Be(com)ing a Christian Is Not a Social Identity: Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Social Roles

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Abstract: This paper examines aspects of Kierkegaard’s authorship in relation to contemporary identity politics. Specifically, it argues that several pseudonymous voices in Kierkegaard’s works and identity politics share the contention that ethics presupposes concrete practical identities in order to function. Given this, one conception of liberalism, predicated on procedural equality, is not viable. However, it also argues that other voices in Kierkegaard’s oeuvres press beyond identities and proffer a radically new way to make sense of differences and equality, one predicated on infinity.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; identity politics; ethics; infinity

“But the ideality with regard to being a Christian is a continual inward deepening. The more ideal the conception of being a Christian, the more inward it becomes . . . . Being a Christian then undergoes a change that I will illustrate with a worldly analogy. Formerly, there were in Greece wise men, [sophists]. Then came Pythagoras and with him the reflection-qualification, reduplication, in connection with being a wise man; therefore, he did not even venture to call himself a wise man but instead called himself a (lover of wisdom, i.e., a philosopher). Was this a step backwards or a step forward; or was it not because Pythagoras had more ideally apprehended what it would really mean . . . to call oneself a wise man; therefore, there was wisdom in his not even having dared to call himself a wise man”

-Kierkegaard (1998, p. 137). (Greek translated into English)

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, many debates center on questions concerning identity. For example, some maintain that it is only by asserting one’s identity as a member of a particular group that entrenched injustices, social biases, and so on can be corrected. Though I think such politics has a vital role to play in addressing and redressing specific otherwise ignored or systemic issues, this essay argues that, for Kierkegaard, being/becoming a Christian cannot be understood in these terms. Precisely, I argue that Kierkegaard’s understanding of be(com)ing Christian is antithetical to identity politics as this paper understands it. This is because be(com)ing Christian, for Kierkegaard, subverts group identity by problematizing a particular model of action and intentionality in the name of infinity.

In Section 2, I set the stage, discussing how this text understands “identity politics.” In Section 3, I turn to several voices in Kierkegaard’s work and proffer a framework for action and practical rationality that I find in several of these voices. In Section 4, I examine Judge William, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous voice of the ethical in Either/Or. Specifically, and drawing on Sections 2 and 3, I use Judge William’s account of ethics as a critical ‘middle term’ that links Kierkegaard’s conception of action with identity politics. In Section 5, I adumbrate the criticisms that several of Kierkegaard’s works and voices make against Judge William’s conception of ethics and identity. Finally, in Section 6, I close by briefly discussing one implication of Kierkegaard’s corpus for identity politics. Specifically, I
discuss why, for Kierkegaard (and some other voices in his corpus), be(com)ing Christian cannot be assimilated into having an identity. I also discuss Kierkegaard’s (and several other pseudonyms) somewhat jarring contention that the only way to cope with difference entirely is by an anti-identity theology of the infinite.

2. ‘Identity Politics’: A Clarification and a Problem

“Identity politics” is a problematic term.² This can be seen in several different registers. First, within the philosophical literature, it often functions as a punching-bag for a variety of criticisms. Often challenges (to identity politics) fail to make sufficiently clear their object of critique, using ‘identity politics’ as a blanket descriptions that invokes a range of tacit political failings” (Heyes 2020, para. 4).

Second, commonly grouped projects under the label “identity politics” often have very different political goals and related strategies. For example, one central goal of the gay rights movement was to gain equal access to already-existent majority institutions such as marriage. In marked contrast, the goal of indigenous bands in, e.g., Canada is often to carve out an orthogonal political space that depends on distance from majority institutions (see Tully 2003, p. 517, for both examples; Taylor 1994, pp. 37–44), foregrounds a similar issue).

Third, the conditions that determine if some movement counts as “identity politics” are rather hard to discern. Indeed, it is unclear if all identities with political projects should be thought of in terms of identity politics. For example, Saba Mahmood (an anthropologist who has spent several years doing qualitative research on ‘Islamism’) wrote an ethnography based on her work with female participants in the Islamic revival movement in Egypt. She contends that this movement is hard to frame in terms of “identity politics.” This is because female participants “are critical of the process by which practices (e.g., wearing a hijab) that are supposed to be part of a large program of shaping ethical capacities lose this function and become little more than markers of identity” (Mahmood 2005, p. 51). Mahmood’s participants and her analysis go on to argue (in my mind powerfully) that the attempt to assimilate these practices into identity politics rests on an untenable conflation between the subjective and the objective register (ibid., pp. 40–57). One is not a participant in the Islamic revival movement because one is born into a Muslim family, lives in Egypt, is classified thus-and-so by others, etc. Instead, one must commit oneself to the normative core of Islam as the Islamic revival movement understand it. Suffice it to say, this is markedly different from being counted as “African American”, “woman”, “disabled”, and so on.

Fourth, related to the third point, what counts as a legitimate “political identity” is also hard to fully grasp. For example, consider if an economic class is a legitimate political identity. To begin, Nancy Fraser, a Marxian inspired critical theorist, chides many forms of identity politics for being “(l)argely silent on the subject of economic inequality, the identity model (Fraser’s conception of a politics based on recognition and identity) treats misrecognition as a free-standing cultural harm; many proponents simply ignore distributive injustice altogether and focus exclusively on efforts to change culture” (Fraser 2000, p. 110). She also notes that this dismissal of class has some dire implications, especially when one considers unpopular intersections. Hence, “(t)he result (of holding class in abeyance for especially the white working class) is a toxic environment that appears to validate a view, held by some progressives, that all Trump voters are ‘deplorables’ . . . Also reinforced is the converse view, held by many reactionary populists, that all progressives are incorrigible moralizers and smug elitists who look down on them while sipping lattes and raking in the bucks” (Fraser 2017, para. 43). Indeed, “toxic” is a regrettablly accurate word. Thus, commenting on the intersection between class and race, an op-ed in National Review opined that (t)he truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible . . . The white American underclass is in the thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles” (quoted in Chua 2018, p. 162. For further comment, see ibid., pp. 137–64).
Notice that such communities deserve to die because they are economically unproductive (cf. Clinton's remarks in India on the same sentiment, reported by Choi 2018). This supports Fraser's point that identity politics displace economic inequality. Instead of demanding economic justice for the working class (whites included), the working class is fragmented, and then a subsection is condemned to death because it is lazy, childish, stupid, etc. Notice also that such a view refuses to take seriously the absolute devastation (one might rightly call it “carnage”) that de-industrialization, financialization, and neoliberalism more generally has had on the working class (whites included) (this point is well-rehearsed in the social scientific literature. See, e.g., Murray 2013, passim; Putnam 2016, passim; Hochschild 2016, passim; Chua 2018, pp. 137–96; Carney 2019, passim).

Given this, the term “identity politics” needs clarification. Such clarification should make sense of both the sorts of demand made in the name of identity politics and what is distinctive about it. For this paper, I assume that all movements classified as “identity politics” have five core features. These features are: (i) the insistence on identity; (ii) classification and lexical ordering; (iii) the reality of this ordering; (iv) a critique of a certain form of liberal politics; and (v) an equivocation concerning what difference is, which can give rise to two different political goals. Let me examine each in turn.

(i) One distinctive feature of identity politics is that participants demand “recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbian that groups demand recognition” (Kruks 2001, p. 85). In other words, identity politics insist on recognizing difference rather than negating or abstracting from it.

(ii) Following from this, the differences involved are “link(ed to) the fetishistic practices of classifications, the forming of tables, and the consequent primacy of the visible with the creation of metaphysical and moral hierarchies” (Alcoff 1996, p. 5). The primary point of Linda Alcoff, a philosopher deeply interested in the intersection of race, philosophy, and identity, can be reconstructed as follows. Assume that an object has specific properties. Within a particular metaphysical tradition, a critical project is differentiating these properties into essential and accidental. An essential property is a property that the object necessarily has. In turn, a classificatory schema is used to track and order such essential properties. For example, it is an essential property of a cat that it is warm-blooded. In effect, any x that is not warm-blooded cannot count as a cat. In turn, this property (among others) ensures that the cat falls under the natural kind mammal, as this kind is merely a way to highlight a particular homeostatic property cluster that all and only certain animals (cats included) necessarily have. Moreover, such a classificatory schema orders the properties in a very specific way. In effect, one can move from mammal to cat via adding specific differences, i.e., properties that partition the set of animals that are mammals into, e.g., land animals and water animals (and so on). And, conversely, one can move from cat to mammal by a process of abstraction wherein certain specific differences are abstracted away from. Finally, accidental properties are properties that are not specific differences and so do not affect classification. For example, a cat might be hairless. However, this does not affect its counting as a mammal. Hence, it is an accident that a cat is hairless.

When we turn to the social world, matters are far more complex and controversial. For example, one might take heterosexual attraction to be an essential property of sexual desire (cf. American Psychiatric Association 1968, DSM II, p. 44, for something like this view). Given this, the social kind gay is either viewed as irrelevant or else ‘pathological.’ It might be irrelevant because it is an accidental property and does not fit into the classification. Alternatively, it might be viewed as ‘pathological’ because it cuts against the classificatory schema employed. In either case, a statistical norm (e.g., most people have heterosexual attraction) is used to inform a classificatory schema. Then this schema becomes normative because deviation from it implies either the valorization of accidents or dysfunction (cf. American Psychiatric Association 1968, DSM II, p. 44). Notice also that this selection of which properties are ‘essential’ directly impacts one’s projects, goals, preferences, and so
on. For example, classifying a gay man’s sexuality as ‘pathological’ might cause him to actively suppress his sexual desires, with the goal of becoming ‘normal.’

(iii) However, although the distinction between accidental and essential properties in the social world is often arbitrary, this does not make the classificatory schemas ‘unreal.’ Indeed, they (sadly) have very real implications for the people so classified. Indeed, such classifications have “political, sociological, and economic salience . . . Race (for example) tends towards opening up or shutting down job prospects . . . available places to live . . . reaction from police, credence from jurors” (Alcoff 1996, p. 6). In other words, deploying a classificatory schema (regardless of how arbitrary it is) has knock-on effects for people so classified. Once one has devised a racial taxonomy of human beings, claims like, e.g., “Jews are sub-human parasites” begin to have genuine and horrifying consequences. We return to this in Section 5.

