**Between Movement and Rest:  
Kierkegaard’s   
Critique of Busyness**

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**Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

**Abstract**

This thesis will present an account of Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of “busyness” (*travlhed*). In Chapter 1, I consider the concept “busyness” in relation to “the city”. For Kierkegaard the city (of Copenhagen) becomes symbolic of modernity, and is integral to his emerging critique of busyness. In Chapter 2, I argue that busyness is central to Kierkegaard’s critique of “the present age”, indicative of a “pseudo-action”, that like the present age’s “reflection”, is apathetic and drawn to image and spectacle. In Chapter 3, I define “busyness” as a fundamentally aesthetic category: to *be busy* is to occupy the aesthetic sphere. Focusing on the aesthete, “A”, I present an alternative to the interpretation of “A” as an idler and demonstrate that his idleness is akin to busyness, as defined by Kierkegaard. In Chapter 4,I explore the Christian preoccupation with busyness, and argue that Christianity views busyness as equivalent to idleness. In Chapter 5, I present Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness. To be busy is to be a *fractured self*, committing to one’s projects only to “a certain degree”, and falling victim to a necessary double-mindedness. Kierkegaard’s response, is to “will one thing”, that is to *halt* through the act of confession, and commit passionately to some specific task. In Chapter 6, I consider *what* this task might be, and explore Kierkegaard’s concept of “vocation” or “calling” as a response to busyness: one’s vocation, or calling, stands in stark opposition to busyness, and by committing to it, one may avoid becoming “busy”. In Chapter 7, I consider whether one’s vocation, or calling, need necessarily be religious to escape busyness, before answering in the positive: the only way to avoid busyness, for Kierkegaard, is through the restless commitment to some single task – one’s calling to become a genuine Christian individual.

**Acknowledgements**

It was in a busy Sheffield café in 2018 that the idea to write the thesis on Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness first materialised. In a discussion of *Either/Or’s* “The Diapsalmata” with fellow PhD Candidate Anthony Eagan, we stumbled upon the question: what does Kierkegaard, or rather “A”, mean, when he decries busyness as the most ridiculous thing imaginable? What does it mean to busy? And why is it ridiculous? These questions stayed with me after leaving the café, and accompanied me along the bustling streets of Sheffield as I made my way to the Philosophy Department. The more I thought about “busyness,” the more central the critique of it seemed to be to Kierkegaard’s overall project. It thus became my desire to define, elucidate, and trace this concept and critique throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship.

Here, I wish to thank those who have allowed me to indulge myself in that endeavour for the past four years (and of course, those who have humoured my study of philosophy for the past decade).

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Any mistakes and errors that remain in the thesis are entirely my own; and, as Judge William would urge, I accept full responsibility for all of them.

***I dedicate this work to***

***my partner, Abi, who has been there since the very beginning,***

***and our daughter, Persephone, who joined us along the way.***

***To you both, I am indebted.***

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**Abbreviations**

The following works by Kierkegaard are abbreviated in the following way:

SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vols. 1-28, (1997-2013), eds. N. J. Cappelørn, J. Garff, J. Knudsen, J. Kondrup, A. McKinnon, & F. H. Mortensen, Copenhagen: Gads Forlag.

SKP *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, vols. 1-16, (1968), ed. N. Thulstrup, København: Gyldendal.

JP *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vols. 1-7, (1967-78), eds. trs. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, with G. Malantschuk, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press.

KJN *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, vols. 1-11, (2007-2020), eds. trs. N. J. Cappelørn, A. Hannay, D. Kangas, B. H. Kirmmse, G. Pattison, V. Rumble, & K. B. Söderquist, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

SV *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, vols. 1-14, (1901-1906), eds. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, & H. O. Lange, Kjøbenhavn: Glydendalske Boghandels Forlag (F. Hegel & Son).

KW *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vols. 1-26, (1978-1998), eds. trs. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

EPW *Early Polemical Writings: From the Papers of One Still Living; Articles from Student Days; The Battle Between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars*, tr. J. Watkin.

CI *The Concept of Irony*

EO I *Either/Or Part I*

EO II *Either/Or Part II*

EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*

FT *Fear and Trembling*

R *Repetition*

PF *Philosophical Fragments*

JC *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*

CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, tr. R. Thomte, with A. B. Anderson.

P *Prefaces / Writing Sampler*, tr. T. W. Nichol.

TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*

SL *Stages on Life’s Way*

CUP1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

CUP2 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

COR *The Corsair Affair*

TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*

UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*

WL *Works of Love*

CD *Christian Discourses*

C *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*

WA *Without Authority*

SUD *The Sickness unto Death*

PC *Practice in Christianity*

FSE *For Self-Examination*

JFY *Judge For Yourself*

PV *The Point of View* including *On My Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*

M *The Moment and Late Writings*

BA *The Book on Adler*

LD *Letters and Documents*, tr. H. Rosenmeier.

As Kierkegaard’s writings are referenced here, they do not reappear in the “Bibliography” at the end of the thesis. Where an alternative translation is cited, this is made explicit in a footnote.

**Introduction**

What does it mean *to be busy?*

Criticisms of “busyness” as a distracted, aimless and pointless form of activity, have been made by philosophers since antiquity; often presented as an affront to a quiet life of philosophical contemplation, or some other less hasty endeavour. For instance, the Roman stoic Seneca considered busyness to be a vice like idleness, a simple waste of one’s time. In Seneca’s *On the Shortness of Life* he writes that people who spend their time distracted and engaged in trivialities are living in “busy idleness” (2005: 96). Busyness, as an activity akin to idleness, is antithetical to the goals and objectives of the good life. Similarly, as noted by Josef Pieper in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture,* the view that idleness or sloth was “the source of restlessness, and the ultimate cause of ‘work for work’s sake’” (1952: 48), was the dominant view held throughout the Middle Ages. As Pieper notes, this kind of dis-interested “activity” may be defined as *acedia*, and the notion that “behind or beneath the dynamic activity of [the individual’s] existence, he is still not at one with himself […] or face to face with the divine good within him” (1952: 49). In a similar vein, Blaise Pascal identifies “busyness” as *distraction*, as mankind’s refusal to attempt to face up to what he is and what he can become; for Pascal, busyness becomes a distraction from existence itself. Friedrich Nietzsche, too, considered the aimless busyness of modernity an ill, writing: “Even now one is ashamed of resting […] ‘Rather do anything than nothing’” (1974: 259). Similarly, Martin Heidegger saw “busy-ness” as intimately linked to the modern age, and specifically technology; for Heidegger, inauthentic busy-ness is linked to the acceleration of modern life – exacerbated by technology – but “driven by the anxiety of boredom” (1999: 85). Again, like those thinkers that came before him, Heidegger too links busy-ness to an inability, or refusal, to *be oneself*: “to forget rapidly and lose oneself in what comes next” (1999: 85).[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet, perhaps the thinker who is most insightful, and who (quite ironically) wrote most fervently, about the busyness of the modern age was Søren Kierkegaard, whose observations and criticisms of busyness will be the focus of the present work.

Throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship he frequently criticises “busyness” (Danish: *travlhed*) as an activity to be avoided. Yet, despite Kierkegaard’s pertinent and numerous comments on busyness, no systematic account exists that attempts to define precisely what Kierkegaard means when he uses the term “busyness”. In this case then Kierkegaard’s analysis and comments on busyness have been largely ignored by Kierkegaard scholars, receiving only passing mention in the pursuit of other considerations. One striking example is Jon B. Stewart’s edited collection of conceptual analysis on Kierkegaard’s authorship which lacks an entry on the concept of “busyness”, despite its prominence in Kierkegaard’s authorship.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, in works on Kierkegaard and modernity, contemporaneity, politics, economics, and society, busyness is rarely – if at all – mentioned; it is often given so little significance that it is rarely indexed. This seems surprising when we consider just how often Kierkegaard mentions busyness throughout his authorship; indeed, an age characterised by an immersion in, and distracted by, its own busyness is one of Kierkegaard’s greatest concerns.[[3]](#footnote-3) Surprisingly, the most prominent discussions of Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness have taken place outside of academic scholarship, for example, on websites targeting a general audience.[[4]](#footnote-4)

With this in mind, it is worth emphasising that there is no attempt to examine precisely *what* Kierkegaard means when he discusses – and critiques – *busyness*. And here, we may briefly address the problematic issue of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity. Often Kierkegaard’s own comments in his eponymous authorship are conflated with his comments in his pseudonymous authorship; or the views of his pseudonym’s conflated: for example, what “A” the aesthete of *Either/Or Volume I* views as busyness is taken as indicative of Johannes Climacus’s view on busyness in *Philosophical Fragments* or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which might again be taken as analogous to Anti-Climacus’s views on busyness in *The Sickness Unto Death*, or even “S. Kierkegaard’s” own views on busyness in – for example – *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, or, *Works of Love*. I will endeavour to treat Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity as seriously as Kierkegaard, himself, intended – referring to the pseudonyms by name when discussing their respective views, including the name “S. Kierkegaard” for the upbuilding discourses. When I use the term “Kierkegaard,” or “Kierkegaardian” I refer to the authorship as a whole (if such a thing is possible), and consider Kierkegaard as “the *secret*ary and, quite ironically, the dialectically reduplicated author of the author or the authors” (CUP [627]).[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, I will follow the hermeneutic principle of Roger Poole, who holds that the pseudonymous authors inhabit radically different “thought worlds”, and that their concepts should be distinguished from one another, “even when they are verbally identical” (Poole, 1996: 162). It will be the aim of this present work to attempt to offer a systematic reading of *Kierkegaard’s*, or the *Kierkegaardian*, concept and critique of busyness.

The first two chapters of the thesis are contextual and aim to situate Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness within the historical milieu in which it developed.

In Chapter 1 I aim to contextualise the historical – that is, biographical, philosophical, sociological, topographical, etc. – context in which Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness emerges. I argue that Kierkegaard’s concern with busyness did not arise in some abstract philosophical vacuum, but rather was intimately connected to the city in which he was born, lived, and died: Copenhagen. Thus, the Copenhagen of nineteenth Century Denmark becomes the starting point from which I begin analysing Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness. For Kierkegaard, his “beloved Copenhagen” (KJN V NB8: 96) is a central “character” within his writings, and an essential one for understanding the reasons behind Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with busyness. Hence, in this chapter we explore Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness *topographically* as we move from the Kierkegaard family home – and Kierkegaard’s relationship to his father *the businessman* – towards the University of Copenhagen, and Kierkegaard’s concerns with the bureaucratisation of philosophy, theology, and academia in general. I consider the streets and public places around Copenhagen frequented by Kierkegaard, and consider the aesthetic character of the age as one of busyness, spectacle, and distraction. In moving away from the hustle and bustle of the city we turn towards the “other places” that Kierkegaard considers antithetical to busyness: the church, the countryside or nature, and the graveyard. These “other places” offer the individual a way to avoid busyness, and in doing so, direct us towards the religious sphere as the individual’s salvation from busyness.

In Chapter 2 I continue an examination of busyness within Kierkegaard’s own age; however, this time I consider Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with busyness in a more general way, through an examination of busyness in Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages*. Thus, whilst Chapter 1 considered Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness through the city of Copenhagen, Chapter 2 considers busyness in a more general way in Kierkegaard’s authorship by examining Kierkegaard’s critique of modernity. A consideration of this text is important as Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages* is often regarded as his most politically and socially charged text. However, unlike most accounts of *Two Ages* that tend to focus on Kierkegaard’s critique of reflection, I will aim to show that Kierkegaard is also concerned with a meaningless kind of action. Thus, this chapter seeks to demonstrate Kierkegaard’s concern with busyness in *Two Ages*, where busyness is presented as an empty, or illusory, pseudo-action.

These first two chapters thus act as a way to contextualise Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness within his own historical milieu; in the first chapter we consider the *real* Copenhagen of Kierkegaard’s time, and in the second we consider the *symbolic* Copenhagen, presented in a more general way as Kierkegaard’s critique of modernity, in *Two Ages*. In the chapters that follow, I aim to explore busyness as it appears in Kierkegaard’s authorship, from its construction to its critique.

