that on the Socratic view, immortality is understood as the state of a disembodied soul—one which retains the capacity for reason and thought, but is troubled by “neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure.” (Plato, *Phaedo* 65c) Socrates’s assumption of a disembodied psyche is thus far removed from Kierkegaard’s fundamentally existentialist understanding of immortality.¹⁴

So how does an embodied being strive passionately for immortality? “The question arises,” Kierkegaard notes, how someone who believes in an immortal bodily existence “should conduct himself in speaking of his immortality, how he can speak from the standpoints of infinity and of finiteness simultaneously, and think these two together in one single instant.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 147; SKS 7: 162) The solution is to discover some evaluative difference which can engage both

¹⁴ In fact, Kierkegaard considers Socrates’s version of immortality to be an expression of a fundamental despair over existence—albeit a more authentic one than most people achieve. Only someone in despair over embodied existence could find consolation in the thought that some psychic portion of us will endure eternally after the death of our mortal bodies. By contrast, Kierkegaard’s concern with immortality “is not answered by showing that the eternal is immortal, because the eternal is after all not the mortal, and the eternal’s immortality is a tautology and a misuse of words.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 143; SKS 7: 158–159) Eternally extended existence in a radically and essentially changed form is not Kierkegaard’s concern. As he puts it, “immortality... is a matter of the immortality of a mortal.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 143; SKS 7: 158–159) The im-mortality that Kierkegaard is interested in, in other words, is a modification of mortal existence—a continuation of the kind of existence we now enjoy beyond the horizon of death.

psychic and somatic moments. Love is Kierkegaard's preeminent example of an attitude that can normatively articulate and structure an entire existence, but that cannot be understood except as it is expressed in a particular set of attitudes and affects, and that attaches to people in all their particularity. Thus, "amorous love is a qualification of subjectivity" (Kierkegaard 2009: 109; *SKS* 7: 124) because it only appears in virtue of the individuality of the lover and the beloved. That is why we talk about "enthusiastic lovers" as "immortals": "being a lover... is precisely a prerogative of subjectivity, for one does not become that objectively." (Kierkegaard 2009: 109; *SKS* 7: 123) If I find in me a love, a passion, which promises to make an entire lifetime (and more) worthwhile, then, I can help this passion infiltrate itself into my character and practices—and receive in return an evaluative difference that would never cease to meaningfully distinguish for me good and bad.

But if I am to take up this task, I necessarily have to proceed experimentally. "The imperfection of this earthly life, its earthliness," Kierkegaard notes, "is precisely that it cannot show this difference between the righteous and the unrighteous." (Kierkegaard 1997: 207; *SKS* 10: 215) I cannot know in advance, in other words, whether a particular passion will in the end free me of despair. But the thought of immortality gives me a starting point. I begin by dismissing certain moments of my personality as probably leading to boredom or despair. If the thought of repeating some activity or practice indefinitely fills me with dread, then it is not a likely candidate for forming an essential aspect of my identity. Other moments or aspects that initially might seem accidental, by contrast, may stand out as essential if we realize that life would be intolerable without them.

The thought of immortality, then, is one way to exercise my capacity for reflective self-evaluation. It assists me in recognizing, identifying with, and reinforcing those aspects of my overall make-up that allow me to express successfully a coherent and diachronically stable style of being in the world. In a consciousness "intensified" by the thought of eternity, I assess my "individual characteristics," and my "personality [is] clarified through this whole process." (Kierkegaard 1975b: 36; *SKS* 17: 259)¹⁵ The personality is clarified as I learn to sort out what could form the basis of an eternal distinction between good and bad, and what I would get bored of or grow indifferent to. The resulting ideal—the ideal of an integration of the factors that could stand the test of eternity—is the ideal of a fully developed subjectivity, of someone who has taken the peculiarities of her particular

¹⁵ See also Kierkegaard (1980a: 153; *SKS* 4: 453): "Even though Christianity teaches that a person must render an account for every idle word he has spoken, and we understand this simply as that total recollection of which unmistakable symptoms occasionally appear already in this life, even though the teaching of Christianity cannot be more sharply illuminated by any opposite than that of the Greek conception that the immortals first drank of Lethe in order to forget, yet it by no means follows that the recollection must become directly or indirectly comical—directly by recollecting ridiculous things or indirectly by transforming ridiculous things into essential decisions. Precisely because the accounting and the judgment are essential, what is essential will have the effect of a Lethe on whatever is unessential, while it also is certain that many things will prove to be essential that one had not expected to be so. The soul has not been essentially present in the drolleries of life, in its accidental circumstances, its nooks and crannies; hence all this vanishes, except for the soul that was essentially in this, yet for him it will scarcely have comical significance... In eternity, on the other hand, all contradiction is canceled, the temporal is permeated by and preserved in the eternal, but in this there is no trace of the comical."

personality, and forged them into a coherent and stable expression of value. It is “to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility.” (Kierkegaard 1980b: 5; *SKS* 11: 117) But this, Kierkegaard concludes, is a task that will consume an entire lifetime and “last as long as life itself” because it is “life’s task.” (Kierkegaard 2009: 137; *SKS* 7: 152)

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