Following from this, (iv), advocates of identity politics often contend that redressing such classificatory injustices cannot be done within liberal politics. By “liberal politics”, I mean the contention that the state’s primary duty is to secure “individual autonomy, by granting equal rights to citizens” (Fukuyama 2018, p. 53; see also Taylor 1994, pp. 51–61). Given this, liberal politics cannot redress classificatory injustice because, plausibly, formal equal rights do not remove the effects of classification. For example, the equal right to a trial by jury is cold comfort to someone who, due to his classification, is automatically assumed to be a ‘super-predator’ (Kendi 2019, pp. 69–80, for further discussion).

Drilling deeper, the contention that liberal politics cannot redress classificatory injustices has been supported in at least two ways. One way is to argue that the inability is a byproduct of “two key Western ideologies: individualism and objectivity. Individualism holds that we are each unique . . . Objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias” (DiAngelo 2018, p. 9). However, I find this approach both self-stultifying and highly Eurocentric. It is self-stultifying because, if objectivity is simply an ideological product, as all positions are equally biased, it becomes terribly unclear why Robin DiAngelo, a key theorist of identity politics, bothers to cite statistics concerning discrepancies between groups of people. Indeed, I am unclear why her claim that certain groups are marginalized, disenfranchised, etc., is any more (or less) licit than the counterclaim that these groups are not. It is Eurocentric because it seems to presuppose that the only group of people who have ever cared about the uniqueness of individuals are Europeans and heirs to ‘Western’ civilization. In turn, such a presupposition can easily (and ironically, given DiAngelo’s goals) function as a justification for imperialism—i.e., “white men are saving brown women from brown men (or their repressive cultures, or themselves)” (Spivak 1994, p. 92) precisely by ensuring that their uniqueness is protected.

The other way to argue that liberal politics is unable to address classificatory injustice is to claim that this inability stems from a particular conception of political equality. Charles Taylor articulates this view with remarkable clarity (Taylor 1994). To begin, Taylor, a philosopher who has a deep interest in identity politics, notes that one way to cash out political equality is in terms of procedural equality. This view contends that “a liberal society is one that as a society adopts no particular substantive view about the ends of life. The society is, rather, untied around the strong procedural commitment to treat people with equal respect” (ibid., p. 56). Moreover, what underwrites this demand for equal respect is “autonomy, that is . . . the ability of each person to determine for himself or herself a view of the good life” (ibid., p. 57).

However, procedural equality faces at least three objections from advocates of identity politics. First, procedural equality suggests that any group goals, or community-based commitments, are at best irrelevant and at worst antithetical to procedural equality. To use Taylor’s case, Quebec’s government takes it as “axiomatic . . . (that) the survival and flourishing of French culture in Quebec is a good” (ibid., p. 58). Given this, Quebec’s government codified a series of laws whose goal is to protect Quebec’s French culture. For example, francophone parents must send their children to French speaking schools. However, these laws seem antithetical to procedural equality as they “can be thought to be
inherently discriminatory . . . Law 101 (in Quebec) forbid . . . francophones and immigrants to send their children to English-language schools, but allow Canadian anglophones to do so” (ibid., p. 55). Thus, a tension emerges between a commitment to French culture and individual choice concerning schools. Second, procedural equality still ends up encoding a non-neutral view of human life, i.e., that what is important about human life is the ability to decide on and pursue one’s own goals. As Taylor notes, this flies in the face of other political configurations whose purpose might be, e.g., to promote justice or piety (ibid., pp. 61–63). Finally, and third, procedural equality levels differences. In effect, all features of a person are reduced to life-choices, and all life-choices are equal in that they all demand equal respect. This viewpoint suspends the effects of classificatory injustices. And this is because such injustices spring precisely from facticity, i.e., features of one’s life (being disabled, African American, etc.) that one does not choose. Moreover, procedural equality does not have much, if any, normative content. Exactly because procedural equality abstains from deciding between different conceptions of the good, it cannot offer individuals any guidance concerning which projects, life-choices, etc., are worthy of pursuit. In turn, this lack of normative content readily lends itself to a reductive account of humans as “‘rational utility maximizers’: they are individuals who use their formidable cognitive abilities to benefit their self-interest” (Fukuyama 2018, p. 12). Such a view of human beings struggles to make sense of why speaking as an x and recognition are politically salient projects in the first place (ibid., pp. 12–24).

(v) Finally, discussions of identity politics are often marked by a strange equivocation concerning differences. This can be seen by considering the seemingly incompatible political goals that some advocates of identity politics often make. Specifically, some advocates “demand that society treats its (a non-majority group’s) members identically to the way that the dominant group in society were treated, (whereas other advocates of identity politics) assert a separate identity for its members and demand respect of them as different from mainstream society” (Fukuyama 2018, p. 107–emphasis in original). Let us elaborate on these two political goals and then reflect on how this relates to differences.

On the one hand, some advocates of identity politics argue that a proper political goal is, ultimately, to eliminate the identity in question. This is because the identity in question is simply a product of marginalization, disenfranchisement, unfairly unequal treatment, etc. For example, it can be assumed that being classified as a woman always betokens being “subordinated in a society due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities” (Haslanger 2012, p. 8). Given this, “justice requires that . . . we should change social relations so there be no more women (or men). (This will not require mass femicide! Males and females may remain even where there are no men or women)” (ibid., pp. 8–9, though Haslanger’s entire book is an elaboration of this thesis). Given this, insisting on speaking as a woman is best viewed epistemically. In effect, such an identity gives one access to the unjust consequences of a particular classification (e.g., that women are essentially ‘feminine’ and that this requires them to be submissive to men). However, the end goal is to reach a point where females are treated identically to males (the dominant group), and so the classification woman is emptied.

On the other hand, other advocates of identity politics insist that its goal is the recognition of their group by the majority in their intra-group terms. Under this view, recognition is “the affirmation of positive qualities of subjects or groups” (Honneth 2012, p. 80). The demand that the majority recognizes the group on its own favorable terms stems from the fact that “self-esteem is a by-product of public recognition” (Fukuyama 2018, p. 100). In effect, one’s sense of identity partly springs from one’s sense of self as an actor in the social world. However, acting in the social world requires that one be recognized in a specific way by the majority group. For example, an indigenous band might try to secure its right to its ancestral land by, e.g., referring to a tradition that claims that a god gave it to them. However, if this is misrecognized and recast in terms of, e.g., superstitious myths about mystical origins (cf. Boghossian 2006, pp. 1–5, for a view that casts indigenous people’s ‘stories’ as mere myths with no political import), their action cannot work. Given
this, the goal is not eliminating these identities but affirming them. Indeed, the demand that one’s indigenous band be given political autonomy is not a demand that one’s band be eliminated. Instead, it is a demand that the majority recognize and affirm the group’s unique political arrangements, positive contributions, etc. (cf. Kendi 2019, pp. 166–80, for a similar defense of racialized spaces).

Finally, these two different political end goals seem to me to spring from “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 1897, para. 1). This is because double-consciousness is a product of the fact that “(o)ur identities are not just imposed on us by society. Often, we create positive and meaningful identities that enable us to better understand and negotiate the social world” (Alcoff et al. 2006, p. 6). Given this, differences (and the identities they relate to) are themselves in an unstable position. Per (ii), differences are being generated by the classificatory schema. However, they can also be utilized by individuals to make sense of their lives and social world. Indeed, their sense of themselves may spring precisely from such differences. This equivocation, caused by this understanding of differences, places identity politics in an unstable position. Hence, some advocates of identity politics demand perfect equality (there will be no women or men) and others insist on differences (Quebec wants to preserve its non-English speaking status).

As we shall see, Kierkegaard, in the guise of Judge William, offers a way out of this aporia (see Section 4). However, for other voices in Kierkegaard’s work, Judge William’s supposed ‘out’ is a dead end and the only way to resolve this tension is to rethink differences and identities themselves (Sections 5 and 6). However, before we can examine this account, we need to clarify how many works of Kierkegaard understand practical rationality. We turn to this presently.

3. Practical Reasoning: A Model for Several of Kierkegaard’s Works

In this section, I proffer a broad interpretation of how Kierkegaard (and several pseudonyms) understood action and practical rationality. Such an account is required as it will clarify many of the complicated relationships that works of Kierkegaard have with advocates of identity politics. Moreover, it will also provide a framework that can help make sense of many of the criticisms that Kierkegaard’s corpus makes against identity and politics.

To begin, the many voices that make up Kierkegaard’s authorship often defy any unified or univocal reading of specific concepts (a point that becomes extremely clear in Section 5). However, usually there are broader features that recur between various works. These features recur partly because arguments, perspectives, etc., presuppose some common ground in order to communicate. Evans and Stack, two Kierkegaard scholars, argue that one shared piece of common ground in many works in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre is an account of action and practical rationality. Specifically, both argue that a broadly Aristotelian account is often presupposed by many pseudonyms in Kierkegaard’s corpus (Stack 1968, 1971; Evans 1991). I stress here, and make clear in Section 5, that this presupposition is often relentlessly attacked by other voices in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre. Regardless, I follow Stack and Evans in reconstructing many of Kierkegaard’s works in these terms, if only so that I can pinpoint later how other voices attack such an Aristotelian account.

Since I assume this Aristotelian reading, practical syllogisms will play a vital role in Kierkegaard’s work. For us, a practical syllogism is:

1. Major Premise: All x of kind K should ϕ (e.g., all people who are women refugees should go to their asylum hearing)
2. Minor Premise: Person P is a kind K (e.g., Person P is a woman refugee)
3. Ergo: Person P ϕ’s (e.g., Person P goes to her asylum hearing)

Let us examine this more carefully.
To begin, the practical syllogism presupposes the existence of a kind K as a middle term that links together the major and minor premises. Kierkegaard stresses this. Thus, commenting on the novel *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard notes that “(a)ction must always occur through the psychological middle term” ([Kierkegaard 1978](#), p. 41). Hence, a person’s actions, projects, and, ultimately, their understanding of themselves as agents depend on social kinds embedded in classifications. This dependency can be seen in terms of both description and agential action. For description, I make sense of action (my own and other people’s) by characterizing it in terms of a major premise and a minor premise. For agential action, people perform specific actions precisely because they understand themselves as an instance of kind K and assume that there are specific roles, duties, etc., that this kind entails. Let us elaborate this further by examining (1) the major premise, (2) the minor premise, and (3) the action, respectively.