In Chapter 3 we begin with an examination of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or Volume I*, with a particular focus on his construction of the concept of busyness in the character of the aesthete. In the first part of this chapter I present A’s *critique* of busyness from the aesthetic worldview; here, we view busyness through the eyes of the aesthete as an activity to be avoided due to how boring busyness is. Busyness, A will tell us, is “[t]he most ludicrous of all ludicrous things” (EO I 25). In what I refer to as the “busyness-aphorism”, the aesthete presents a view of busyness that is to be avoided at all costs; not necessarily due to its pointlessness – though indeed he does consider it pointless – but primarily because it is boring. However, as we will see, in his attempts to avoid boredom, the aesthete ironically becomes busy. In the second part of this chapter we consider the *construction* *of the concept* of busyness itself, that is, a busyness that is fundamentally a category of the aesthetic sphere. In this sense, we begin to see “Kierkegaard’s” critique of busyness, as an activity that is detached, aimless, “engaged” with multiplicity, and ultimately defined as stagnation or inertia. Thus, to be busy, I argue, one occupies the aesthetic sphere of existence. To avoid busyness one cannot remain in the aesthete sphere; thus to escape *beyond busyness* will mean moving beyond the aesthetic sphere into the ethical and religious.

Chapter 4 acts a preliminary to the remaining chapters. Here, I will consider the criticisms of busyness as they have appeared in the Christian tradition. Specifically, I focus on the musings of two Christian thinkers: Blaise Pascal and Richard Baxter. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that avoiding busyness has always been a preoccupation for the Christian, and in doing so, lays the groundwork for Kierkegaard’s own critique of busyness, as presented from the ethical-religious sphere of existence.

In Chapter 5, I begin my analysis of Kierkegaard’s religious critique of busyness. My focus is primarily on S. Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, where he endorses the view that the individual should strive to “will one thing”, whilst avoiding such vices as busyness and double-mindedness. In this chapter busyness is defined as a concern with multifariousness, or multiplicity. I argue that to be busy, for Kierkegaard, is to be a *fractured self*, committing to one’s projects only to “a certain degree”, and falling victim to a necessary double-mindedness. The answer, for Kierkegaard, is to “will one thing”, that is to *halt*, through the act of confession, and commit passionately to some single task. This chapter will systematically work through the text “An Occasional Discourse”, where I focus my attention on Kierkegaard’s discussion of *confession*, as an activity that *halts* the individual, the preliminary step in avoiding busyness. In this chapter, too, I consider the “attitudinal modalities” that prevent the individual from “will[ing] one thing” and thus halting. This chapter will also begin to develop the Kierkegaardian distinction between busyness and restlessness; whilst the former is something to be avoided, the latter is the fundamentally Christian stance of rest and unrest. Thus, almost paradoxically we will see how busyness is a kind of stagnation, whilst the halt necessary for avoiding busyness is an (inward) movement.

In Chapter 6, I begin to consider what kind of passionate task one must commit to in order to avoid busyness. In considering what this task might be, I explore Kierkegaard’s concept of “occupation” as well as the associated concepts of “vocation” or “calling” as a possible response to the problems posed by busyness. Engaging with the concept of vocation, primarily in three of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors (Judge William, “S. Kierkegaard”, and Anti-Climacus), I argue that one’s vocation, or calling, stands in stark opposition to busyness, and that by committing to it, one may avoid becoming “busy”. In the first part of the chapter on Judge William, one’s vocation is viewed in opposition to the idleness and anti-work attitude of the aesthete. To have a vocation for the Judge is to commit to some specific task within the framework of a wider society. In part two I consider S. Kierkegaard’s view of vocation in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and other works, as an opposition to a life of mere occupation and busyness. In part three I examine Anti-Climacus’s musings on vocation in the *Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. For Anti-Climacus, one’s vocation is necessarily religious, and for the Christian is represented by the *call* of Christ. This chapter draws to a close with the implication that for Kierkegaard, the only way to avoid busyness is through the religious commitment to God.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I consider whether one’s vocation, or calling, need necessarily be religious to escape busyness, before answering in the positive: that the only way to avoid busyness, for Kierkegaard, is through the restless commitment to some single task, which for Kierkegaard is expressed through one’s calling to become a genuine Christian individual. Furthermore, this chapter also seeks to demonstrate to what extent Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness might have significance for our own secular age; to achieve this I examine Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness through the lens of several contemporary thinkers who present similar concerns to Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness.

# “The Capital’s Boisterous Movement”: Situating Busyness

*“The only person I can say I envy is he, when he comes, whom I call my reader, who will be able to sit in peace and quiet and enjoy, purely intellectually, the infinitely comic drama that, by my existing there, I have had Copenhagen perform. Doubtless, I see the value of this drama better than he does […]. From the point of view of poetry, it must be abridged. And that is how it will be for my reader. On the other hand, the religious begins in and with the daily routine, and that is how I understand my life: for me, this infinitely comic drama is a martyrdom. But it is certain that were I not aware of myself as being under an infinite religious obligation, I could wish to travel to some isolated place and sit down and laugh and laugh – even though it would pain me that this krähwinkel [small town/backwater] is my beloved native land, this prostituted city of residence of bourgeois philistinism, my beloved Copenhagen” (KJN V: NB8 96).*

### Introduction

The aim of this chapter, as the title suggests, is to “situate busyness”. In other words, to give an account of the contextual milieu in which Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness emerges. In this way our concern will consider specific historical features – biographical, philosophical, sociological, topographical etc. – that I believe to be necessary when exploring Kierkegaard’s criticisms of busyness. Kierkegaard’s insights – like all great thinkers – neither arose in a vacuum, nor did Kierkegaard intend them to; rather, Kierkegaard remains a thinker profoundly connected to his environment: fundamentally concerned with what it means to be a Christian in modernity. The above being said, it is also possible to consider ways in which Kierkegaard’s insights, specifically on busyness, may be relevant to us today; this question will be a task for a later chapter. The task for now is to consider how busyness is situated within Kierkegaard’s writings.

There are many ways to organise a “contextual” chapter. One way might be to focus on historical events, listing them chronologically, in order to demonstrate ways in which a concern with busyness may have developed in Kierkegaard’s authorship. Another way might be to focus on the biography of Kierkegaard himself, and show how Kierkegaard was concerned with busyness throughout his life. Whilst I will note historical and biographical facts that I consider important for an understanding of Kierkegaardian busyness, I am not writing a historical biography of Kierkegaard. Instead, the aim of the present work is to show how – throughout his authorship – Kierkegaard develops a philosophically interesting concept of busyness, and a subsequent critique. Thus, in order to “situate” this concept in Kierkegaard’s writings, I focus not only on the *time* in which it emerged, but primarily the *place*: Copenhagen, the bustling commercial capital city of Denmark.

Much has been written on Kierkegaard and Copenhagen. For instance, George Pattison, whose work I draw upon heavily in this chapter, suggests that Kierkegaard and Copenhagen mirror other nineteenth century writers, such as Baudelaire and Paris, Dickens and London, and Dostoevsky and St. Petersburg, in the sense that they all are today considered so intimately tied to the cities in which they authored their works (Pattison, 1999: xv). As Pattison notes, Copenhagen is not merely a background to Kierkegaard’s authorship “but constitutes a tangible presence in his writings” and is “a living imaginary by which [Kierkegaard] articulate[s] both his critique of modernity and his struggle to redefine the task of Christian discipleship” (Pattison, 2013: 2). In this vein then, we also find in Kierkegaard’s deployment of Copenhagen in his writings his concept and critique of busyness.

As the focus of this chapter is on the *place* instead of the *time* in which Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness emerges, rather than present my observations chronologically I will instead organise the chapter *topographically*. Thus, the chapter will be split into two main sections. The first section will focus on “The City of Copenhagen” itself, in which I will consider those places discussed in Kierkegaard’s authorship which he associates with the concept of busyness: the Kierkegaard family home, the University of Copenhagen, the streets and suburbs of the city, and the public spaces of which Kierkegaard is particularly attentive. After a brief “Interlude”, in which I will consider “Liminal Spaces” we cross the bridge into the next section of the chapter, finding ourselves moving away from the city into the “Other Places” that Kierkegaard views as not involving busyness, but as ways to transcend busyness: the churches of Copenhagen, the surrounding countryside, and the graveyards beyond the city walls.

In short, then, this chapter can be said to deal with the *real* Copenhagen, whilst the following chapter – examining Kierkegaard’s critique of modernity more generally in *Two Ages* – deals with the symbolic Copenhagen; *the Copenhagen which Kierkegaard feels we all inhabit*.

With these preliminaries in mind, let us turn to consider Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen.

### Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen

The Danish capital city of Copenhagen (Danish: *København*; literally, the merchant port) is just as significant a part of Kierkegaard’s life and writings as any other biographical feature, and serves as a worthy backdrop for considering Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness. As noted, Pattison, among others,[[6]](#footnote-6) stresses the importance of the city of Copenhagen for Kierkegaard, suggesting that it is as central a part of Kierkegaard’s philosophical development as his engagement with Romanticism and Hegelianism (2013). In many ways, the city of Copenhagen is yet another character in Kierkegaard’s corpus, appearing frequently throughout his writings.

To be sure, Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen has no fixed identity, but was rather a place that shifted and evolved throughout his life. There is no denying that Kierkegaard lived through turbulent times. During his lifetime the city of Copenhagen underwent drastic changes, as the country of “Denmark was transformed from an early modern society (a rather rigid, hierarchical, but ‘face-to-face’ absolute monarchy) into a modern mass society based on the anonymous forces of the marketplace and popular sovereignty” (Bukdahl, 2001: xi). In Copenhagen these changes were amplified, where the population increased by fifty-percent during Kierkegaard’s lifetime: between the years 1800-1850 Copenhagen grew from roughly 100,000 to 150,000 citizens (Zerlang, 1997a: 83).

It was, in many ways, a city defined by a certain tension: between the pull of the future, expressed through the steady globalisation of its market, the addition of popular entertainment venues – such as Tivoli, where the upper and lower classes mixed – and the slow secularisation of its population, against a nostalgia for the past, the commitment to traditional monarchic rule, and the intimacy of religious and family life. One could suggest that this tension between two ages was made manifest by Copenhagen’s steady overflow beyond its medieval city walls, which were maintained throughout Kierkegaard’s lifetime. In the years after Kierkegaard’s death, between 1856-1858, Copenhagen’s four main gates – Vesterport, Nørreport, Østerport, and Amagerport – were dismantled, and in 1868 a law was passed to begin the demolition of the city’s fortifications. The pull of the future would prevail, and Copenhagen would continue in its march towards modernity.

Within this rapidly changing place, Kierkegaard was born, lived, and died. According to Pattison, notwithstanding repeated trips to Berlin, and short excursions to elsewhere in Denmark, most notably Jutland and Gilleleje, Kierkegaard lived almost his entire life “within a one-kilometre radius of Copenhagen’s *Vor Frue Kirke*” (Pattison, 2013: 1). In Copenhagen Kierkegaard’s life was concentrated, and so it is no wonder then the frequency with which various parts of Copenhagen appear in Kierkegaard’s writings. E. P. Alverez refers to the way in which Copenhagen is incorporated into Kierkegaard’s writings as “Kierkegaard’s concreteness […] the most salient mark of Kierkegaard’s work” (Alverez, 2011: 109). This concreteness is crucial to Kierkegaard’s overall authorial project. It is therefore important to recognise, as Thulstrup notes, that “[w]hen Kierkegaard names something of Copenhagen in his works, he does so with a certain artistic and literary purpose” (Thulstrup, 1986: 126). There is a reason Kierkegaard uses *real places* in his writings as locations for his pseudonymous characters’ endeavours, and it is hardly for lack of imagination. Kierkegaard’s use of real places within his writings, is an attempt to ground the reader, who at the time was limited to the reading public of Copenhagen, within their own existential milieu. In contrast to the dominant academic philosophy of Kierkegaard’s time, namely Hegelianism, Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings sought to highlight the existential, the subjective, and the lived experience of humanity. Significant for the present study, is that this “existential milieu” is *the city*. Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness, I suggest, could only have emerged within such a city – which is why we take Copenhagen as our starting point for the present work.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Interestingly, when Kierkegaard does mention places in Copenhagen within his writings, it is limited to the pseudonymous works, and his own *Journals*. Kierkegaard “never [mentions real locations] in the edifying and Christian texts” (Thulstrup, 1986: 126). This is significant concerning busyness, as for Kierkegaard, it is the religious alone that offers one an escape from busyness.