(1) For the major premise, one question is how the kind K is embedded in the social world. One plausible answer is that the kind in question is an interactive social kind such that (self-)ascribing it alters how people act, interact, and interpret each other and themselves ([Hacking 1999](#), pp. 100–24). Hence, classifications change how agents act and interact with each other. Let me elaborate.

First, one critical feature of interactive kinds is that people modify their behavior when someone is said to instance one kind or another. To see this, let us borrow an example from Ian Hacking, a philosopher of science ([e.g., Hacking 1999](#), pp. 31–33). Consider what occurs when a female is classified as a woman refugee or an economic migrant. The former classification entails that the female has a right to seek asylum, that she should not be deported back to her country of origin, that the state should seek to guarantee that she receives a particular economic, cultural, social, etc., support. Moreover, her interactions with people in her new country will also be marked by her instancing the woman refugee kind. Thus, she is likely to interact with human rights lawyers, social workers, and so on, each of whom has a duty to ensure that her fundamental human rights are respected. Finally, given these interactions, her understanding of her situation and herself will also shift. For the former, she will likely come to view her new state’s legal apparatus as working to protect and help her. Indeed, she may well look forward to her asylum hearing. As for her self-understanding, she is likely to begin to reinterpret her past experiences according to how others treat her. Thus, rather than viewing her displacement as an unavoidable tragedy, say, she might start to understand it as an unjust expulsion.

In marked contrast, a female classified as an economic migrant has no such rights or assurances. Indeed, she may well face the threat of deportation. Moreover, in her new country, she is likely to interact with police officers, border patrol agents, and so on, each of whom has a duty to enforce immigration law. Finally, given this, her understanding of her situation and herself will also change. As for her situation, she will likely come to view the state’s legal apparatus as hostile to her project of living in a new country. Indeed, she will probably work very hard to avoid or minimize any interaction with agents of the state, and dread having to go to court. Regarding her self-understanding, she may come to increasingly think of herself as either a criminal or else as unfairly persecuted for simply wanting to make a living.

Bracketing out the complex sociological, legal, and ethical dimensions of people moving from country A to country B, there are three critical points to make. One, clearly, is that classification, i.e., what social kind an individual is said to instance, affects how people interact with her. Two, these varied interactions are likely to shift how she understands herself and her situation. Finally, three, following from this, fights about such classifications are unsurprisingly frequent. If a female can change her classification from economic migrant to woman refugee, her entire social world is transformed.

Second, these changes in how agents interact with one another can be understood in terms of status function. A status function has the form “X counts as Y in C . . . where Y names something more than the sheer physical features of the objected named by the X term (and C stands for the relevant context)” ([Searle 1995](#), p. 44). Bracketing several
elements in the account of John Searle, a key social ontologist, the core for my purposes is as follows. One, the X term refers to the brute physical features of a person, e.g., that she is 5 feet tall, from a particular country, and so on. In marked contrast, two, the Y term is a social kind term ascribed to the individual. Moreover, three, this ascription cannot simply be ‘read off’ or derived from the X term. Indeed, it is quite possible that, for two females moving from country A to B, one will be ascribed the kind refugee and the other the kind economic migrant. Pursuant to this, four, the Y, or social kind, term ascribes to the person a certain status within the social world. In turn, this status changes the way individuals socially respond to her. Finally, and most critically, five, the Y, or social kind, term is established and maintained via “continued human cooperation in the specific forms of recognition, acceptance, and acknowledgment of a new status to which a function is assigned” (ibid., p. 40).

Given this third, it is unsurprising that classification affects how people respond to one another. In effect, a classification counts a particular individual as an instance of a social kind. This “counting as” is underwritten by recognitional practices at work within a specific social world. Moreover, this form of recognition is not “mere words or symbolic expressions, because only the corresponding modes of comportment can produce the credibility so normatively significant for the recognized subject… we should speak of recognition as a ‘stance’ (Haltung), i.e., an attitude realized in concrete action” (Honneth 2012, p. 80). A woman refugee may look forward to her asylum hearing exactly because the judge, her lawyer, etc., will take concrete action to ensure that her status in the country is secure.

Fourth, and further following Searle (Searle 1995, pp. 43–51), these status functions are best thought of as constitutive rules. Such constitutive rules specify both which conditions must be met for some X to count as Y and clarify what normative structures and strictures determine the possible actions of and interactions with this Y. A bit of wood can count as a knight on the condition that one is playing chess. For this bit of wood to count as a knight, it is normatively entailed that the piece should move in an ‘L’ shape. In a markedly similar way, a female can count as a woman refugee only when several conditions, laid out in, e.g., international human rights law, are fulfilled. Once the female counts as a woman refugee, it is normatively entailed that she should go to her asylum hearing. Moreover, given this, the semantic content of the kind term and the normativity that determines possible actions and interactions with it are directly connected. The meaning of “knight” is that it is the piece that moves in an ‘L’ shape in a game of chess; the meaning of “woman refugee” is (partly) that it is a female who has the right to seek asylum after being expelled from a country.

Fifth, given this, the normativity of the social kind that the major premise spells out is internal to it. In other words, it is because someone counts as an instance of the kind woman refugee that she and others have duties, roles, rights, and so on. The “should” in “all women refugees should go to their asylum hearing”, and the related duty to secure her status is not an imposition on the social kind woman refugee. Instead, it is partly constitutive of what it means to count as a woman refugee.

Finally, sixth, assuming that these constitutive rules are widely shared and understood within a community, the major premise makes people’s actions intelligible from a third-personal, or observer’s, perspective. To change our example, de Silentio (Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author of Fear and Trembling) stresses, at several points, that a tragic hero’s situation is still intelligible third-personally. This is because tragedy presupposes that the two roles that come into conflict in the drama are ubiquitous features of the social world (e.g., Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 57–58). Partly, this is simply a correlate of how these roles work. For example, all kings should lead their people to glory in war, and all fathers should protect their children. Provided that these rules for kingship and fatherhood are widely held within a community, the tragic tension Agamemnon finds himself in is readily intelligible. Agamemnon’s two different social roles come into conflict in the example of sailing to Troy, and he must choose between them. Critically, though, which role or kind has
lexical priority is up to him (is he a king first or a father first?) and his subsequent actions are coherent and clear. Moreover, explanations such as the quest for a military victory, excuses like the need to appease Airtimes by killing his daughter, etc., are all made available to him. Hence, the Greeks did not take Agamemnon’s murder of Iphigenia as some form of insanity, arbitrary caprice, etc. Instead, Agamemnon’s action was immediately intelligible precisely because it still relied on widely held major premises. It is tragic because it is a no-win situation in which Agamemnon must prioritize one role.

(2) For the minor premise, two possibilities are viable. These are first-personal self-ascription of kinds and third-personal ascriptions of kinds. In other words, a person might insist that she instances K social kind, or others might classify her as a K. Though we develop this fully in Section 4, one key aspect, for now, of this model is that the (self)-ascription of a minor premise makes action intelligible and gives rise to a set of reasons an agent can draw from when she acts. In effect, I make sense of my own or someone else’s actions by placing them under a description wherein they/I are taken as an instance of some already given social kind, and their/my behaviors are described in such a way that they flow from this kind membership. For example, a female goes to a particularly grand building. She places her hand on a book. She says words to a person in a robe with a hammer, and so on. By ascribing the kind ‘woman refugee’ to the female and the kind ‘judge’ to the person in the robe, the situation is made readily intelligible—e.g., it is a hearing concerning her petition for asylum.

(3) For the ‘ergo’, notice that the result of the practical syllogism is intelligible action. This is to be expected. In effect, the social kind in the major premise is constitutively normative. Given this, it is associated with specific roles, duties, etc. Indeed, its meaning stems partly from precisely these roles, obligations, and so on. Since this is so, when the subject is ascribed a kind term in the minor premise, the actions she then performs flow precisely from this. Hence, an intelligible action is described in terms of a practical syllogism wherein the middle term connects people’s actions with the normative content of the major premise. Since a person instances the woman refugee kind, she has the right to seek asylum. Her going to court and pleading her case before a judge is her actualizing this right in practice.

4. Ethics and Identity: The Judge vs. Procedural Equality

With a broadly Aristotelian account of action in view, let us turn to Judge William, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous voice for the ethical in Either/Or Part II (e.g., Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 155–338) and some scattered remarks by Kierkegaard. I argue that many aspects of Judge William’s account of the ethical sphere presage, clarify, and support identity politics. Indeed, as we shall see, for Judge William, ethics without identity is not viable.

The alignment between Judge William and identity politics can partly be seen by noting that central targets of Judge William’s attacks include “(i)ndividualism, rationalism . . . a drive towards total liberty and total equality; such ideals seemed to have made it impossible to live a communal and fraternal life” (Walker 1982, p. 52). Moreover, Judge William criticizes “Sartre and liberal-libertarian views of the selfhood, the notion of self-choice (that) has become a cultural icon” (Mooney 1995, p. 13). Relatedly, he has no truck with accounts that make “choosing oneself . . . (into) pursuing a Rawlsian rational ‘life-plan.’” (ibid., p. 14). Indeed, Judge William’s discussion of the ethical “undermines the sharp distinction between public and private life” (ibid., p. 14). Let us elaborate on this set of criticisms further, paying particular attention to how it and identity politics harmonize.

To begin, one critically important feature of Judge William’s account is that he insists on speaking as a married man. Indeed, he stresses that being recognized as a married man is of paramount importance for him because it is “my most cherished, precious, and in a certain sense most meaningful occupation in life” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 170). He alludes to this identity at several points in his discussion (e.g., ibid., pp. 9, 37, 63, etc.). Notice that this insistence aligns Judge William with feature (i) of identity politics outlined in Section 2.
In both cases, being recognized in terms of a social kind is emphasized as fundamental to the person in question.³

Judge William then turns to why such recognition is critical for the ethical sphere. Specifically, he insists that his identification as a married man “firmly and imperturbably attaches him” to my wife, to my children, and to this life, whose beauty I shall always praise” (ibid., p. 208). Moreover, abstracting from this specific social role, Judge William further contends that

the word ‘duty’ can prompt one to think of an external relation, (however,) the very derivation of the word suggests an internal one; for that which is incumbent upon me, not as this individual with accidental characteristics but in accordance with my true being, certainly has the most intimate relation with myself. That is, duty is not something laid upon but something that lies upon. When duty is regarded in this way, it is a sign that the individual is oriented within himself. (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 254)

Notice that identification with a social kind and duty has a critically important relationship for Judge William. Specifically, for him, the normative content of a specific duty springs precisely from the social kind one identifies with. Indeed, plausibly, the normative content of a particular duty derives from a social kind. The major premise clarifies the normative content of this social kind. For example, “All married men should be attached to their wife and children” partly explains both the meaning of “married man” and displays its normative core. Moreover, Judge William further stresses that, without this major premise and middle term, one is left with “an illusion (of a self) that is completely abstract and devoid of content” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 222). I call this illusion of a self an “abstract self.” For Judge William, such a stipulated abstract self (A) is philosophically problematic, (B) misunderstands choice, and (C) levels difference. Let me take each in turn.

(A) To clarify the philosophical problems, it is crucial to notice that Judge William insists that Aristotle’s account of duty and justice is “superior to the modern one, which bases justice upon duty, the abstract-categorical; he [Aristotle] bases it upon the social” (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 322). The Judge adds that the modern account he has in mind derives from Kantian ethics (ibid). Given this, plausibly, William is accusing modern ethics of empty formalism. In effect, the supposed duty that derives solely from the abstract self cannot do any real work. This is because we have no way of connecting a duty derived from an abstract self with concrete normative content (e.g., ibid., pp. 254–55). To see this, consider that I can redescribe “murder” as “the just application of state power to discipline a criminal.” Notice that each of these is grounded in the same basic fact– i.e., X person was killed. However, depending on which description I understand the fact in terms of, its moral significance shifts. Critically, there is nothing in the fact that ‘tells me’ how I should describe it in the first place. Thus, “buying a cup of coffee” can be redescribed as “willfully exploiting the developing world”, “sexual harassment” can be reinterpreted as “a flirtatious exchange”, etc. Given this, a duty derived from an abstract self cannot work because I can always redescribe the relevant empirical features so that I can do whatever I would like to. Since any course of action can be brought into accord with a supposed duty, none of these courses are determined by it (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, § 201). Thus, without a connection between ethics and identity, we have no way to orient ourselves in that we have no reason to describe the relevant empirical features in one way rather than another.

(B), Following this, Judge William points out that the attempt to make sense of ethics without identity misunderstands the concept of choice, especially self-choice. Thus, Judge William points out that “if what I chose did not exist but came into existence absolutely through choice, then I did not choose– then I created. But I do not create myself–I choose myself” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 215). Partly, Judge William is stressing the importance of facticity. In this, again, there is a deep alignment between his account and identity politics, as discussed in Section 2. Indeed, Judge William further clarifies feature (ii), the lexical ordering of properties that classification enables, and feature (iii), the reality of this ordering. However, Judge William also begins to push identity politics in a particular
direction. Specifically, he begins to internalize the lexical order (a point we return to in a moment). In any case, let me take (ii) and (iii) in turn.

For classification (feature (ii)), Judge William points out that, without any ordering of properties, preferences, etc., the abstract self is “a nonentity and (is) something that exists only in relation to others. You are only in relation to others” (ibid., p. 159). In other words, an abstract self is unable to order his properties, projects, goals, etc., because all “have equal right to emerge, equal right to demand satisfaction” (ibid., p. 225). Moreover, a person without such an ordering casts his “essence into a multiplicity, so that you actually become several” (ibid., p. 160. See also ibid. 224). In other words, an abstract self without an identity is nothing over and against its multiplicity of roles and related ascriptions. Indeed, “everything really belongs to him (an aesthete) equally accidentally” (ibid., p. 260). Given this, choice is (at best) arbitrary caprice that does not reflect the abstract self at all. Moreover, for Judge William, the only way for a person to make coherent, rational choices is by ordering his properties, projects, and so on. This ordering depends on resources that are independent of his various itches and urges. This is partly because, as Judge William noted, there is nothing in the cravings and urges that tell the abstract self which ones are salient, worthy of pursuit, vital for it, etc. Given this, identifying with a middle term or social kind, clarified by a major premise, provides an independent normative criterion that enables one to order one’s properties, projects, etc. According to Judge William, it is only within this framework that the concept of choice makes sense.

For the reality of the lexical priority (feature (iii)), Judge William points out that a conception of an abstract self understands that the “whole distinction (between essential and accidental properties) is illusory . . . (because such abstract selves) do not take on this (aspects of their facticity) ethically, as a task, as something for which you are responsible” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 260). However, this understanding is not sustainable. This is for two reasons. One such a view avoids or ignores facticity. Pace this, a person is always already involved in a set of relationships, has a particular body, a location in the social world, etc. (cf. e.g., ibid., pp. 214–15). Such avoidance of facticity distorts the actual human condition to the point of misrecognition. Secondly, trying to live as an abstract self leads to despair. Though this is a very complex topic for Judge William, one key point is psychological (ibid., pp. 271–72). To wit, the conception of autonomy that such a denial of facticity gives rise to ends up recasting all projects, relationships, properties, and so on as inherently repressive and limiting. However, since people are social animals, this sort of militant distance from others leads us to despair.

(C), Given (A) and (B), it becomes clear that Judge William and identity politics share and adumbrate a critique of procedural political equality and so a particular conception of liberalism (feature (iv) of identity politics). This critique occurs in at least two registers.

One, Judge William (and identity politics) are deeply skeptical of the claim that we can sharply differentiate between a person’s conception of the good life and politics as recognition. Thus, Judge William flatly notes that “(t)he self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 262). This contention makes perfect sense, given the above two sections. Our conception of ourselves as agents in the social world turns precisely on social and civic recognition. Without this recognition, one cannot act, let alone pursue one’s conception of the good. This is because the required description that casts, e.g., telling ‘mythic’ stories as political action may not be in place. Moreover, yet again, Judge William also insists on facticity. Thus, he notes that a self is always a “specific individual with these capacities, these inclinations, these drives, these passions, influenced by this specific social milieu, as a specific product of a specific environment” (ibid., p. 251). Granting this, one’s conception of the good life will already be marked by one’s social milieu, one’s drives, one’s race, one’s gender, etc. Hence, for Judge William (and identity politics), procedural equality’s claim that it is neutral between conceptions of the good life refuses to take facticity (and classificatory injustice) seriously. Conceptions of the good life and politics as recognition are deeply interconnected, a point Aristotle stressed (Aristotle 1984, Politics, Book I, lines 1–10).
Two, there is an additional argument that Kierkegaard offers that, I think, clarifies and deepens both Judge William’s and identity politics’ attack on procedural equality. Specifically, in his commentary on the novel Two Ages, Kierkegaard argues that procedural equality is best cashed out as “numerical equality” (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 108) between abstractions, e.g., citizens, actors, entities with dignity, etc. Indeed, it is only by postulating some abstract core of humanness that one can (claim to) be indifferent to various conceptions of the good life, human success, flourishing, etc., while still respecting people.

However, for Kierkegaard, such numerical equality is antithetical to the human condition. This is partly because it nullifies differences. In this, I take Kierkegaard to be making an exact logical point, based on Leibnitz’s principle of the indiscernibility of identity. Leibnitz’s principle states:

\[ x = y \rightarrow \forall P(P(x) \leftrightarrow P(y)) \]  

(read: If \( x \) equals \( y \), then for all Properties \( P \), \( x \) instances \( P \) if and only if \( y \) instances \( P \)).

Let “\( x \)” and “\( y \)” be variables that range over human beings. Let “\( P \)” be a social property that a person with a specific social role, a religious avocation, a gender, etc., instances. Given this, (LP) clarifies that for two people to be equal, they must share all properties in common. Conversely, by contrapositive, (LP) also shows that if two people do not share all the same properties in common, then they are not equal. Given this, the only way for procedural equality to work is to postulate some sort of bare abstract properties (e.g., dignity, autonomy, rights, etc.) that are constitutively political and essential to all and only to human beings and to stipulate further that other properties people instance are not relevant for politics.

Now, consider that person A has a property that she takes as relevant to politics and does not share with B. This implies that A and B are not equal, or it means that the property A has and B lacks is not relevant for politics.\(^4\)

However, these logical options quickly become socially and politically problematic (even, quite literally; deadly), as theorists focused on identity show. It might lead to some inegalitarian arguments that deny A equality based on this property. Sadly, this move has been made. For example, someone’s instancing the property of being a woman or being an African American implied that one could not be equal to men or whites. However, one hopes that such overt denials of equality do not occur so explicitly, so I bracket this.

Alternatively, it might lead to the contention that the property that A has does not matter for politics. However, such a denial is precisely what is at issue for A. Merely stipulating that a property A takes as politically important is not begs the question against A. Moreover, here we see an aspect of what Kierkegaard meant by leveling (Kierkegaard 1978, pp. 86–96). In effect, a property which A has is ignored so that she can be equal. Worse, the property might be forcibly removed from her by, e.g., radically altering her place in the social world (and related self-understanding). This quickly has dire political implications. For example, the view that we must change A’s social world so that she does not have the property readily lends itself to assimilationist rhetoric. This rhetoric reflects “the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group” (Kendi 2019, p. 24). In effect, since the only way for A and B to be equal is for A and B to be the same, it follows that advocating ‘enrichment’ programs designed to make A more like B are critical. Such programs would focus on remaking the social world so that a property A has is nullified in the name of equality. Obviously, such a contention is overtly hostile to any difference that A might have from B. Moreover, such a contention easily underwrites the tragic history of Euro–US imperialism, where the goal is making A more like B by, e.g., making their social world more like the Euro–US one. The history of such a project has been devastating.