Relatedly, an aside worth noting is that Pattison (1999) links Kierkegaard’s fascination with Copenhagen to his construction of the aesthetic, and specifically with what Pattison calls “the spectacular”. For Pattison, the spectacular refers to two different processes that were taking place across cities during the nineteenth century. The first of these processes of spectacularisation stresses what Pattison calls “the material reconstruction of the urban environment” (1999: 4). By this he means the demolition of the old to be replaced by the new. In Copenhagen this took the form of “the wholesale destruction of old, medieval areas with their narrow overcrowded residential streets and their replacement by broad, panoramic boulevards lined with shops, restaurants and places of entertainment” (1999: 10). The second of these processes, closely linked to the first, “concerns the proliferation of spectacular experiences” (1999: 5). Here, Pattison has in mind such visual media as “peep shows, dioramas, ‘dissolving views’, cosmoramas, the stereoscope and, in 1896, the beginnings of modern cinema” (1999:10). These visual media created “a new kind of observer”, wherein “the subject now came to play a determinative role in envisioning the world” (1999:10). Of course, as Pattison notes, for Kierkegaard this kind of new urban observer is made manifest in his construction of the aesthete. This can be seen most prominently in *Either/Or* where the aesthete – called repeatedly “Mr. Observer” by Judge William – self-actualises the process of spectacularisation; “transmuting reality into image” (Pattison, 1999: 12). This is significant, because as we will see throughout the present work “busyness” as construed by Kierkegaard is a concept that is fundamentally aesthetic. In all three spheres – aesthetic, ethical, and religious – in busyness the individual is always brought back to an aesthetic form of existence. The notion of “*to-be-seen*-to-be-busy” will become a defining characteristic of busyness’s aesthetic makeup, wherein busyness as a kind of illusion of movement creates an individual concerned with image over reality.

This section will thus consider the *real* Copenhagen in Kierkegaard’s writings; that is, the physicality of the Copenhagen of the nineteenth century, situated on the east coast of Denmark, as *historically* and *topographically* significant for Kierkegaard’s emerging critique of busyness, before turning to the *symbolic* Copenhagen in the next chapter. I will consider specific places, important to Kierkegaard, such as the Kierkegaard family home, the University of Copenhagen, the notable streets and suburbs Kierkegaard draws upon in his writings, and the public places that Kierkegaard examines. Key will be the ways in which these various urban settings have connections to, but also assist in situating, Kierkegaard’s emerging critique of busyness.

#### “Born in a Demoralised Provincial Town”: The Kierkegaard Family Home

Kierkegaard was born on 5th May 1813, in the same year that the Danish State declared bankruptcy following the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), and shortly after England’s capture of the Danish Naval fleet during the Bombardment of Copenhagen (1807). Kierkegaard would later reflect on his birth in his *Journals*:

I was born in 1813, the wrong fiscal year, in which so many other bad banknotes were put into circulation, and my life seems best compared to one of them. There is something of greatness about me, but because of the poor state of the market I am not worth much. And at times a banknote like that became a family’s misfortune (KJN JJ:198).

The majority of early biographies of Kierkegaard paint a despairing picture of his formative years. For example, in one of the earliest, John A. Bain’s 1935 account of Kierkegaard, he is described as “a lonely child”, “old fashioned, precocious” (Bain, 1935: 25). It is said of Kierkegaard that “he had never been a real child, never had child companions, never played real child games” (Bain, 1935: 24). A few years later, Walter Lowrie opens his authoritative biography of Kierkegaard with the chapter “A Tragic Background” (Lowrie, 1938: 19), and describes the young Kierkegaard as “dispos[ed] to melancholy” (Lowrie, 1938: 27). A slightly later biographical account of Kierkegaard emphasises this tragic background to his life in its title, referencing Hamlet, and alluding to Kierkegaard as “*The Melancholy Dane*” (Martin, 1950). Martin’s account of Kierkegaard opens with the claim that “his life appears as a sad tragedy […] spent in laborious writing, in inward struggles, and in lonely misunderstanding” (Martin, 1950: 13). Kierkegaard’s “home-life” seems to play an equally defining role on his character as the city in which he lived. Of course, these two biographical features are intimately related, and thus the Kierkegaard family home is one “place” within Copenhagen that is of interest in relation to this account of Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness.

To clarify, it is not my intention to debate the factual accuracy of any of these biographical claims, and their effect on Kierkegaard’s *character*; rather, regarding Kierkegaard’s home life two features are of interest to the present study, and raise several questions worth exploring. (1) The fact that Kierkegaard’s father was a *businessman*, and to be sure, one of Copenhagen’s most successful. What is the relationship between “busyness” and “business”? How are they connected in Kierkegaard’s writings? (2) The fact that Kierkegaard’s own homelife itself – “spent in laborious writing” – also seems to be aptly described as “busyness”. Indeed, Kierkegaard was no idler. Throughout his life he remained an incredibly busy individual, and over twelve years (1843-1855) achieved an immense literary output. Was Kierkegaard guilty of the kind of busyness of which he is so critical? Is Kierkegaard somewhat hypocritical, or ironic, when it comes to his critique of busyness? Or is the busyness involved in Kierkegaard’s authorial project something different entirely? These questions cannot be entirely answered here, but they lay the groundwork to a key distinction in this thesis: that between *busyness* and *restlessness*.

##### Kierkegaard’s Business

A repeating theme throughout many accounts of Kierkegaard’s early years stress the relationship to his father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard (1756-1838). Michael Pedersen was originally a shepherd’s boy, living in rural Jutland, who had moved to Copenhagen at the age of eleven to be an apprentice to his uncle, a dry goods merchant on one of Copenhagen’s busiest streets, Østergade. Through a mix of good fortune and cleverness, Michael Pedersen eventually established his own business, dealing in luxury Chinese and West Indian goods, such as sugar and coffee. By the time Kierkegaard was born, Michael Pedersen was one of Copenhagen’s richest businessmen; though it should be stressed, at the time of Kierkegaard’s birth, Michael Pedersen had been retired for well over a decade. As Swenson notes, “[a] merchant who retires at forty from a successful business career in order to have leisure to repent his sins, read Wolffian metaphysics, and bring his children up in the fear of God, [is no] ordinary or commonplace character” (Swenson, 1920: 2). Similarly, for Pattison, Michael Pedersen is one of the figures whom “haunts” Kierkegaard’s authorship (1990: 79). His influence on Kierkegaard is undoubted.

Much has been written on Michael Pedersen’s influence on Kierkegaard. But most accounts tend to focus on Kierkegaard’s father’s pious upbringing, and religious melancholy; and the *inheritance of sin* that Kierkegaard felt left by his father.[[8]](#footnote-8) Less explored is the occupation Kierkegaard’s father held, and the impact of the *literal* *inheritance* on Kierkegaard’s writings. Indeed, the fact that Kierkegaard’s father was one of Copenhagen’s wealthiest businessmen allowed him to leave to Kierkegaard an inheritance great enough that it supported Kierkegaard throughout his whole life, and gave him the financial freedom to publish his own works, and devote himself entirely to his authorship.

Thus, the question arises, considering Michael Pedersen’s influence on Kierkegaard: *was Kierkegaard’s father, being a businessman, significant to the present study?* *That is, significant to Kierkegaard’s development of his critique of busyness?*

Initially, it seems that the answer is yes, when we consider that many of Kierkegaard’s criticisms of “busyness” are often accompanied by references towards “businessmen”, or “those men of business” (*Forretningsmands* (EO1 25)). Not to mention the connotations between “busyness” and “worldliness”; that is, the pursuit of worldly wealth, honour, and prestige (WL 94, CD 227, UDVS 37-44). Are “busyness” and “business” the same thing for Kierkegaard? In the English language the connection between busyness and business is more obvious, where the word “business” derives from the word “busyness” (itself a derivative of the Old English “bisignis”). Further, both words are phonetically similar. However, in Danish the words “busyness” (*travlhed*) and “business” (*forretning*) do not share an etymological, nor phonetical, connection. The Danish word for busy (*travl*) derives from the French *travail* (i.e. to toil, to work, and to suffer-through), whilst the Danish word *forretning* is Norwegian in origin. That said, Kierkegaard does *thematically connect* these concepts; and, so whilst they do not share an etymological root, they are part of the same semantic field within Kierkegaard’s authorship. Frequently, as we will see throughout the thesis, Kierkegaard considers busyness and business to be somewhat interchangeable. That said, “busyness” is more general, more far-reaching, and thus more interesting as a philosophical concept for Kierkegaard, in the sense that it applies to more than the world of socio-economic matters to which business is largely confined. However, that is not to say that the socio-economic connotations of business do not carry over to the concept of busyness itself. Indeed, they do. The allusion to money, and worldliness, in the concept of busyness when applied to the religious, in Kierkegaard’s view, highlight the business-like, or institutionalised nature of Danish Christendom.

So, if busyness and business are semantically related terms for Kierkegaard, *does the biographical fact that Kierkegaard’s father was one of Copenhagen’s most successful businessmen have any bearing on Kierkegaard’s conception and critique of what he calls busyness?*

To answer this question, it is fruitful to engage with a more general question: *in what way does the financial inheritance of Kierkegaard’s father effect Kierkegaard’s authorship?*

As noted, Kierkegaard was clearly financially indebted to his father. Indeed, when Michael Pedersen died Kierkegaard inherited “31,335 rixdollars in real estate, stocks, and bonds” (Cappelørn, et al., 2007: 846).[[9]](#footnote-9) How much of an affect this had on Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings is harder to quantify – though it is clear that Kierkegaard’s “authorship” would have been less likely to exist without it. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s wealth and bourgeois standing led Adorno to suggest that “Kierkegaard falls to the mercy of his own historical situation, that of the *rentier*” (1999: 48). That is, that Kierkegaard himself was above the immediate concerns of capital, and therefore his wealth blinded him “to […] socioeconomic interrelationships” (Adorno, 1999: 49). Adorno’s reading points towards the view that any money that Kierkegaard did possess, was something to which he paid little attention; and something that therefore made little impression on his writings. Recent scholarship however has rejected Adorno’s view, and there are now several accounts that suggest Kierkegaard was much more aware not only of his own socioeconomic situation, but that of the society around him.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is also clear that Kierkegaard recognised, quite acutely, the effect of his father’s financial inheritance, as well as his own socioeconomic status and advantages. Towards the end of his life, in 1852, he wrote in his *Journals* under the heading “The Course of My Life”that by “having private means and being independent, it was easier for me to express existentially what I had understood […] which made action easier for me than for others” (KJN VIII: NB25 114). The “others” to whom he refers are clearly the less wealthy, and in an earlier passage he acknowledges this socioeconomic divide: “the fact that I have had the privilege of being able to live independently. I am fully aware of this and for that reason feel exceedingly inferior to men who have been able to develop an authentic life of the mind and spirit in actual poverty” (JP 6489). Indeed, Kierkegaard points towards money as one of the main reasons for his writing (JP 6132). Kierkegaard was clearly aware of the advantages his inheritance had given him.

However, whilst it was after all his father’s inheritance that gave him the *financial* security to spend his entire life working on his authorship, it seems that the main way Kierkegaard felt himself indebted to his father, was *spiritually*: this is the main way that Michael Pedersen *haunts* Kierkegaard’s authorship. For despite his worldly riches, Michael Pedersen remained a deeply religious – and indeed even superstitious – man. Influenced greatly by the Moravian Church, a pietist movement which had arrived in Denmark in the early eighteenth century, he held onto a religiosity that deeply influenced and affected his whole family, especially a young Søren Kierkegaard. And, as Pattison remarks “[a]lthough he established his house-hold at the heart of Copenhagen’s cultural and commercial centre *the increasingly liberal ethos of the market place scarcely penetrated the walls of the patriarchal home*” (Pattison, 1990: 82).[[11]](#footnote-11) Two years after his father’s death, on a journey to Sæding – the rural parish where Michael Pedersen was born – Kierkegaard wrote: “I learned from him what fatherly love is, and through this I gained a concept of divine fatherly love, the one single unshakeable thing in life, the true Archimedean point” (KJN III: NB6 24). Kierkegaard also devoted his religious upbuilding discourses to his father. And, it is interesting to note that whilst the dedication in these religious writings point towards the great *religious inheritance* from his father, Kierkegaard also alludes to the *financial inheritance* as well, being sure to include within the dedication his father’s profession: “To the late Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, formally a clothing merchant here in the city, my father, these discourses are dedicated” (EUD 3).