With all this in view, we can turn to feature (v) of identity politics, the equivocation concerning differences. Recall that it was argued that this stems from double-consciousness,
in that crafting a self often relies on classifications that are then rejected as unjust. I argue that Judge William can dissolve this tension by emphasizing one point.

To see this clearly, it is important to return to two distinct ways in which a minor premise and an agent can be related, which I briefly flagged in Section 3, (2). Specifically, there is a fundamental difference between third personal ascriptive practices and first personal ones. In other words, someone being classified as, e.g., homosexual by a psychologist and someone ascribing to themselves membership in the LGBTQ+ changes the way the person and minor premise relate. Let me elaborate.

For third personal ascriptions, Judge William can be read as taking these as necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for identity and selfhood. As mentioned above, this is partly because of facticity. For the Judge, the self does not create itself ex nihilo. Moreover, as the above arguments (hopefully) show, the claim that the self can create itself ex nihilo faces a battery of objections, including its inability to identify with concrete normative content. Given this, Judge William turns to the sources of facticity. He stresses that one critical source emerges when a person transitions from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere. Specifically, such a person

\[
\text{discovers that the self he chooses has a boundless multiplicity within itself inasmuch as it has a history \ldots This history is of a different kind, for in this history he stands in relation to other individuals in the race \ldots this history contains painful things, and yet he is the person he is only through this history. (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 216)}
\]

Plausibly, this claim is partly underwritten by the thought that one comes to understand oneself as a married man, as a woman, etc., before articulating a more reflective and unified version of the self. The source of this myriad of social kinds that one understands oneself in terms of stems precisely from third personal ascriptions. Moreover, this historical raw material is critical for becoming a self in that it is exactly this unique history, with this set of social relationships and classifications, that makes the person who he is.

However, according to Judge William, this multiplicity is not sufficient to enter the ethical sphere and become a self. This is because a critical concept is missing – responsibility. Thus, Judge William insists that “(n)ot until a person in his choice has taken himself upon himself, has put on himself, has totally interpenetrated himself so that every movement he makes is accompanied by a consciousness of responsibility \ldots not until then is he concrete” (ibid., p. 28). This responsibility is precisely what the self-ascription of minor premises carries in its wake. One is not just passively classified as a social kind K. Instead, one commits oneself to this kind. This commitment, this reuptake of the social kind K, inscribes one into the ethical sphere precisely because one now has a middle term that allows one to order one’s life, projects, properties, etc.

Hence, for Judge William, becoming and being an ethical self is not a rejection of classification per se. Instead, the ethical self embraces its facticity. By doing so, the ethical self becomes “his own editor, but he is also fully aware that he is responsible for himself \ldots for essentially only that belongs to me which I ethically take on as a task” (ibid., p. 260). Thus

\[
\text{The person who chooses himself ethically has himself as his task, not as a possibility \ldots He does not blot out or evaporate this multiplicity (of roles, minor premises, etc.); on the contrary, he repents himself firmly in it, because this multiplicity is himself \ldots since he does not assume that the world begins with him or that he creates himself \ldots (I)n choosing himself penitently he is acting– not in the direction of isolation but in the direction of continuity \ldots It (choosing oneself) is collecting oneself, which itself is an action (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 258)}
\]

In addition:

\[
\text{The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion. He then possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these}
\]
external influences . . . Here he then possesses himself as a task in such a way that it is chiefly to order, shape, temper, inflame and control . . . (H)e possesses himself as a task that has been assigned to him . . . The (ethical) self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self (ibid., p. 262)

Given this, Judge William can dissolve the tension at the heart of identity politics. Precisely, by insisting on one owns one’s facticity, e.g., the various classifications applied to one, Judge William avoids the trap of a subversion that presupposes the classification it subverts. The point is not to subvert the classification but to take responsibility for it and change it (and the social world). In turn, social justice would be a consequence of a group of people doing precisely this. By insisting on their facticity as a social kind K, such groups would reuptake the social kind in question. This would enable them to demand recognition, respect, etc., for this kind. Moreover, this reinforces Judge William’s and identity politics’ feature (i). To wit, speaking as a K, insisting on being recognized as a K, etc., are critical for the ethical sphere, properly construed.

However, Judge William’s elaboration of ethics and identity faces a battery of objections that cut to the heart of identity politics. Indeed, as we shall see, one fatal flaw that other pseudonyms and Kierkegaard call attention to is that this account of ethics presupposes that social kinds are always already given features of the social world. In turn, unsurprisingly for Judge William and ironically for identity politics, this makes the connection between ethics and identity far too conservative. Precisely, such an account of ethics and identity conserves the social world. This is because the account presupposes the inherent stability of social kinds K as well as casts the social world as a monolithic structure (e.g., a unified ideology, a totalized discourse, a complete set of power relations, etc.). This is because the very conditions for action and identity rely on the major premise, and its correlations with other social kinds. In turn, though one can tweak aspects of this structure, one cannot avoid the holism inherent in such an account. To act at all requires that one draws from the resources of an already given social world (ideology, discourse, etc.). Hence, it is discourse (power, ideology, etc.) all the way down. As we shall see, such totalized wholes that define all aspects of a person conserves far too much of the given social world for the taste of many voices in Kierkegaard’s corpus. Indeed, as we shall also see, for several voices in Kierkegaard, it is difference, not discourse, that goes all the way down. We turn to this presently.

5. Passionate Inwardness: The Destabilization of Identities

In the last section, I proffered a reading of Judge William that aligned him with identity politics. I further argued that Judge William’s understanding of the ethical self can dissolve an inherent tension in identity politics by centering responsibility. In any case, should Judge William’s arguments have proven to be persuasive, any account of ethics without identity is not viable.

However, in this section, I reconstruct several lines of argument from Kierkegaard’s oeuvre concerning ethics and identity. Mainly, I focus on why, for many voices in Kierkegaard’s corpus, such an account badly misunderstands how one comes to be an individual. I also connect this flawed view of being an individual to a battery of arguments that show that the ethical sphere is still unable to cope with identity and differences.

To ensure my adumbration of these attacks is precise, I use the practical syllogism (discussed in Section 3) as a framework. Given this framework, the objections we examine are: (a) Climacus’s (one of the most philosophically inclined of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms) contention that the major premise defies the social world in such a way that world history and becoming an individual are conflated; (b) Kierkegaard’s assault on the reduction of the self that the minor premise requires; (c) de Silentio’s (the pseudonymous author of Fear and Trembling) argument that the supposedly tight conceptual connection between major premise, minor premise, and ergo can, in certain extreme situations, break down; and (d) the entire authorship’s insistence that this model fundamentally misunderstands being an individual, as it discounts the infinity of the self. Let us take each criticism in turn.
For (a), I read the whole of Climacus’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as a series of complicated and interacting assaults on the very idea of a major premise, as the ethical self and identity try to use it. One line of argument, which I focus on, is that the model conflates social kinds with that single individual. Thus, Climacus notes that the observers see world history in purely metaphysical categories, and he sees it speculatively as the immanence of cause and effect, ground and consequence. Whether he is able to discern the telos for the whole human race, I do not decide, but that telos is not the ethical telos, which is for individuals, but is not a metaphysical telos . . . . Ethically, what makes the deed the individual’s own is the intention, but this is precisely what is not included in world history. (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 155)

Before beginning, it is critical to note that Climacus’s understanding of ethics is very different from judge William’s. Indeed, Climacus often calls it ethical–religious to mark this break (e.g., ibid., p. 162). I follow him and reserve “ethical–religious” for his account. Given this, part of the point of this discussion is the disentangling of ethics from the ethical–religious.

In an event, and with this terminological note in view, let me unpack aspects of Climacus’s criticism of ethics. Notice that Climacus claims that there is a conflation in telos. This conflation comes from a confusion between the observer’s perspective and the ethical–religious individual. In turn, plausibly, this confusion stems from the role that the major premise plays. From the observer’s perspective, which I focus on here, the major premise is always a pre-given feature of a particular social world. This is a consequence of one understanding of the practical syllogism. In effect, the observer makes someone’s behaviors intelligible precisely by describing them in terms of a major premise that is always already given. Moreover, from the observer’s perspective, all the explanatory work is done by this major premise. A bodily movement is explained precisely by connecting it to a major premise. Hence, the observer’s perspective requires that the major premise conceptually antedates that single individual.

In turn, the observer’s perspective readily connects to Judge William’s account of ethics and identity. In effect, for Judge William, becoming and being an ethical self cashes out as committing oneself to an already given particular social kind (or middle term), and then allowing the normativity of the major premise to order one’s properties, guide one’s actions, etc. However, Climacus insists there is at least one problematic issue that such an account engenders. Specifically, Climacus notes that the ethical self is supposed to be found immanently in despair, that by enduring the despair the individual would win himself. Admittedly he (Judge William) has used the qualification of freedom, to choose himself, which seems to remove the difficulty . . . . But that does not help . . . . It is in this moment of decision (provoked by despair) that I need divine assistance (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 258)

For my purposes, Climacus stresses here that mere commitment to pre-given social kinds is not enough to ensure that one is ethical–religious. This is because, as Judge William himself notes, his account of ethics makes one’s commitment conceptually prior to good and evil. Hence, Judge William asks,

(w)hat, then, is it that I separate in my Either/Or? Is it good and evil? No, I only want to bring you to a point where this choice truly has meaning for you . . . As soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads . . . he will choose the right thing. (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 168)

This quote suggests that, for Judge William, commitment to some social kind, somehow, ensures that one ends up being good or choosing the right thing. With sadly incredible foresight, Climacus is aware that the contention that it would all work out well after a commitment has been made is deeply problematic. Indeed, for Climacus, the presupposed benevolence of all pre-given social kinds that seems to underwrite this contention is and
must be suspect. Hence, Climacus’s appeal to the divine and assault on the immanent partly springs from his realization that there are situations where the social world is so badly deformed that truly monstrous social kinds, and terrifying actions under their guidance, can occur (Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 149–54).