So, it seems in many ways that whilst Kierkegaard does connect busyness with business thematically throughout his writings, where it concerns his father’s business, it is overshadowed by his father’s religiosity. Yet, this is not to say that Michael Pedersen’s business did not influence Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness. Because of the conceptual opposition between busyness and the religious, there is the possibility of a more indirect influence; namely, Kierkegaard’s father’s business is viewed positively rather than negatively by Kierkegaard. In other words, that Kierkegaard’s father was a prosperous businessman does more to develop Kierkegaard’s religious inclinations in a positive direction, than it does towards the negative development of his concept of busyness. Perhaps, the way that Michael Pedersen was able to marry the immense material wealth he had accumulated with his religiosity, rather than merely the fact that he was wealthy, is the defining influence of Michael Pedersen’s business on Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness. For, as we will see later, Kierkegaard’s criticism of busyness does not rule out a life of earthly, material existence, but rather critiques a certain kind of life, wherein these aspects become dominant.[[12]](#footnote-12)

So, if Kierkegaard’s father’s *business* has little direct influence on Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness, what about Kierkegaard’s own *busyness?*

##### Kierkegaard’s Busyness

Kierkegaard was an incredibly busy individual. His home-life was spent in “laborious writing” (Martin, 1950: 13), and “[f]or long periods of time Kierkegaard’s extreme industriousness isolated him from his surroundings” (Garff, 2005: 292), both social and geographical. Kierkegaard was indeed aware of his “enormous productivity”, and noted it often in his *Journals* (KJN VI: NB 17). In Clare Carlisle’s recent biography of Kierkegaard – *The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* – she draws attention to the high-speed world which Kierkegaard inhabited and in which he took part; whilst at the same time alluding to the paradoxical nature of Kierkegaard’s own busyness (Carlisle, 2019). In the opening pages Carlisle writes: “Never before has [Kierkegaard] moved so quickly! And yet, he is sitting quite still, not uncomfortably – resting, even” (Carlisle, 2019: 3). Of course, Carlisle means to describe Kierkegaard’s experience on one of the newest transportation technologies, the train; nonetheless, the imagery of the philosopher moving with haste whilst remaining at rest is useful and a theme we will return to in a later chapter.

Despite Kierkegaard’s relentless activity, he went to great lengths to conceal his efforts from others. For instance, his daily walks aimed partly to “create the image of himself as an indolent person”, as well as distance himself from his pseudonyms (Alverez, 2011: 112). In fact, when it came to the pseudonymous nature of Kierkegaard’s works, he went to unusual lengths to hide his identity, “giving the world the impression he was a mere idler” (Pattison, 1999: 14), even when he had no time for his daily walks. In his *Journals* he writes:

During the time I was reading proofs of *Either/Or* and writing the upbuilding discourses, I had almost no time to walk the streets. I then used another method. Every evening when I left home exhausted and had eaten at Mini’s, I stopped at the theatre for ten minutes – not a minute more. Familiar as I was, I counted on there being several gossips at the theatre who would say: Every single night he goes to the theatre; he does not do another thing. O, you darling gossips thank you – without you I could never have achieved what I wanted (JP VI 6332).

If Kierkegaard was spending all day in public, then he could not be thought of by others as being a busy writer, nor could he be considered the name behind the pseudonyms. But, of course, ironically this deceptive activity really only added to his now revealed busyness.

Yet, despite outward appearances, hidden industriousness, and deceptive acts, Kierkegaard would not consider his own activity to be anything like the busyness of which he is critical. So, what exactly did Kierkegaard consider his activity to be? Is Kierkegaard’s busyness, *busyness?* Is Kierkegaard in some way hypocritical, or perhaps ironic, when it comes to his own busy activity?

Kierkegaard must have been aware of this apparent contradiction in his own life, for in a rather telling reflection from 1849, on the aesthetic character of his own age, Kierkegaard writes in his *Journals*:

I think constantly of only one thing: that I never become so busy that I forgot to sorrow over my sins and reflect on how I have transgressed (KJN NB11 25).

The above, taken from a longer passage on the illusory Christianity that Kierkegaard feels dominates his age, manifesting in a desire for distraction, shows clearly that Kierkegaard’s task, at least as he saw it, was certainly not some inane busyness, as a way to pass the time nor, acquire wealth or worldly fame. Rather, it must be assumed that Kierkegaard’s authorship, as he sees it, has some underlying motivation behind it. Indeed, Kierkegaard does suggest that his life is “under an infinite religious obligation”, and he does in many ways view his life and authorship as a kind of martyrdom (KJN V: NB8 96). Thus, if his father’s inheritance provided the *means* for his writing, then this religious “obligation” provided the *end*.

Whether Kierkegaard’s busyness was *busyness* is a difficult question to answer, and one that will be returned to in Chapter 6, where we will consider the concept of vocation in relation to busyness. For, in doing so we will consider one of the key distinctions of this thesis, that between *busyness* and *restlessness.* Briefly, in busyness one plays at activity, so busyness is mere illusion of movement, a stagnation and inertia; whilst restlessness for Kierkegaard, regardless of outward appearance, is true movement, true activity. This is why Carlisle’s imagery of Kierkegaard moving whilst at rest is so useful, for it alludes to the way in which movement for Kierkegaard is inverted, and points towards the way in which Kierkegaardian busyness is a kind of non-stop inertia.[[13]](#footnote-13)

#### “Busy with his studies”: The University of Copenhagen

Comparable to his home-life, the University of Copenhagen was an equally important place within the city concerning Kierkegaard’s philosophical development. It is similarly important as a place that Kierkegaard viewed as partaking in the busyness of the age. Despite spending a decade at the university, Kierkegaard rarely refers to it directly in his *Journals* and elsewhere. Unlike some of the other places referenced in Kierkegaard’s writings, his observations on the university can be found indirectly, primarily from comments on “university students”, the professors, and through literary tales of philosophy students, the most notable example being Johannes Climacus.

It is worth remembering that during Kierkegaard’s life, the University, like many of the city’s large institutions was becoming increasingly bureaucratic and centralised. Under the rule of Frederick VI, the university’s “self-governance had been severely curtailed” (Tudvad, 2005: 174),[[14]](#footnote-14) and its Board of Directors (*Direktionen for Universitetet og de Lærde Skoler*) included such established figures as J. P. Mynster, who was later Bishop of Zealand, and the main target for Kierkegaard’s attack on the Danish State Church. Of course, Kierkegaard was well aware of the enveloping bureaucracy of his age; and, in *Two Ages* (to which we turn to in the next chapter), Kierkegaard presents a scathing critique of the rationalisation and “sensibility” of the age, negating the possibility of passion and immediacy – and crucially, genuine action. Indeed, part of this process of bureaucratisation, or institutionalisation – or even *businessification* – is captured within Kierkegaard’s conception of *busyness*; the empty, illusory, or pseudo-activity that Kierkegaard feels dominates the city of Copenhagen.

Kierkegaard attended the University of Copenhagen from 1830-1840. Whilst at the start Kierkegaard was a keen student, this initial enthusiasm soon waned. The university’s records, Kierkegaard’s own notebooks, and accounts from those who knew him suggest that between 1835 and 1836 Kierkegaard had tired of academia, and theological scholarship specifically. In his *Journals* Kierkegaard alludes to the way in which he considers theological scholarship to have complicated the Bible of the New Testament. In a *Journal* entry from 1835 he writes: “the enormous mass of interpreters has on the whole done more harm than good to the understanding of the New Testament” (JP I 202). Similarly, in *For Self-Examination*, Kierkegaard would go on to suggest that theological scholarship has become a kind of busyness; a worldly secular concern with “interpretation” rather than the task of becoming a Christian:[[15]](#footnote-15)

Everybody turns into an interpreter, public officials become authors, and every blessed day an interpretation is published, one more learned, more penetrating, more elegant, more profound, more ingenious, more wonderful, more beautiful than the other. Criticism, which is supposed to maintain an overview, can scarcely maintain an overview of this enormous literature; indeed, criticism itself becomes such a prolix literature that it is impossible to maintain an overview of the criticism: everything is interpretation […]. And not only this, that everything became interpretation – no, they also shifted the view of what earnestness is and made busyness with interpretations into real earnestness (FSE 33-4 / SV XII 322).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Whilst we will consider the idea of “busyness” in *For Self-Examination* in a later chapter, it is worth here saying something about Kierkegaard’s overriding anti-academic standpoint, and his continual disparagement with the character he calls “the professor” or “assistant professor”, bywhich he means *the Hegelian*.

During Kierkegaard’s time as a student, the most influential trend amongst the Copenhagen academe was Hegelianism; that is, the philosophical system of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). I use the term “trend” with its modern connotations of popularity and fashionableness, for indeed there was a real aura of excitement around the German philosopher. As Stewart notes, “the philosophy of Hegel was something of a fad among the students [of Copenhagen]” created and maintained by the scholar, and Kierkegaard’s private tutor, Hans Lassen Martensen (Stewart, 2015: 23). Kierkegaard’s relationship to Hegel and the Danish Hegelians is complicated.[[17]](#footnote-17) On the one hand he is in many ways a disciple of Hegel; his writing and philosophy follows Hegelian dialectical structures (at times ironically, at others less so), and it is clear he is influenced by the ideas and concepts Hegel develops. On the other hand, Kierkegaard is one of Hegel’s greatest critics, considering Hegel’s systematising to be an empty and pointless endeavour.

To be sure, much has been written on Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel. One area that remains underexplored is the connection between Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel, and his more general disdain for the institutionalised academic world. For whilst Kierkegaard is inherently anti-systematic in his philosophical writings, this is rarely extended to stress that he is “consequently, more or less anti-institutional” (Bertman, 1972: 306). This has links to the bureaucratic and rationalistic nature of the age, and in many ways Kierkegaard views Hegelianism as equally as bureaucratic as the university (Robinson, 2019:26). It might be argued that Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian philosophy, and with academia more generally, constitutes a kind of *philosophical busyness*.[[18]](#footnote-18) For indeed it was in this way, alongside the bureaucratisation of the age, that Kierkegaard viewed “the university” as a kind of corrupt enterprise, engaged with “busyness”.

#### The Streets and Suburbs

Like Socrates, the Gadfly of Athens, Kierkegaard was one to walk around the streets and suburbs of Copenhagen, engaging with all whom he met. An account by one of Kierkegaard’s student peers stated that: “When you met [Kierkegaard] he was usually in the company of somebody [and] despite all his work, he was constantly on the street or in public places” (Kirmmse, 1996: 63). Kierkegaard too considered himself to be a kind of Socrates of Copenhagen (Stewart, 2015: 21), and would regularly engage with all those he encountered, interrupting their daily business/busyness to discuss his own philosophical musings and observations. Several of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, such as the never used “Street Inspector” alluded to in his *Journals* (Pattison, 1999: 18) and Vigilius Haufniensis – The Watchman of Copenhagen – in *The Concept of Anxiety*, stress Kierkegaard’s observations and meanderings through the city. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard would wander the streets of the market town; and, as a result many of Copenhagen’s busy streets and suburbs are mentioned within Kierkegaard’s writings. Whilst most streets and suburbs of Copenhagen are of interest concerning Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, it would go beyond the scope of the present work to consider them all, I will therefore consider only Østergade – although, as we will see, Østergade is typical of the urban landscape in general. [[19]](#footnote-19)

##### Østergade

Østergade, or East Street, was one of Copenhagen’s busiest streets; indeed, it was on Østergade that Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard was apprenticed to his uncle. In Kierkegaard’s writings, the most well-known reference to Østergade is to be found in the opening of “The Seducer’s Diary” in *Either/Or I* (EO I 317). It is symbolic of the nineteenth century streets of Copenhagen, and thus much that applies to Østergade may be seen to apply more generally to the typical urban character of which Kierkegaard is so critical.

Fredrika Bremer describes Østergade in a way that accentuates its hustle and bustle:

Østergade, terrible to recall for a quiet spirit, one who is not used to the movement in the streets of Copenhagen […] Whatever you may desire […] – no matter what you ask for, you will be guided to this street. And when you come to Østergade, at all times, you find that the whole town is already there, shopping, strolling, conversing, yawning. And if you happen to find yourself in that terrible position of needing to hurry through Østergade to reach the other end of town, then, oh poor experienced wanderer, put your heart in the hands of God and try to find your way as best you can (Bremer, cited in: Steiner, 2014: 78).

According to Pattison, Østergade is “in the midst of what Kierkegaard would come to call ‘the human swarm’, the life in the crowd” (Pattison, 2013: 14). It is thus representative of life in the modern city in general, and a depiction being the individual lost in the crowd that Kierkegaard considers afflicts us all in modernity. In the next chapter, we’ll consider Kierkegaard’s description of “the crowd” and the damning effect of this entity on the individual.

#### Public Places

The following is not an account of Kierkegaard’s view of “the public”, but rather the use of “public places” within his writings; though, of course the two are linked. As mentioned, Kierkegaard uses examples of real places in his writing to ground and locate the reader within their own existential milieu, as such; but I will narrow the focus and consider Tivoli as the prime example of the modern public space for Kierkegaard. Indeed, the theme park Tivoli occupies an interesting place in Kierkegaard’s writings. Whilst, admittedly, Kierkegaard does not mention Tivoli very often, when he does mention Tivoli it is, as one would expect, in a rather negative light, and so not without interest, as Pattison notes (1999: 23). In my view, Kierkegaard’s comments on Tivoli are linked to his critique of busyness.[[20]](#footnote-20) Hence, it is worth considering what he notes of one of the world’s oldest theme parks.