To take an extreme example, Eichmann’s identification with the social kind Nazi bureaucrat, his refusal to disobey the law in the name of humanity, his inability to take any responsibility for his actions, all flow from the fact that he has committed to this kind (see Arendt 2006, passim, for both a laudably honest and, for that reason, terrifying analysis of this). Moreover, the meaning of “duty” and “good”, according to Judge William’s conception of ethics and identity, gain their normative content exactly from this social kind. Indeed, this linkage partly explains a set of rather horrifying conceptual connections Eichmann draws upon to ‘justify’ his monstrous deeds. Precisely because he identifies as a Nazi bureaucrat, his relationships with individual Jewish people, his sense that signing documents that led to the arbitrary murder of millions is terrible, etc., all divide out. His sole duty stems from his place in a social network, not from his own person. Worse, he can call himself “good”, as the social kind he relies on specified the duties that he performed ably. In sum, precisely by his fanatical commitment to a terrifying social kind, Eichmann ‘became ethical’ in a way that flies in the face of what one hopes “ethics” really should mean.

Moreover, and worse, the entire idea of responsibility also begins to misfire in Judge William’s model of ethics and identity. To begin, notice that, for Judge William, responsibility is derived from commitment. In effect, once I have committed to a social kind, I am responsible, meaning that I am answerable in terms of this social kind. Granting this, one never acts as a single individual, but always in terms of one’s commitment to a kind K. Indeed, one’s intentions are not one’s own but derived from the major premise’s normativity. In effect, a committed person puzzles out what kind K should do, and then he does it. Since what kind K should do is not up to one, one seems absolved of any of the deeds that flow from being a K. Indeed, Eichmann’s trial makes this extremely clear. He refused to take responsibility or, rather (and more horrifyingly), insisted that the semantic content of “responsibility” and its normative core derived from his identification with the social kind Nazi bureaucrat. This possibility is always built into this conception of ethics as commitment to identity. Indeed, even commitments to social justice, equality, etc., can generate this sort of misfire. Since this is so, Climacus’s frequent charge that this way of thinking has no ethical–religious dimension seems exactly right (e.g., Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 119, 121, 307fn.)

In sum, for Climacus, the central problem with the ethical is how it uses the major premise. In effect, the major premise is fine (indeed perhaps necessary) for observers who try to understand actions. Certainly, it may even be critical for making sense of myself as an actor. However, this has nothing to do with the ethical–religious, with responsibility, and with that single individual. Indeed, Climacus notes that the only person (or pseudonym) in Either/Or who begins to grasp this is a simple country pastor who insists that “in relation to God we are always in the wrong” (Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 341–54. For Climacus’ comments, see Kierkegaard 1992, p. 256), a claim that requires, not equality, but a fundamental asymmetry between oneself and G-d (or that single individual). We return to this in Section 6.

Flowing from this, (b) begins an assault on the role the minor premise plays. Specifically, for Kierkegaard, the minor premise, too, begins to go very badly wrong when ethics and identity are connected. To see this, let me consider parts of Kierkegaard’s commentary on the novel Two Ages. Kierkegaard notes that

The age of revolution is essentially and passionate age and therefore has immediacy. Its immediacy, however, is not the first immediacy, and in the highest sense, it is not the final immediacy either; it is an immediacy of reaction and to that extent is provisional. This is crucial with respect to the constancy of this passion. In life it may well be that multiplicity remains true to itself until the
end, but seen in the context of the idea it must end with the single individual’s becoming untrue to himself, because it is a provisional idea (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 65- italics in original)

Though complex, certain features of this quote are critical. First, to reiterate, commitment to a middle term embedded in a minor premise in the practical syllogism is required to become an ethical self. Given this, revolutionaries with such commitments have left behind first immediacy and the desultory to-ings and fro-ings that make it up. Second, pursuant to this, revolutionaries regain a form of second or higher immediacy. This stems precisely from the fact that they self-ascribe the minor premise to themselves, thereby committing to it and taking responsibility for it. Indeed, a revolutionary’s sense of herself and her dignity becomes inexorably bound up with this self-ascription. Third, the commitment is powerfully motivational strictly because everything that a person is depends on her identification with the kind revolutionary.

However, critically, something goes awry. Specifically, Kierkegaard notes that this sort of passionate self-ascription of the minor premise necessarily makes an individual untrue to herself. This is simply because a person is always richer than any given kind she commits to. In effect, the minor premise and the concrete empirical reality, i.e., the utter complexity, of that single individual are out of sync. The latter has fears, dreams, loves, a body, a family, etc. In marked contrast, the former has an ideal and is willing to violently destroy all other features of the empirical self (and the social world) to achieve it. Moreover, if one acts solely as a K, then one discards any and all relationships, actions, interactions, etc., that do not harmonize with it. Indeed, one might begin to forcefully redescribe everything in kind k’s terms, thereby violently misunderstanding certain gestures, relationships, etc.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard stresses that such minor premises are always reactionary and provisional. They are reactionary because they rely on an already given major premise that obtains in the social world. Again, we have the tension voiced in feature (v) of identity politics. One’s sense of oneself is tied up with one’s social world in such a way that one becomes a mere ‘organic’ outgrowth of pre-established social kinds. One might reuptake a kind and then, e.g., work to change negative stereotypes, which may be laudable in itself. However, Kierkegaard’s primary point is that this work still presupposes the major premise and the entire social world it is bound up with. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, this does not go far enough.

They are provisional because the self-ascription of the minor premise always excludes other facets of the self, facets that might be(come) emphasized if substantial changes occur. For example, one might be a revolutionary Marxist in college and have a romantic relationship. Several years down the line, the romantic relationship, captured by that terrible bourgeois institution of marriage, might become emphasized and the Marxism discarded. The primary point is that the minor premise, being abstract and dependent on the middle term that connects it to the major premise, must continually reduce the complexity of that single individual so that she can be forced into its prefabricated mold. This always requires that a person discard critically important facets of her life. She violently reduces herself and her social world based on the strength of her commitment to K.

Pursuant to this, (c), de Silentio, integrates the above criticism voiced in (a) and (b). Moreover, he begins to push past them in a radically different way. In this, he begins to make sense of the role of religion in that single individual. Again, circumspect readers must keep in mind that de Silentio’s understanding of religion is different from both Climacus’s ethical–religious and Judge William’s religion as a sort of afterthought to ethics, as we, again, unfold.

To begin, commenting on the story of Abraham’s offering of Isaac to G-d (Genesis 22: 1–19), de Silentio stresses that “Abraham does not have access to the middle term that saves the tragic hero” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 57). Notice that what de Silentio is pointing out is that the major premise and the minor premise are unavailable to Abraham (and those who strive after faith). This is because his action cannot be codified into a practical
syllogism without some deep conceptual tensions. This brings into harmony the above two points. Let us adumbrate these tensions.

For the major premise, de Silentio is keenly aware that the appellation “father of faith” cannot be captured in a major premise for at least two reasons. First, unlike all other social kinds we have been dealing with, it is radically new. It does not depend on a pre-given social world. Instead, it betokens a radical break from this world, symbolized perhaps most clearly in Abraham’s abandonment of all available social kinds of his time—his tribal affiliation, his land, etc. (e.g., Kierkegaard 1983, p. 17). Second, whatever else “father of faith” might imply, it is not a social kind that can be stabilized into a generalizable major premise and then re-instanced and reiterated by various individuals. Indeed, de Silentio stresses that attempting to do this is tantamount to endorsing the deranged murder of children in the name of the Most High—a possibility that rightly horrifies him (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 30–53).

For the minor premise, matters are yet more interesting. G-d does not speak to an aspect of Abraham, i.e., to Abraham as an instance of a social kind K. Indeed, such an attempt engenders an inconsistency. This is because speaking to Abraham as, e.g., the one who holds the title to G-d’s promise that, through Isaac, Israel will become a great nation, immediately conflicts with G-d’s current (and seemingly capricious) new command to take Isaac to a mountain, tie him, and slit his throat. Indeed, as Kierkegaard himself comments, (supposedly) divine command theory (and the tyrannical view of a god it seems to entail) cannot dissolve this issue as “(t)he terrifying thing in the collision is this— that it is . . . a collusion . . . . Between God’s command and God’s command” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 248). Instead, G-d is addressing Itself to Abraham as a single individual in his infinite richness and complexity. Moreover, Abraham’s response is equally important. Specifically, Abraham suspends thinking of himself as or in terms of some pre-given social kind. Indeed, he does not, in this case, argue with G-d (cf. Genesis 18:16–33 for such an argument). He does not point out that he, as the one who holds G-d’s promise, cannot kill Isaac. It is precisely here that we begin to see a radical disruption of the social world on the part of G-d and a radical response on the part of Abraham. Even if “father of faith” is a social kind She Herself invented, it does not, cannot, will not, and should not limit G-d’s relation to Abraham. As it were, G-d Himself is a nominalist in that G-d has no ontological use for kinds that specify ‘essences,’ duties, roles, etc.

Flowing from this radical disruption, even more stunning shifts loom into view. Specifically, there are moments where we can relation to one another and G-d not through minor premises but relationally. In other words, we can dispense with thinking about each other, ourselves, and the Most High in terms of, e.g., “social justice activist”, “professor” or “omnipresent”, and respond to the sheer complexity of that single individual who cannot be reduced to abstract kinds and logical derivations. Part of what underwrites this is changing the focus from becoming an ethical self to relationship-building. In effect, the model of practical rationality we presented, and its connection to becoming an ethical self, presupposed that be(com)ing a self is something one can do under one’s own power. As it were, ethics and identity are remarkably monological. In marked contrast, Abraham leaves open his becoming a person, his becoming that single individual. Hence, for Abraham, the act of becoming himself is as much (if not more) in G-d’s hands as his own, precisely because who he is (qua empirical being) always escapes the abstractions he must rely on to make his own behaviors coherent. Indeed, part of what Abraham suspends is the very idea that who he is (to become) is up to him. Notice that this echoes Climacus’s insistence that, in these moments of decision, we need divine help. In sum, and critically, for Abraham, becoming that single individual is neither akin to simply drifting through life nor fanatically insisting on one’s identity as a K. Instead, becoming that single individual is a matter of accepting that who I am turns on my open relationships with others. To reduce such relationships to ideals, to a matrix of power and position, to grand discourses, to totalized ideologies, to the relentless self-assertion that one speaks as a K, is to do violence against myself and others. We return to this in Section 6.
This leads to (d), one of the most innovative insights Kierkegaard has throughout the authorship. For Kierkegaard’s corpus, as I read it, one consistent point of emphasis is how quickly philosophy (and revolutionary activism influenced by it) deteriorates into a form of ‘essence hunting’ that discards the sheer complexity of the magnificent and horrifying world we live in. Indeed, people are rational agents, 35-year-old men, proletariats, cis, born into a particular family, white, straight, and so on and so forth. Each of these social identities might be important, might be helpful for proffering explanations, might clarify entrenched injustices that should be attacked, and so on. The philosopherizer’s mistake, however, is confusing these provisional identities with real essences. People are not just rational agents, creatures of sexuality, proletarian revolutionaries, etc. For Kierkegaard, the real danger is that we ignore the fact that such understandings of ourselves and others in terms of social kinds and identities always terminate in approximations of single individuals (cf. Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 23–57). Once this mistake has been made, once this sin is committed, one is no longer interested in helping those single individuals, but in fighting for groups, for abstractions.

In sum, for many voices in Kierkegaard’s work, such a confusion of abstractions with empirical reality is violence because it refuses to accept a truth at the heart of the authorships–being a child of G-d means having infinity in oneself and any attempt to reduce this infinity to social kinds, be these embraced or ascribed, is violence against it. People are always more than the sum of their parts exactly because the parts, being abstract, never correctly capture the (empirical) complexities of the person. In other words, though rendering someone’s actions and interactions intelligible, contesting systemic injustices, and so on, may well require post hoc representation of them in terms of practical syllogisms, it is a deleterious confusion to think that these capture the person. The ‘essence’ of people is precisely that they have none, from a speculative perspective. People are always more complex than the minor premises we rely on to sort them (and ourselves) out.

6. The Single Individual, the Second Person, and Be(coming) Christian

In the last section, I briefly reconstructed an assault that Kierkegaard and several voices in his authorship make on ethics and identity. Given this, it seems clear that the single individual and the task of becoming Christian, in Kierkegaard’s authorship, requires an entirely different conceptual grammar. Moreover, as we shall see, this conceptual grammar cuts against identity politics as understood in Section 2, not by simple invectives, but by going beyond it. Let me elaborate.

To begin, consider a claim about equality/equity made by DiAngelo as she clarifies the concept of equality/equity. She states that “no one can be taught to treat people equitably, because humans cannot be 100 percent objective” (DiAngelo 2018, p. 81). Often, equity is used in identity politics to avoid the leveling effects of equality, effects that Kierkegaard ably criticized (see Section 4 above). However, what is more telling is the link between objectivity and treating people a certain way. For objectivity, DiAngelo equates this with the thought that we can “be free from all bias” (ibid., p. 9). In turn, this suggests a very particular gloss on the nature of differences. Specifically, and as discussed briefly in feature (ii) of identity politics, differences are cast as byproducts of classification. In effect, the difference between A and B is generated by A being classified one way and B another. Given this, it seems that if (per impossible) we can be free from all biases, if we could dispense with social classifications, then we would realize that all people are fundamentally the same, thereby achieving perfect equality. Notice also that this view casts all differences as biases, as unfair ways of treating the same sort of entities unequally.

For many voices in Kierkegaard’s authorship, this view still misunderstands what being a person (i.e., a single individual) requires, still contains a problematic account of equality, and still cannot cope with differences. However, Kierkegaard’s proposed solution to these errors must dispense with identity as the linchpin of be(com)ing a person and refuse to think in terms of justice, distribution, etc. Let me discuss each point in turn.
For be(com)ing a person, that single individual, it seems that identity politics relies solely on what Climacus called (in Section 5) the immanent. Cashing this out, the primary thought is that one becomes a person exclusively because one is socialized into a particular culture, with pre-given kinds, and so on (cf., e.g., DiAngelo 2018, pp. 9–13). In turn, such a view readily lends itself to an understanding of people as nothing more than a set of inculcated intersecting identities embedded in a network of social power. Moreover, since, per assumption, all differences between people are generated by classifying them thus-and-so, the only way to properly understand the differences is by reflecting on the classificatory schema or matrices of power relations.

Turning to Anti-Climacus (a philosopher-cum-religious ideal voice in Kierkegaard’s authorship), though he accepts much of this as necessary for being a single individual, he insists that it cannot be sufficient. Specifically, concluding one section, and one of the densest discussions in philosophy, he notes that

\[ \text{[t]herefore, the formula set forth above, which describes a state in which there is no despair at all, is entirely correct . . . for faith: in relating itself (the self) to itself (i.e., interpreting the actions of the empirical self) and is willing itself to itself and in willing itself to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.} \]

(Kierkegaard 1980, p. 14- emphasis mine)

Though there are many different aspects of this gnomic discussion that one could elaborate on, two critical paths are of interest to me. The first is Anti-Climacus’s argument against the claim that socialization can exhaustively account for a single individual. The second is Anti-Climacus’s related contention that the source of the single individual requires G-d. Let me take each in turn.

The claim that socialization exhausts the single individual, and the related centering of minor premises or social kinds, rest, for Anti-Climacus, on a fundamental conflation between how I think about myself with who I am. For the former, I rely precisely on the practical syllogism to make my behaviors intelligible to myself. Indeed, here, there is no significant difference between the first-personal and third-personal perspectives. In either case, I rely on pre-given recourses that I was socialized into to render action (my own and other people’s) intelligible. However, for Anti-Climacus, this reliance always abstracts from features of who I am, from myself in my sheer empirical complexity. Moreover, as Anti-Climacus’s discussion clarifies, reflection exacerbates this situation. In effect, to think about my empirical self (my facticity) in terms of some social kind will ramify into my behaviors, changing the very substratum I reflect on. In turn, this sets off an infinite (a concept we return to in a moment) repetition wherein each reflection alters the empirical self, thereby demanding more reflection. For Anti-Climacus, it is this infinite repetition that confutes reductive claims regarding socialization and classification. My reflection on my position in the power matrix changes my behaviors, and so my position, and so the matrix, thus demanding more reflection, thereby changing my behaviors, etc.

Given this, Anti-Climacus then takes it as axiomatic that this capacity for infinite repetition shows that a single individual’s subjectivity depends on resources that transcend the (finite) social world. To elaborate on how this works, let us draw from Putnam (commenting on Levinas and Descartes). Putnam notes that analytic philosophers often take

‘infinite’ to have the meaning it has in such statements as ‘there are infinite prime numbers.’ But this is not what Descartes (when he invokes the notion of infinity in the Third Mediation) means at all . . . Levinas believes that what Descartes is reporting is . . . a profound religious experience, an experience that might be described as an experience of a fissure, of a confrontation with something that disrupts all his categories. (Putnam 2008, p. 79)

Granting this, what Anti-Climacus claims to discover in the heart of the self is some x that destroys all the ways he has that claim to make it intelligible. Indeed, the infinite repetition that reflection generates can be read as a sign of this infinity. Whatever the single
individual is, they always escape reduction because reflection changes them. Moreover, from here, Anti-Climacus can be read as making a move like that of Descartes. This infinite capacity to repeat testifies that being a person requires something radically independent of the social world, i.e., it requires G-d. Who I am does not depend on how others classify me, nor less on which minor premises I reuptake and insist on. Instead, it depends on my relationship with the power that established me, and on the other infinities that are Her children.

Critically, this second point must be taken on faith. Indeed, there is no way for me to ‘prove’ that endless repetition is a sign of the infinite, in me and others, and testifies to G-d as that which establishes. However, this faith is not some fatuous leap in the dark, nor less an attempt to avoid the ‘real insight’ that people, if viewed in an unbiased way, are all the same.

Instead, this faith testifies to a principled refusal of sameness, i.e., of the identity between who I think I (and others) am (are) and who they (and me) empirically are, of the insistence that all someone ‘really’ is, is their position in a power network, is a set of differences generated by classification, etc. This refusal is principled on two fronts. First, there is a “danger in grounding ethics in the idea that we are all ‘fundamentally the same’ . . . a door is opened for a Holocaust. One only has to believe that some people are not ‘really’ the same to destroy all the force of such grounding” (Putnam 2008, p. 71). In other words, the contention that people are ‘essentially’ members of a set, whatever set this may be, makes it possible to deny the humanity of others who are not members of the set I lionize (or else cast these others as monsters, or incurable x-ists, un-x, or x-phobic, etc.).

Second, Kierkegaard stresses that the assumption that all people are the same is mere hubris. This is because such a view means that it is entirely up to us (or power, etc.) what differences we have. Indeed, the only thing that disrupts the endless sameness of all people is arbitrary differences that spring from classification. However, pace this, Kierkegaard notes that in “a God-relationship . . . Face-to-face with God, I would have to use a much humbler expression (than self-ascribing a minor premise or, worse, thinking that being a Christian cashes out as a difference engendered by, e.g., Danish bureaucrats imposing classifications); I trust that God in his mercy will receive me as a Christian” (Kierkegaard 1998, pp. 135–36). Picking one thread from this, it is clear that, for Kierkegaard, be(com)ing a Christian (insisting on this difference) cannot be understood as a knock-off effect of classifications or power matrixes. Indeed, only G-d can properly decide. Stepping back from this, one of Kierkegaard’s points is that the assumption that all differences stem from classification and interrupt the endless sameness of perfectly equal human beings does not capture many aspects of difference. Indeed, it is mere hubris to assume that someone’s differences from others are a product of how discourse has designed them, say.