##### Tivoli

When it opened in 1843 (the same year Kierkegaard began his authorship in earnest, with the publication of *Either/Or*) Tivoli sat outside the city walls of Copenhagen, accessible through the *Vesterport*. If Copenhagen itself was not “busy”, relative to other European capitals such as Paris, Tivoli certainly was. According to Pattison, when Tivoli first opened, on its first Sunday over 10,000 people entered through its gates; in its first year it had 372,237 visitors – nearly one third of Denmark’s total population at the time (Pattison, 2013: 55) and nearly three times that of Copenhagen![[21]](#footnote-21) As Pattison states: “Copenhagen may have been little more than a market-town, but Tivoli made it possible for the citizens of Copenhagen to experience first-hand the modern urban crowd” (Pattison, 2013: 55). What does Kierkegaard say about Tivoli in his writings?

###### Spectacle

Tivoli is part of the spectacularisation of the modern city, and therefore fundamentally linked to Kierkegaard’s critique of the aesthetic mode of existence (Pattison, 1999). As noted above, the spectacular encompasses two distinct processes taking place in Copenhagen during Kierkegaard’s lifetime: *the modern redevelopment of urban areas*, and the *creation of spectacles*. It is primarily in the latter sense that Tivoli is understood as a paradigm example of the spectacular. For Martin Zerlang, it is helpful to consider the notion of the spectacular in relation to the sublime; if the sublime refers to that which is beyond the horizon of our understanding, measurement, and containment, then the spectacular is that in which such a feeling of greatness is “commodified.” In this case, sublime is indicative of the divine (and of nature), whilst the spectacular is indicative of man (and the city):

In contrast to the sublime the spectacle was located within the new commercial culture of the modern metropolis, indeed it could be interpreted as the result of a technologically produced commodification of the sublime (Zerlang, forthcoming: 15).

In this way, Tivoli is a “city-within-a-city” (Zerlang, forthcoming: 2), a microcosm of the world outside its walls. One notable example of this were the many contraptions and mechanisms that were on display inside the theme-park: “in Tivoli the steam-driven merry-go-round was a positive symbol of the process of industrialisation […] where you – as observed by a satirist – *move without getting anywhere*” (Zerlang, 1999a: 88-9).[[22]](#footnote-22) One can see, within this depiction of Tivoli, as *spectacle*, an indication of one way that Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness will develop. Busyness for Kierkegaard, as we will see, is representative of this kind of pseudo-action, or -movement; it is in itself a kind of spectacle.

###### Distraction

It is interesting that Kierkegaard connects Tivoli with busyness, considering that Tivoli – viewed through the eyes of the Copenhageners of the nineteenth century, and today – is a place of leisure, and relaxation (TA 173-4fn77). Surely, this is the opposite of busyness? However, it is precisely through the notion of *distraction*, or *diversion*, that Tivoli can been seen as a place that Kierkegaard might define as “busy.” As we will see throughout the thesis, one aspect of busyness for Kierkegaard is that he views it as a distractive, indeed self-distractive mechanism.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus tells of a religious man who debates with himself whether to indulge in the distractions and diversions that can be found in Tivoli.[[24]](#footnote-24) The question that concerns him is, whilst acknowledging the necessity of such distractions for human life, is this distraction necessary *right now*, at this particular time. Karl Aho notes how Kierkegaard’s consideration of Tivoli in *Postscript* draws attention to “the vice of busyness” and “how easily [leisure] can become just another busy distraction from the most significant relationships in our lives” (Aho, 2016: 12). Aho considers that in his discussion of Tivoli, Kierkegaard is attempting to warn his readers that in finding time for distraction and leisure, they do not fall into the trap of yet more busyness: “busy people tend to fill their leisure with distracting busyness too” (2016: 13). In doing so, the religious runs the risk of being forgotten.

For Kierkegaard, this is indeed a danger that a distractive place, such as Tivoli, presents; whereby the religious and eternity are pushed aside. As Johannes Climacus states, “the lovers of Tivoli value eternity so little, since it is the nature of eternity to be always the same” (CUP 286 / SV VII 245). Thus, what the theme-park revellers seek is something new to distract them; but the “new” that they seek, becomes old very quickly, and in doing so, they move onto the next “new” distraction. The rides and shows of Tivoli offer them these distractions. The lovers of Tivoli seek to remain within the finite, constantly seeking variation. Their behaviour may be aptly described as Kierkegaardian busyness.

In this way, concerning busyness as distraction, or diversion, Johannes Climacus asserts that for the lovers of Tivoli, “variation [*Forandring*] is the highest law” (CUP 286 / SV VII 245). As we will see, variation, or multiplicity, is a key feature of busyness; key to the splitting of attention, or double-mindedness, and the pursuit of many different things that busyness entails. In Tivoli, Copenhagen’s public seek variation and multiplicity in microcosm: they busy themselves with distraction after distraction. Indeed, Aho notes that this is what we might call an inclination to “multi-tasking,” a feature of busy distraction he links to the Aesthete in *Either/Or* (2016: 12-13). We will explore this idea in more detail in Chapter 3.

***– Interlude –***

***Liminal Bridges: The Possibility of Escaping Busyness***

Like many places in Copenhagen, the bridges Langebro (The Long Bridge) and Knippelsbro (Knippel’s Bridge) appear frequently in Kierkegaard’s writings. Until recently[[25]](#footnote-25) these bridges were the only two connecting the city of Copenhagen to the island of Amager indirectly through the neighbouring district of Christianshavn. During Kierkegaard’s lifetime, Christianshavn was, whilst connected to Copenhagen, in many ways its opposite: quiet, deserted, and adorned with decaying warehouses from businesses that did not survive the financial crash of 1813-1820. It was a poor and destitute area of Copenhagen. Indeed, according to Steiner, “Kierkegaard regards Christianshavn as a mirror image of the city of Copenhagen” (Steiner, 2016: 142), arguably in both its contrast of poverty and richness, but also too in its contrast between its quietude and Copenhagen’s busyness. Here, I want to focus both on Christianshavn itself, but also on the “liminal space”, the *bridge* as symbolising the possibility of escaping the busy city of Copenhagen; specifically, I will focus on Langebro, though as we will see in Chapter 3, Knippelsbro too has links to Kierkegaard’s writings on busyness.[[26]](#footnote-26)

A liminal bridge, a space between worlds, Langebro receives its most significant treatment in Kierkegaard’s *Stages on Life’s Way*, in the section “‘Guilty’/‘Not Guilty’”. Here, in “Quidam’s Diary” under a section titled “A Possibility”, Quidam reflects on Langebro and its relationship to Copenhagen and Christianshavn:

Langebro [Long Bridge] has its name from its length; that is, as a bridge it is long but it is not much [of] a roadway, as one easily finds out by passing over it. Then when one is standing on the other side in Christianshavn, it in turn seems that the bridge must nevertheless be long, because one is far, very far away from Copenhagen.

When Quidam claims that “one is far, very far away from Copenhagen”, he has more than the quantitative measurement of the bridge in mind. For Quidam, not only is Langebro’s length expressed in Christianshavn’s physical *distance* from Copenhagen, but also in its fundamental *difference* from Copenhagen. As he continues:

It is immediately evident that one is not in the capital and royal-residence city; in a certain sense one misses the noise and the traffic in the streets; one seems to be out of one’s element by being outside the meeting and parting, the haste and hurry in which the most diverse matters equally assert themselves, outside the noisy community in which everyone contributes his share to the general racket. But in Christianshavn a quiet peacefulness reigns. People there do not seem to be acquainted with the aims and goals that prompt the inhabitants of the capital to such noisy and busy activity, do not seem to be aware of the heterogeneity that is at the root of the capital’s boisterous movement. Here it is not as if the earth moves – indeed, shakes – under one’s feet; one stands as securely as any stargazer or a submarine telescope gazer could wish for the sake of his observations. One looks about in vain for that social *poscimur* [summoning] of the capital, where it is so easy to go along, where at any moment one can get rid of oneself, at any hour find a seat in an omnibus, everywhere encompassed by diversions; here one feels abandoned and imprisoned in the stillness that isolates, where one cannot get rid of oneself, where one is encompassed on all sides by lack of diversion. In some sections the streets are so empty that one hears one’s own footsteps. The enormous warehouses contain nothing and bring in nothing, for echo[[27]](#footnote-27) is certainly a very quiet tenant, but when it comes to business and payment, it is no good to the owner. In the really populated sections, life is far from being extinct; nevertheless, far from being strident; it is like a quiet human noise that at least for me resembles the droning of summer, that by its droning suggests the stillness out in the country (SL 276-277).

Thus, Christianshavn differs fundamentally from Copenhagen: in Christianshavn, away from the busyness of the city, one finds oneself confronted with one’s self where one is unable to lose one’s self in the distractions and spectacles of the capital.

In her analysis of Kierkegaard and Copenhagen (2016), Steiner suggests that this contrast between the busyness of Copenhagen and the emptiness of Christianshavn “indicates a more positive manifestation of the overwhelming character of urban life” (2016: 143). This is manifested by a *tension between the busyness and emptiness of Copenhagen and Christianshavn respectively*, but also through a tension in the individual, which is illuminated through this topographical difference between Copenhagen and Christianshavn. She suggests that the modern city, to which Kierkegaard is seemingly opposed (in, for example, *Two Ages*), allows for the sustaining of conditions that “invigorate […] human existence” (2016: 143). These conditions, Steiner suggests, rather than render humankind’s existence as meaningless (as one of many, as lost in the crowd, etc.) allow for an understanding of the individual in relation to others, to goals, to relationships, that “render the city a potential source of orientation” (Steiner, 2016: 143). Conversely, because of the emptiness of Christianshavn – the isolation, the alienation, etc. – Kierkegaard, or rather, Quidam is alerted to this tension, and through this, Steiner suggests: Christianshavn demonstrates the possibility of both the “importance of the *messiness* and *richness* of city life” (Steiner, 2016: 143).[[28]](#footnote-28) In other words: *the busyness of city life gives the individual’s life meaning, when confronted with its opposite, that is, the silence of outside the city.*

I do not agree with Steiner’s analysis here. Whilst I concede that Kierkegaard is attempting to show the vast difference and tension between Copenhagen and Christianshavn, I do not consider Kierkegaard to be painting a positive picture of Copenhagen’s busyness, and a negative picture of Christianshavn’s emptiness. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, Steiner’s analysis seems to rest primarily upon the view that Christianshavn’s “stillness that isolates” is something to be avoided; an alienation of the individual. Yet, I consider it *precisely* this isolating silence and stillness that Kierkegaard recommends to individuals in modern urbanity. Kierkegaard wants the individual to remove themselves from diversion in order to confront themselves in their individuality (and ultimately their relation to God). Similarly, the “*quiet* human noise” that occupies Christianshavn is representative of a life of meaning that is not confined to the busyness and boisterousness of the city; a meaning that is not defined by external forces, but that must come from within.[[29]](#footnote-29) Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 5, stillness, silence, and isolation are precisely what Kierkegaard recommends as an antidote to the busyness of the modern age, and a way to re-orientate ourselves, and give our lives meaning; but, *that meaning must come from the stillness, silence and isolation itself*, and ultimately one’s confrontation with God, not from any other external factors, as Steiner seems to argue.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Returning to Langebro: the bridge itself, as the passage suggests, is representative of a transitory zone, a liminal space between the busyness of the capital, and somewhere else. It represents the *possibility* of escaping the spectacle, diversion, and busyness of the city, in order that we can come to confront ourselves; yet, as the name of the bridge makes clear, this journey is undoubtably a long one. To be sure, this allusion to a physical bridge in Kierkegaard’s writings leads us both thematically and topographically away from the city, and to consider ways that “other places” within Kierkegaard’s writings offer possible escapes from not only the busy capital, but busyness itself. If the city in its noise and busyness is representative of distraction, a lack of thought and ideality, then it is elsewhere – *beyond the city* – that a solution must be found. Indeed, towards the end of the passage, Quidam suggests that the “quiet human noise”, the “droning” reminds him of the stillness of the country. As we will soon see the countryside as an “other place” represents for Kierkegaard just one of three real and symbolic escapes from the busyness of Copenhagen.

### Other Places

It is not only the busy urban sprawl of Copenhagen that has real and symbolic significance for Kierkegaard. Other geographical places, real and imagined, play an important role in the background to the development of his ideas. As Pattison has shown in his “Kierkegaard and Copenhagen” (2013), these “other places” are (1) the church, (2) nature/the countryside, and (3) the graveyard. Whilst, as we will see, Pattison is concerned with these places in juxtaposition to the *city as a spectacle*, it is possible to see how these places connect with Kierkegaard’s concerns with busyness. Interestingly, these “other places” all point towards an *escape* from “busyness”, and the hectic life of the city’s inhabitants. So, whilst I will allude to Pattison’s remarks on these “other places”, noting his concerns with the “spectacle” of the city, I will also endeavour to demonstrate how they relate to busyness within Kierkegaard’s writings.

#### The Church: Transcendence Through Religion

Obviously, as a religious individual, the church occupied an important role in Kierkegaard’s life. Like the city of Copenhagen itself, the church is both reality and symbol for Kierkegaard within his writings. Indeed, for Pattison, Kierkegaard sees the church as (1) offering a real physical place wherein one can seek *silence and solitude* away from the crowd on the busy streets of Copenhagen, and (2) as symbolic of one’s true connection with God’s love. Yet, there is more to the church than this. As an institution rather than a physical place, Kierkegaard views the Church, with a capital “C” as both “a place of comfort and edification” as well as “a corrupt and disgraceful *business enterprise*” (Holm, 2013: 112).[[31]](#footnote-31) Whilst in this section, I will explore the former, that is, the church as both physical reality and symbol for Kierkegaard in relation the city, I will allude to the wider criticisms Kierkegaard makes of the Church (cf. Holm 2013) as an institution before returning to this latter issue in more detail in Chapter 5*,* wherein institutionalised churchgoing becomes another kind of busyness.

*Prima facie* as reality, then, the physical church offers a literal escape from the busyness of the city. Appropriately, Kierkegaard’s most frequented church, *Vor Frue Kirke* (the Church of Our Lady) houses a statue of Jesus Christ under which are inscribed the following words: “*Kommer til mig*”. The reference is to *Matthew 11:28*, and the full sentence reads: “*Come unto me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*”. In the physical church, then, one is able to leave the busy city streets, with its many spectacles, noises, and distractions, and find respite, sanctuary, and calm within its walls (as I have indeed done myself on many visits to Copenhagen). Yet, whilst this kind of escape might befit an exhausted tourist, for Kierkegaard it does not constitute what it means to be a true churchgoing Christian. Indeed, one should not rely on this literal escape from busyness, as in doing so, one retreats from the world. Remember that Kierkegaard’s task as he sees it is to “re-introduce Christianity into Christendom”, mainly because he considers Christianity, or rather Christendom (that is, state Christianity) to be “an enormous illusion” (cf. PV 41-44). It is thus Kierkegaard’s intention that one can *practice Christianity* wherever one happens to be; hence, one should not leave one’s practice within the church but should take it with oneself, so to speak, into the city streets. As Kierkegaard suggests in *Postscript*: “it is the *relationship with God* that itself bids the religious person to *seek elsewhere*” (CUP1 497).[[32]](#footnote-32) Thus, the retreat into the sanctuary of the church, is in many ways precisely the kind of Christianity that Kierkegaard is so opposed to.[[33]](#footnote-33)

As would be expected then, Kierkegaard views the church as *symbolic* of one’s connection with God; but, and this is crucial, the church does not need to be the physical brick-and-mortar building. In fact, if the connection to God remains tied to the physicality of the church, then one risks severing one’s connection from God entirely when one (a) either leaves the church, (b) focuses only on the need to be seen attending the church, or, (c) when, as Pattison suggests, the church becomes just another of the many spectacles of the city.[[34]](#footnote-34) Furthermore, as we will see in Chapter 5, the activity of churchgoing for Kierkegaard can all too easily become just another kind of busyness. This is one reason why the church must be symbolic within Kierkegaard’s writings. The real church “belongs to hidden inwardness and does not have many – if any? – outward signs of existence” (Holm, 2013: 112). The believer has to take the church with them, so to speak, so that it does not become just another spectacle, a mere place to be seen, or just another place in which to busy oneself. As we will see, the other “other places” that can be seen as withdrawals from the busyness of the city can also be thought of as “symbolic churches” in the sense that they are places wherein one can develop an inward relationship with God. To be sure, the true church must be more than the bricks-and-mortar, the pulpit and the preacher.

It is necessary to explore the church in relation to busyness in more detail here, because, whilst it seems obvious that the church offers a physical escape from the busyness of the city – wherein one can connect with God – it is perhaps more difficult to see how this escape from busyness might manifest itself if the church is *symbolic*, and thus able to extend beyond the physical brick-and-mortar barrier between the busyness outside and the sanctuary within. How does one escape busyness if one *remains* within the busyness of the city, and resides only in one’s symbolic church? To answer this question, it is worth considering Kierkegaard’s view of the church in comparison to the views of his contemporaries.

Kierkegaard’s view of the church as an escape from the busyness of the city differs from other religious figures of his time, most notably, Jakob Peter Mynster, the Danish theologian who served as Bishop of Zealand from 1834 to 1854 – and who was one of Kierkegaard’s greatest, and most bitter, rivals. As Pattison suggests, Mynster seems to view the church primarily as a physical and *literal escape* from the busyness of the city:

God’s House offers you its peaceful refuge, and the joyful and troubled go in; go in yourself, that your heart may be warmed in gathering together with your brothers, yet without being disturbed by the hubbub of the world (Mynster, 1854: 92; cited in: Pattison, 1999: 113).

As Pattison suggests, whilst Mynster sees the physical church as a place for refuge from “the hubbub of the world”, where one can join with a new type of crowd, i.e. a congregation, as we have seen Kierkegaard views the church symbolically, as a place where one can achieve *solitude and silence*, and therefore truly connect with God. Conversely, for Mynster, it is precisely to escape one’s solitude that one might enter the church, as Pattison suggests:

The Church is to be a place of refuge from the world, but one does not go there alone or to be alone with God. On the contrary, the fellowship of the Church is not only a refuge from the world, it is also a refuge from what Mynster experiences as the torment of solitude (Pattison, 1999: 113).

Indeed, in many ways Kierkegaard’s view of the Church (as symbolic) is an inversion of Mynster’s view of the church (as literal). Kierkegaard does not want the individual to retreat into the church to join a new crowd, nor to find God, but rather, to find God everywhere, even in “the hubbub of the world”. Thus, Mynster’s view of the church, as an escape from busyness, is akin to a kind of resignation from the world; a *weariness* of the world, perhaps. In fact, we might even go as far as to suggest that Mynster’s view of the church, of joining the congregation, is just another kind of busyness; another kind of distraction from a true commitment to God. Whilst Mynster then views the physical Church as an escape from busyness, and an end in itself, conversely it seems that Kierkegaard views the church as the symbolic place wherein one connects with God, in order to *practice Christianity* wherever one happens to be, and crucially, *within the busyness of the city*. For Kierkegaard, the physicality of the Church is expressed only as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Indeed, in this way other “symbolic churches” are possible for Kierkegaard and are represented by the “other places” that I will argue constitute an escape from busyness. In other words, what makes the church the church for Kierkegaard is the possibility for the personal connection with God, rather than anything else.[[35]](#footnote-35)

#### The Countryside: Transcendence Through Nature

The dichotomy between city and countryside, urbanity and nature, is one that appears throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship, both eponymous and pseudonymous.[[36]](#footnote-36) In fact, as Kirmmse suggests, “Kierkegaard […] represented in his very person the tension between country and city” (2013: 39).[[37]](#footnote-37) Interestingly, as Pattison and others note,[[38]](#footnote-38) Kierkegaard’s authorship in many ways opens with a reflection on a journey from the city into the countryside. In 1835, whilst still a student at the University of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard embarked on a journey to the northernmost town of the Danish island of Zealand. With him he took a journal, wherein he recorded the journey and his insights: philosophical, literary, and personal. What is now commonly referred to as the *Gilleleje Journal* contains some of Kierkegaard’s earliest writing.

In and around Gilleleje, Kierkegaard’s many walks through the countryside and its surrounding natural landscapes – “now melancholy, now awe-inspiring, now soothing” (Pattison, 2013: 13) – accompany and echo his inner spiritual transformation from aimless student to committed religious writer. Indeed, it was in Gilleleje that Kierkegaard wrote his now famous existential reflection, which would form the cornerstone of his philosophical project in the years to come:

What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know […] It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing to do is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die* (KJN AA:12).[[39]](#footnote-39)

In this place of silence and beauty, away from the busy crowds of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard reflects upon his life and his task; indeed, it is here – *in* *nature*, away from the busyness of the city – that Kierkegaard considers his life and its many possibilities. During his time in Gilleleje, in a letter sent to a fellow theology student, P. E. Lind, Kierkegaard comments that his journey to Gilleleje, from the city where he was somewhat known to the countryside where he is a stranger

is to my advantage, for it teaches me to focus upon my inner self, it spurs me on to comprehend myself, my own self, to hold it fast in the infinite variety of life, to direct towards myself that concave mirror with which I have attempted until now to comprehend life around me (LD 49).

Similar to both Christianshavn over the Langebro, and the Church, the isolation that the countryside provides and the ability to reflect upon oneself stands in stark contradiction to the city, wherein one is distracted by busyness – “the infinite variety of life” – and the demands and spectacles of others.

One might picture Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818)[[40]](#footnote-40) as representative of Kierkegaard’s time in Gilleleje: “a young man […] going on long walks […] pondering his future” (Pattison, 2013: 13). In his *Journals*, Kierkegaard writes about Gilbjerg Head, a one-hundred foot cliff overlooking the ocean towards Sweden and Norway:

[…] one comes to the highest point around here – *Gilbjerg.* This has always been one of my favourite spots. Often, as I stood here on a quiet evening, the sea intoning its song with deep but calm solemnity, my eye catching not a single sail on the vast surface, and only the sea framed the sky and the sky the sea, while on the other hand the busy hum of life grew silent and the birds sang their vespers, then the few dear departed ones rose from the grave before me, or rather, it seemed as though they were not dead. I felt so much at ease in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and I felt as though I were outside my body and floated about with them in a higher ether – until the seagull’s harsh screech reminded me that I stood alone and it all vanished before my eyes, and with a heavy heart I turned back to mingle with the world’s throng – yet without forgetting such blessed moments (KJN AA:9).[[41]](#footnote-41)

Whilst today on the cliffs of Gilleleje sits *Søren Kierkegaard Stenen* (The Søren Kierkegaard Stone) as an acknowledgement to Kierkegaard’s stay in Gilleleje and his lasting philosophical, theological, and literary legacy, at the time Kierkegaard, then only twenty-one years old, was incredibly uncertain about his own future; indeed, to be able to ponder his future, and find the quietude necessary for reflecting earnestly on it, Kierkegaard required an escape from the busyness of the city.

Indeed, it is interesting – for the purposes of this present study – that Kierkegaard’s authorship begins with an escape to the country, away from the “busy hum” of the city. The countryside then is symbolic of a place of reflection, wherein the individual can consider both their own selves and their relation to God. It is worth stressing, however, that it is the *untamed wilds of the countryside* that Kierkegaard sees in opposition to the busyness of the city, rather than, for instance, a rural lifestyle. For example, as we will see in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard makes a comparison between people harvesting and busyness (WL 95). Thus, what he sees as an affront to busyness is not the villages, towns, or agricultural lifestyles of its inhabitants, but rather nature, as untouched by mankind. This is made even more explicit in his *Journals*, where on another pilgrimage – this time to Jutland shortly after his father’s death – in 1840 he writes:

The [Jutland] heath must be peculiarly suited to developing spiritual strength; here everything lies *naked* and *unveiled* before God, and there is no place here for all those distractions, the many nooks and crannies in which consciousness can take cover and where seriousness often has difficulty catching up with *distracted* thoughts. Here consciousness has to take a firm and precise grip on itself. “Whither shall I flee from thy presence?” is something one can truly say on the heath (KJN N6:29).[[42]](#footnote-42)

The natural surroundings of the countryside then seem to offer an escape from the busyness of the city, a place to consider and reflect upon oneself, and a place to connect with God.

This emphasis on the spiritual power of the natural world is made most explicit in Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourse: “What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds in the Air” (UDVS 155-212). Reflecting on Matthew 6:26, as the title suggests, in the discourse Kierkegaard is concerned with what one can learn from the silence and obedience of nature. Here, the themes of silence and obedience – as well as the emphasis on an *unadulterated nature* made manifest through the lily and the bird – demonstrate the way in which *nature is seen in opposition to busyness*. Indeed, Kierkegaard sets the groundwork to this upbuilding discourse years earlier. In the *Gilleleje Journal*, after a stroll through the woods in Hillerød, Kierkegaard writes:

And the church bells call to prayer, but not in the man-made temple. If *the birds do not need to be reminded to praise God*, then should not men be moved to *prayer without church*, in the true house of God, where heaven’s arch forms the church ceiling, where the roar of the storm and the gentle zephyr take the place of the organ’s bass and treble, where the warbling of the birds forms the congregation’s hymns of joy, not as in the stone church where the pastor’s voice is repeated in an echo from the roof-vault, but where everything resolves in an endless antiphony (KJN AA:7).[[43]](#footnote-43)

Interestingly in this early reflection on religious devotion we see a comparison made between nature and the church. In this case, it is suggested – as I argued above – that Kierkegaard sees the church as only a means to an end; one should be able to “practice Christianity” without the reliance on the physicality of the church. Nature, or rather the lilies and the birds, are there to remind us of this. As Pattison suggests, “Kierkegaard’s discourses on the lilies and the birds constitute an appeal to a pure ‘out there’, an ‘other place’ outside the complex of socially-determined meanings that is the life-world of the city” (Pattison, 1999: 129).