In any case, such a denial of sameness immediately confronts the problem of equality. Specifically, the issue seems to be that without some prior sameness, some postulated ‘common humanity,’ one cannot make sense of the demand that we fix real injustices in the world. Indeed, though identity politics (rightly, from Kierkegaard’s view) roundly rejects attempts to cash out equality in terms of supposedly blind procedural neutrality, it still retains a commitment to some conception of equality. Otherwise, e.g., points about arbitrary restrictions on who can access which social institutions would make little sense.

This leads to the second point. Specifically, for many voices in Kierkegaard’s work, what causes leveling is not equality but identity itself. Indeed, Leibnitz’s principle presupposes identity to spell out equality, not vice versa. Given this, for Kierkegaard, it is precisely because we have misunderstood the single individual as, somehow, a mere instance of something else that we begin to go wrong. Moreover, Kierkegaard (it seems to me) offers a remarkable re-imagination of equality, based on his contention that single individuals are each infinite. Thus, in Two Ages, Kierkegaard notes that “the basest kind of levelling . . . always corresponds to a denominator (i.e., a postulated sameness) in relation to which all are made equal. The eternal life is also a kind of leveling, and yet it is not so, for the
The denominator is thus: to be an essentially human person in the religious sense (i.e., to be an infinity)” (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 96).

To unpack this further, let me consider a very halting but helpful analogy. The set of even natural numbers and the set of odd natural numbers have no common element. Nevertheless, they can be thought of as equal in that they have the same cardinality, i.e., there is a function that pairs each element from one set with each element from the other. Similarly, for Kierkegaard, what makes two people equal is not some discreet property (e.g., ‘common humanity’). Instead, extremely roughly, it is the fact that they have the same cardinality. It is because they are each infinite that they are all equal (read: have the same cardinality). For Kierkegaard, it is precisely the “flaws and imperfections”, the inability to solely be a K, that reflect this infinity. Indeed, against God, we are always in the wrong, which partly reflects just this (Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 341–54). Hence, people are not equal due to some property we all share. Instead, they are equal because they all have the same cardinality. Of course, for Kierkegaard, again, this contention is and must be underwritten by a theology. This theology presupposes that every person is a child of G-d and, as such, is infinite. This cannot be argued for and must be accepted as axiomatic (or rejected as absurd). However, when it is accepted, it dissolves leveling while retaining the core demand that each person is worthy of respect, justice, love, etc. Each person is worthy of respect, dignity, etc., because each of them is infinite. However, this worth does not in any way need some endlessly self-same essential common property. Indeed, such a reduction is, for Kierkegaard, utterly offensive, an affront to every individual’s infinite value, seen precisely in their differences.

This leads to the third point about differences. To see how Kierkegaard alters the terms of the debate, let us return, one last time, to the tension in feature (v) of identity politics. The issue with identity politics is that some advocates want to recognize differences and others to abolish them in the name of some stipulated sameness, some impossible non-biased perspective that ‘just sees’ that we are all endlessly the same. In turn, the instability inherent in this stems from the prior assumption that differences are not primitive, that they are generated by power, social hierarchy, etc., and yet are really part of persons, i.e., how they understand themselves, who they empirically are, and so on.

Pace this, for Kierkegaard, differences between single individuals are properly primitive. At the level of single individuals, each life is incommensurable with another because none, strictly speaking, have the same properties. This is because how they instance a particular property is changed by reflection so that it is no longer identical to how others instance the supposedly same property. As it were, it is difference all the way down. In turn, this account of differences alters both what a person is and transcends a key feature of identity politics.

For persons, single individuals, this shifts our focus from duties, goods, virtues, justice etc., and towards modes of address and love for a particular single individual. To clarify, for Kierkegaard, who an individual is depends inexorably on how the individual is addressed and what/who does the addressing (e.g., Kierkegaard 1998, pp. 71–90). Given this, a new grammatical person becomes emphasized, the second person. Notice that this shift in focus is new in that, up until now, we have only discussed the third person (e.g., a person ascribes a kind to another) or first person (I ascribe a kind to myself).

In turn, this second personal mode of address, the “du” of lovers that Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher-cum-mystic, so powerfully discusses (Buber 1970, passim), resists abstractions. This is because, for Buber, the second person betokens a mode of existence or attitude that “does not have something for his (the speaker’s) object . . . where You is said there is no something. You has no borders” (Buber 1970, p. 55). Partly, what Buber means is that saying “you” to another requires that one resist the urge to classify them thus-and-so. Moreover, the second person is borderless for him partly because its application to another does not seem governed by pre-set criteria, a well-defined extension, and so on. As it were, it is an indexical (but, for Buber, the second person’s lack of criteria reflects so much more than logical attempts to clarify it may suggest).
Granting this, Kierkegaard further contends that the proper key for recognizing differences is precisely the second person and the appropriate mode of address is love. This is because love is a unique relationship that, far from nullifying differences, generates them (Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 23–36). In other words, love destabilizes my sense of myself precisely by providing me with a space to be(come) again and again, different in repetition (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 125–231). More formally, for Kierkegaard, the very idea of a pattern presupposes that the cases that the pattern supervenes on are each distinct from the other. “Love” would be, in this analytic cant, a way of seeing alternative ways of patterning built into the previous cases so that unheard-of ways of going on all seem open and viable (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, § 201). Precisely because no finite set of cases can exhaust the pattern that we claim to detect, there are always other possible patterns, other ways of going on. Love and being loved are new ways of going on, new ways of be(com)ing oneself anew. If you like, Kierkegaard considers the self as a musical theme that, when interacting with other musical themes, always distinct from it, can morph and respond, can become new again. As all good improv players understand, such jam sessions cannot be reduced to one musician relentlessly asserting her particular theme. Of course, this means that I do not become a self by being ascribed a social kind nor less by re-uptaking a social kind and insisting on recognition. I become a person, a single individual, by being open. Indeed, here we see the asymmetry I mentioned in Section 5 take hold. Being loved is asymmetric in that nothing I do, am, or could be, can bring it about. Against God, we are always in the wrong—this means, in part, that single individuals depend on something they did not earn and cannot rightly claim to possess.

As or identity politics, we end up with something like a militantly anti-identity based ground. This is seen clearly in the fact that love and infinity cannot be integrated into any conception of a person as merely a social kind. Moreover, such an insistence of love and infinity cannot be integrated into any given political project (nor less terminate in specifiable policies). Indeed, it entirely wrecks any conception of politics as giving and getting. This is because basic categories like exchange and balance are nullified in the name of unpredictable ways of going on. These ways cannot be reduced to past sins, righting wrongs, and the like. That is the point of it. In an analytic cant, “love” is so occasion and assessment sensitive, so embedded in tacit ways of engaging the beloved, so profoundly embodied, and so on, that no transition from loving or being loved to abstract principles concerning, e.g., how to weigh and measure various deeds, is possible. As it were, how many little smiles of joy can be exchanged for a night of snuggling is such an absurd question because the very idea of exchange is strangely out of place. In any case, the normativity that grounds all social kind K terms is, in love, nullified as the beloved and the lover come, again and again, to embrace the differences already always given within their patterning. They are always more than their social identities. Being in love realizes this for them. Anything less, for Kierkegaard, is violence. Any politics, be it based on social justice or not, is inherently defective if it makes sense of people solely in terms of reductions that lose track of those single individuals.

Given all this, we can finally see Kierkegaard’s take on identity politics. For him, though being a K is critical to finding oneself intelligible, confuting entrenched injustices, and so on, no one is nor can simply and purely be a direct metaphysical instantiation of the normative structures and strictures that K has built into it. People are never just rational agents, knights in chess, citizens, working class, etc. This anti-identity basis of Kierkegaard’s thought displays something critical. To wit, any attempt to make someone into just a K deprives them of their true dignity. Hence, and with an ironic dialectical twist that the old melancholy Dane would surely have appreciated, the cry for equality that identity politics justly demands is best underwritten by an anti-identity theology that relentlessly works to show that single individual for who they are—a child of G-d Herself. Without this theology, one seems stuck with reductions that make equality ‘numerical’ and inexorably destroy differences. With this theology, and G-d, a new set of concepts such as love, forgiveness, care, and music come online. However, properly elaborating
such concepts would require “writing under erasure”, as there is a real danger that they too become stabilized in such a way that they occlude the infinite. Indeed, part of the danger of a commandment like “love your neighbor” is that people try to cash it out as a duty concerning respect (or whatever). Though I think an elaboration of these concepts is possible, I fear I have exhausted the reader’s patience. In any case, this is a topic for another time (and in a very different style).

In sum, for Kierkegaard, if we could view a single individual without bias, we would not discover endless sameness. Instead, we would discover radical differences and second-personal forms of address. For Kierkegaard, be(com)ing Christian is striving to live in this way (Kierkegaard 1998, pp. 135–41). This is not a social identity. However, I would add that it is an important reminder that single individuals are not simply extrusions of discourse (ideology, power, etc.) but instead are infinities, worlds onto themselves. Such a reminder is critical, lest the abstractions we rely on to fight injustices replace the single individuals in whose name we (should) struggle.

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2 Thanks to a reviewer for pushing me to clarify what I meant by “identity politics.”

3 Judge William also points out that he is “not a philosopher” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 170). Given this, my philosophical reconstruction of him is tentative. Circumspect readers should keep this in mind.

4 Strictly speaking, this is wrong as LP makes no distinction between ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ properties.

5 However, it is important to note that Judge William does not discuss this because his social kind, a married man, was respected in his time. Nevertheless, I think that his linkage between ethics and identity begins to make sense of social justice that advocates of identity politics demand. Thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out.

6 The ironically conservative streak in identity politics is ably (and amusingly) pointed out by Laurent Dubreuil, a literary critic interested in social thought. See (Dubreuil 2020).

7 Indeed, the last two centuries of history are marked by reigns of terror done in the name of high ideals like justice or equality.

8 I use “G-d” and arbitrary pronouns to try to keep in view that the term is not a proper name and that thinking of G-d in terms of, e.g., existential instantiation is a gross category confusion.

9 A reviewer rightly pointed this out to me. Interestingly, I think aspects of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication can be read in this way—i.e., as a way to avoid rarified abstractions and reified identities.

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