There is one final point to consider here in the distinction between city and countryside in relation to Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness. Following on from the isolation that Kierkegaard considers necessary to oppose busyness, is the emphasis on the individual and the numerical, or rather, the individual and its opposition to the crowd. In the countryside, or more specifically in nature, the individual is isolated, alone with themselves; whilst in the city, the individual becomes, according to Kierkegaard, a mere number within an ever-growing amorphous crowd. In a rather humorous passage in his *Journals*, Kierkegaard writes on the merits of life in the countryside, over life in the city:

Life in the country has the advantage that there are roughly ten cows, fifteen sheep, two pigs, a lot of sparrows, for every one human being – from which one sees that a human being is of some importance. In the capital, there are one hundred human beings for every one cow, from which one sees that a cow is of some importance. But notwithstanding that in the capital city the human masses circulate like bad money, no one cares about becoming human, but instead, most humans are mad about getting married, and those respective marriages are in busy activity [travl Virksomhed] towards there coming to be even more human beings (SKS: JJ 494).[[44]](#footnote-44)

In this passage, whilst ironic rather than literal, Kierkegaard draws attention to a key motif that runs throughout his authorship. Kierkegaard quite clearly wants to move away from a quantifiable understanding of what it means to be human. The reference to accumulation, to money, and to the “busy activity” of making more humans seems to suggest that for Kierkegaard life in the crowd is something to be avoided. Whilst there are more humans in the city, the increased number seems to lead to a kind of “human-inflation”, whereby the value of each human is reduced. For, if quantity is to define importance, then a single cow is more important (most likely due to its scarcity) than many human beings. Obviously, Kierkegaard does not mean this literally, but rather as figurative of the view that individual meaning cannot come from an unreflective life in the crowd where no one cares about the spiritual task of “becoming human”[[45]](#footnote-45) and is more concerned with the accumulation of material and quantifiable assets. Nature, or in this case the countryside, is a reminder of the need to consider oneself as an individual, and to approach properly the spiritual task of “becoming human.”

#### The Graveyard: Transcendence Through Death

The Graveyard is the third and final “other place” that Pattison considers in opposition to the spectacle of the city. Like Christianshavn, the church, and the countryside, the graveyard too is an escape – both real and symbolic – from busyness. However, unlike Christianshavn, the church, and the countryside, the graveyard is a “liminal space” (Pattison, 1999: 97). Hence, like Langebro, the graveyard represents a space between the busyness of the city, and what lies beyond. Here, then I’ll explore the graveyard in its (1) literal opposition to busyness, as the *final* resting place of human endeavours, as well as in the further literal sense of a physical place that one can go to rest and reflect, *momentarily* escaping one’s busyness. In both literal senses it is a “liminal space” – a space between life and death, between the living and the dead, always slightly connected to the city. Finally, I will consider the graveyard as (2) a symbolic opposition to busyness, that is, as a *reminder* of one’s finitude, one’s *finality*; whereby the graveyard acts as a *momentary* disruption (or, halting) to one’s busyness, allowing for a *refocusing and a re-evaluating of one’s time spent on one’s tasks and commitments*.

##### Literal Death

Firstly, we may consider the graveyard as a literal interruption of one’s busyness – as a *final* disruption to one’s busyness.“Then all is over” Kierkegaard remarks in “At a Graveside”, his moving reflection on death and human finitude (TDIO 71). The graveyard *is* the final resting place of the city’s inhabitants and is therefore a literal end to their busyness. When one is dead, one is laid to *rest* and one ceases to be *busy*! Apart from the obvious opposition between one’s daily *busyness* and one’s final *resting place*, there is little more that needs stating on this point.

Secondly, we may consider the graveyard as a literal interruption of one’s busyness – as a *temporary* disruption to one’s busyness**.** As mentioned above, the graveyard, and specifically Copenhagen’s Assistens Kirkegaard (*kierkegård - graveyard*), was situated outside the city walls, but remained intimately connected to the city, acting as the final resting place of its most esteemed inhabitants. As Pattison remarks:

[T]he Churchyard was situated some distance beyond the city. It had been opened in 1760 in response to the overcrowding of the ancient churchyards adjacent to the various Churches in the city and the health problems arising from such overcrowding. Originally burials were confined to the poorer classes […]. By Kierkegaard’s time it had become the burial place of the great and the good of Denmark’s Golden Age (Pattison, 1999: 94).

Kierkegaard himself was buried in the family grave at Assistens Kirkegaard, and during his life would often visit the graveyard, in part, because it housed the family gravesite, but also, because it offered a nearby and convenient place for solitude and reflection. To be sure, this was not unusual. Assistens Kirkegaard was – and still is – a popular place for Copenhageners to walk, picnic, and relax in. It is perhaps better to understand Assistens Kirkegaard as a public park, rather than a typical church graveyard. And indeed, because of this, Pattison notes that whilst the graveyard is seen as “offer[ing] a space in which one can withdraw from the city with its busy crowds, a space in which to indulge an individualising and interiorising melancholy, it is nonetheless still a public space” (Pattison, 1999: 95). This is where the second instance of opposition to busyness arises: the graveyard is not wholly removed from the hubbub of the city’s inner walls: whilst it is geographically removed, it remains anchored to the ebb and flow of its inhabitants; it is, as Pattison notes: “in the city but not of the city” (2013: 18). Its physical location outside the city walls, which gives it its liminality, allows for an albeit brief respite from one’s busyness. One goes to Assistens Kirkegaard to escape the busyness of the city; but one must ultimately return to continue with one’s daily tasks and commitments.[[46]](#footnote-46) However, there is a further and more fundamental way that the graveyard demonstrates opposition to one’s busyness, that is, symbolically.

##### Symbolic Death

The graveyard – as symbolic of death itself – is in opposition to busyness. Whilst Pattison suggests that the graveyard is “a reminder […] of questions that the busy life of the city cannot answer” (Pattison, 2013: 18) – a reminder that meaning must be derived from elsewhere, from something other than spectacle – it is also the case that the graveyard is representative of the sombre reminder of one’s finitude and the certitude of death. In “At a Graveside” Kierkegaard reflects on the reality of death for the individual. Kierkegaard considers the task of the individual to think (about) death earnestly: not the death of others, not death in abstraction, but death for themselves; that they, as an individual, will die. This earnest thought of death – which is no easy feat – teaches the individual that “he had no time to waste” and that to *think death* “makes one alert as nothing else does” spurring the individual to seek “the right goal toward which he directs his momentum” (TDIO 78, 83). Death, and one’s earnest thinking of it, creates – even in the busiest of individuals – a moment of arrest, wherein they can consider what it is they are doing with their lives. As Kierkegaard states:

[P]racticing in his life the earnest thought of death, *so that he was halted and halted again in order to renounce vain pursuits, was prompted and prompted again to hasten on the road of the good now was weaned of being talkative and busy in life in order to learn wisdom in silence*, now learned not to shudder at phantoms and human inventions but at the responsibility of death, now learned not to fear those who kill the body but to fear for himself and *fear having his life in vanity, in the moment, in imagination* (TDIO 77).[[47]](#footnote-47)

As one would expect, in opposition to busyness, death highlights the absolute solitude one faces. Death is a “silence in which nothing is heard” (TDIO 85). It is – as Christianshavn, the church, and the countryside were – a further form of spiritual isolation; it is, however, the most extreme form. In death, the individual is entirely alone:

Alone, because that is indeed what death makes him when the grave is closed, when the cemetery gate is shut, when night falls and he lies alone, far away from all sympathy, unrecognisable in the shape that can only evoke a shudder, alone out there where the multitude of the dead do not form any kind of society (TDIO 89).

To think (about) death, is for Kierkegaard to face this solitude, and consider one’s response. Somewhere between movement and rest, the graveyard, then, is a constant reminder of one’s approaching death.

To be sure, the notion of time (Danish: *tid*) becomes crucial here. In thinking (about) death, Kierkegaard wants the individual to create for themselves a scarcity (Danish: *dyrtid*) of time. This is what Kierkegaard calls “a retroactive power” (TDIO 99), wherein *thinking-death* raises the importance and value of the present moment. Interestingly for the purposes of this study, Kierkegaard uses – as he often does – economic imagery to stress that earnestly *thinking-death* has “jacked up in price” (TDIO 84) certain hours and days: “Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, gained infinite worth because death made time dear” (TDIO 84). Indeed, Gordon Marino notes: “earnest reflection [on death] can help us to dispel the illusion that we have days and weeks to waste, that we can put off getting serious about life” (Marino, 2011: 154).[[48]](#footnote-48) Hence, one issue that Kierkegaard wants bring to the forefront of his readers’ minds, is to consider *how we spend our finite time on earth*, and *whether our daily busyness is really worthwhile*.[[49]](#footnote-49) As Kierkegaard says elsewhere, firmly positioning busyness in opposition to death: “busyness seems to have the least understanding of the idea of the shortness of life and the certainty of death” (EUD 184).[[50]](#footnote-50)

Perhaps not too surprisingly, all of the “other places” we have explored are intimately concerned with finding the space to create a deep and meaningful connection with God. To do this, they need to offer a place free from the distraction and spectacle of the city; and specifically, free from the demands of one’s busyness. What is common to all of them – Christianshavn, nature, the church, and the graveyard – is that they provide the space to reflect quietly, and therefore connect with God. Yet it is important to reiterate, that the true escape from busyness comes not from the other place itself, but rather, *precisely from the connection with God*, made possible by the escape from the busyness of the city.

### Summary

In this opening chapter I have attempted to set out a contextual groundwork within which Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness emerged. In other words, I have aimed to demonstrate *why* Kierkegaard is concerned with busyness at all, and further, *what* it is about his specific cultural and topographical milieu that would lead him to focus on this concept immensely throughout his authorship. I began with a discussion of “Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen”, wherein I explored the various contextual features of the city that lent themselves to Kierkegaard’s emerging critique of busyness. Furthermore, I distinguished between the notions of “busyness” and “business” in Kierkegaard’s writing; concluding that Kierkegaard thematically links these concepts throughout his authorship. I also focused on the “Other Places”, whereby the individual might seek respite from the busyness of the city: the church, the countryside, and the graveyard. In doing so, I developed preliminary accounts of silence, stillness, and a deep connection to God that these “other places” can afford the individual. Indeed, the concepts will be developed further throughout this thesis, as ways in which the individual can escape the clutches of busyness.

In this chapter I also noted the distinction between the *real* Copenhagen and a *symbolic* Copenhagen. It is to the symbolic Copenhagen to which we now turn, and in doing so, we explore Kierkegaard’s critique of modernity in a more general way, with a specific focus on his critique of busyness.

# “Chimerical Exertions”: Kierkegaard’s Critique of the Present Age

*“In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Debord, 2005: 7).*

### Introduction

In the previous chapter we explored the contextual – that is, historical, social, and topographical – background in which Kierkegaard’s concept of “busyness” emerges. We saw that for Kierkegaard, the city of Copenhagen played a central role in his development of his critique of modernity, and that an examination of this specific social-political milieu was a necessary preliminary for an understanding of Kierkegaard’s critique of “busyness”. In this chapter we will turn towards that critique of modernity in a more general way by examining Kierkegaard’s philosophical analysis, and sociological critique, of what he calls “the present age”, in his *Two Ages: A Literary Review* (hereafter, *TA*). Whilst I will focus primarily on *TA* in this chapter, I will also draw upon Kierkegaard’s criticisms of “the present age” in other works, most notably the later pseudonymous work, *The Sickness Unto Death* (hereafter, *SUD*).[[51]](#footnote-51)

What this chapter aims to do is a two-step process. I aim to show how Kierkegaard’s critique of modernity, which is most striking and concentrated in *Two Ages*, contains within it a previously understated critique of pseudo-action, or what Kierkegaard calls “busyness”. In order to do this I will examine “reflection” of which Kierkegaard is critical, to show *how* it relates to busyness – namely, through the ideas of reflection-as-image and spectacle, and the way that reflection is used to disguise inaction and pseudo-movement.

I will begin this chapter by providing an overview of Kierkegaard’s *TA*, and aim to situate it within the context in which it was written; both in terms of its place within the locale of the Danish Golden Age, and also its place within Kierkegaard’s authorship. Specifically, important in the latter is the fact that *TA* was published during Kierkegaard’s rather nasty clash with the satirical newspaper *The Corsair*: an ordeal that left an unmistakable mark on Kierkegaard’s “second authorship” (the period from 1846, with the publication of *TA*, to his death in 1855). I will then move on to examine the “two ages” that Kierkegaard examines. That is, (1) the age of revolution, and (2) the present age. Crucially, I will argue that not only is Kierkegaard concerned with “reflection”, and “in-action”, in “the present age”, as the standard reading suggests, but also with “busyness”: an aspect of Kierkegaard’s critique of “the present age” that has been almost entirely neglected in the literature.

### *Two Ages. A Literary Review*: Context and Structure[[52]](#footnote-52)

*TA* is Kierkegaard’s most politically charged text, wherein he presents a penetrating, concentrated, and astute insight into his own age. However, before considering the critical content of *TA,* it is necessary to consider the context in which it emerged.

#### A Literary *Review*

First, it is important to reflect on the fact that *TA* was, as its subtitle implies, a *review*.[[53]](#footnote-53) The author of *Two Ages* was Thomasine Gyllembourg who was widely considered to be responsible for the first modern Danish novel.[[54]](#footnote-54) Gyllembourg published *Two Ages* anonymously, or rather pseudonymously, revealing herself only as “the Author of *A Story of Everyday Life*” (TA 3 / SV VIII 4). It is unlikely that Kierkegaard knew of the real identity of the author of *Two Ages* for in a letter to J. L. Heiberg (Gyllembourg’s son, and the editor and publisher of Gyllembourg’s writings) to whom Kierkegaard sent a gift copy of the review, Kierkegaard refers to the author of *Two Ages* as male (LD 191). Although, according to Hong & Hong, it was also possible that Kierkegaard had “rumoured knowledge” that the author was “one of the most spirited and intelligent women in Copenhagen” (Hong & Hong, 2009: vii), but that if he had such information, he concealed it from posterity, and duly respected Gyllembourg’s anonymity.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that *TA* was primarily intended as a review, it is indeed possible to consider it an original critical analysis of Kierkegaard’s own age, and a part of Kierkegaard’s wider authorial project. This is for two key reasons.

Firstly, the way that *TA* is structured demonstrates that it is not merely intended as a review of another work. For instance, Parts I and II (TA 25-59), are concerned with the novel, *Two Ages*; with Part I presenting a descriptive account and Part II presenting an aesthetic interpretation. However it is in Part III (TA 60-112) where the work becomes more than a review: Part III is dedicated to an analysis of the novel, but also the way in which the novel, *Two Ages*, successfully depicts “the present age”. This latter half of the work indeed occupies the majority of the “review”. Here, Kierkegaard aims to “suggest [the concepts from *Two Ages*] in a general way, corresponding to the details of the author’s fictional presentation” (TA 61). In other words it is the task of the latter half of the review to attempt to draw out the features that define “the present age” (as well as the previous age), and to present them in a universal manner, whilst using examples from Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages* to accentuate these concepts. This is more obvious in the Danish. There the word Kierkegaard uses, “*udbytte*” (translated by Hong & Hong as “conclusions”) is perhaps better translated as “yield”, “profit”, or “return”, which then invites the question: what conceptual formulations are yielded from considering Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages* (SV VIII 57)?

This is also suggestive of the fact that whilst Kierkegaard’s *TA* arose within the contexts of the Danish Golden Age, it is not bound to that specific age. Rather, Kierkegaard’s criticism of “the present age” can be read as a wider critique of modernity, rather than purely of Copenhagen during the nineteenth century. The *real* Copenhagen merely *symbolises* wider issues with the age in which Kierkegaard was writing.

Secondly, many of the concepts that Kierkegaard defines in *TA* are found elsewhere throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship. I have already alluded to *SUD*, which will be explored in more detail later, but examples of Kierkegaard’s critique of reflection, apathy and a lack of passion, and the negative depiction of “the crowd” can be found as early as *Either/Or* (hereafter, *EO*). For example, in *EO* the aesthete A describes the age as “without passion”, where “[p]eople’s thoughts are as thin and fragile as lace” (EO I 27). Similarly, in *Fear and Trembling* Johannes de Silentio opens the book with a lamentation of the superficiality and, indeed reflective nature of the age (FT 5-8). So, whilst concepts, like the above, may be expressed through the characters and events of Gyllembourg’s novel in *TA*, there is no denying that they are distinctly Kierkegaardian. In many ways, the concepts that are given explicit social-political treatment in *TA* are some of the defining characteristics of Kierkegaard’s authorial project which culminates with his attack on Christendom; it is in *TA* that these ideas are given focused consideration regarding how they pertain to Kierkegaard’s social-political context. This makes *TA* all the more interesting for the present work, due to the fact that Kierkegaard’s criticism of busyness within *TA* has been understated in the literature. This chapter will aim to begin to remedy this omission.

#### The Corsair Affair

It is also worth noting that *TA* was published during Kierkegaard’s clash with the satirical newspaper, *The Corsair*. Whilst I need not delve into specifics here – a good account of “*The* *Corsair* Affair”, as it later came to be called, is given by Hong & Hong in the “Historical Introduction” to *The Corsair Affair and Articles Related to the Writings* (2009: vii-xlv) – it is necessary to say something of the debacle due to its purported impact on Kierkegaard’s scornful criticisms of “the present age”, in which both “the public” and “the press” are vilified. Like many aspects of Kierkegaard’s writings, one cannot help but note the biographical context, and indeed it was an attack on Kierkegaard’s biography that in many ways initiated The *Corsair* Affair.

In April 1845 Kierkegaard published the pseudonymous *Stages on Life’s Way* (hereafter, *SLW*). In the December of that year, an article, “A Visit in Sorø”, was published by Peder Ludvig Møller in his yearbook *Gæa 1846*. Møller was a frequent, albeit anonymous, writer and editor for *The Corsair*. In the *Gæa* article, Møller presents a satirical critique of Kierkegaard’s *SLW*. Whilst Møller indeed in some respects commends Kierkegaard’s aptitude as a philosopher and writer – though praising primarily aesthetic qualities – he considers his latest work, *SLW* to be lacking. Importantly, he is critical of Kierkegaard not as a philosopher, or writer, but rather as a person, specifically in the way in which Kierkegaard marries reality with literary creation. As Hong & Hong suggest “the review did indeed invade the personal Kierkegaard-Regine relation” (Hong & Hong, 2009: xiii). In discussing “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” Møller states: “the feminine nature placed on the experimental rack turns into dialectic in the book and vanishes, but in actual life she inevitably must go mad or into Peblinge Lake” (COR 101). He goes on to suggest:

If you regard life as a dissecting laboratory and yourself as a cadaver, then go ahead, lacerate yourself as much as you want to; as long as you do not harm anyone else, the police will not disturb your activity. But to spin another creature into your spider web, dissect it alive or torture the soul out of it drop by drop by means of experimentation – that is not allowed, except with insects, and is there not something horrible and revolting to the healthy human mind even in this idea (COR 102).

Møller continued his attack on Kierkegaard in the *Gæa* review, by suggesting that Kierkegaard was in many ways abnormal, inhuman, and sick: “Writing and producing seem to have become a physical need for him, or he uses it as medicine, just as in certain illnesses one uses bloodletting, cupping, steam baths, emetics and the like […] instead of reproducing himself with a foetus a year as an ordinary human being, he seems to have a fish nature and spawns” (COR 100). These personal attacks were too much for Kierkegaard, and he followed Møller’s review with a pseudonymous reply from Frater Taciturnus, the author of Part III of *SLW*.

In Taciturnus’s article, “The Activity of a Travelling Aesthetician and How He Still Happened to Pay for the Dinner” Kierkegaard responds to Møller’s review of *SLW*. Whilst Taciturnus’s response contains Kierkegaard’s usual wry remarks,[[55]](#footnote-55) the most crucial aspect of the response is that it directly links Møller with *The Corsair*. In a passage that challenges *The Corsair* to ridicule him, Kierkegaard exposes Møller as one of its anonymous writers:

Would that I might only get into *The Corsair* soon. It is really hard for a poor author to be so singled out in Danish literature that he (assuming that we pseudonyms are one) is the only one who is not abused there. My superior, Hilarious Bookbinder [the compiler and publisher of *SLW*], has been flattered in *The Corsair*, if I am not mistaken; Victor Eremita [the editor of *Either/Or*, and attendee of the dinner party in *SLW*] has even had to experience the disgrace of being immortalised – in *The Corsair*! And yet, I have already been there, for *ubi spiritus, ibi ecclesia* [where the spirit is, there is the Church]: *ubi* P. L. Møller, *ibi The Corsair* (COR 46).

In the following years nine issues of *The Corsair* were published, and in retaliation to Kierkegaard’s jibe each contained “one to three pieces on Kierkegaard” (Hong & Hong, 2009: xliii). The attacks on Kierkegaard – which included satirical dialogues, articles, and caricatures – were vitriolic, relentless, and deeply personal. *The Corsair* did not attack Kierkegaard’s writings, *per se*, but rather his manner, his appearance, and his personal life.

It was around this time, before *The Corsair* Affair had begun in earnest, that Kierkegaard was considering ending his career as an author. During the early stages of *The Corsair* Affair Kierkegaard was in the process of publishing *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (hereafter, *CUP*) which he intended as his last work. In the final unnumbered pages of *CUP*, Kierkegaard comes clean as the face behind his pseudonymous masks. In “A First and Last Explanation” Kierkegaard describes his pseudonymity as an essential part of the authorship, and his role as both “the secretary and […] the dialectically reduplicated author of the author or the authors” (CUP [627]). With the publication of *CUP* Kierkegaard was to end his role as the pseudonymous writer and seek to “qualify as a pastor” (JP V 5873). Yet, this was not to be. Much like the *Gilleleje Journal* of his twenties, again in his *Journals* he debates with himself as to his future direction in life, specifically, as a writer.

In order to “avoid becoming an author” (JP V 5877), Kierkegaard decided to write reviews, that way Kierkegaard could “put down what I had to say in reviews, developing my ideas from some book or other and in such a way that they could be included in the work itself” (JP V 5877). Again, this is further reason to consider *TA* to be an original critical analysis of “the present age”, rather than merely a review. With the publication of *TA*, the review was to be Kierkegaard’s last publication; “which, I repeat, is final” he stresses in his *Journals* (JP V 5873). However, *The Corsair* Affair, and the harassment that followed spurred Kierkegaard on to begin his *second authorship*: a much more critical string of writings, ending with his attack on the Danish State Church, but beginning with the review of *Two Ages.* Within its pages, Kierkegaard develops a scathing critique of his own age as apathetic, superficial, and absorbed in a disinterested and lacklustre reflective malaise, themes that perhaps were in gestation from 1843 onwards, but that would reappear frequently and fully formed throughout his second authorship.

#### Busyness in *Two Ages*?

As I mentioned above, it is also worth noting that in the scholarship surrounding Kierkegaard’s critique of “the present age”, and the commentaries on it, the focus has tended to emphasise the present age’s apathetic, sluggish, and lethargic characteristics. That is, that reflection – so construed by Kierkegaard – creates a society that stands in opposition to action. And, whilst I do not intend to dispute these characteristics, this focus on the “inaction” within Kierkegaard’s analysis of “the present age” has obscured the further characteristic with which I consider Kierkegaard to be equally concerned (not merely in his critique of “the present age,” but across his authorship) – namely his critique not only of reflection as inaction, but also of *pseudo*- or *superficial* action. This superficial action is characterised by Kierkegaard as “busyness”. In what follows then I will give an account of *TA* that considers not only its more commonly explored characteristics – for example, reflection, apathy, the crowd, etc. – but also explores Kierkegaard’s concern with busyness*.*

With these contextual preliminaries in mind, let us turn to the content of Kierkegaard’s *TA*.

### “Essentially Passionate”: The Age of Revolution

It is best to begin a discussion of what Kierkegaard means by “the age of revolution”, not by discussing *revolution*, but rather by discussing *passion* or *pathos*. Indeed, a better name for “the age of revolution” would perhaps be “the age of passion”. In his opening remarks in an attempt to define “the age of revolution”, Kierkegaard states: “The age of revolution is essentially passionate [*lidenskabelig*]” (TA 61). Now, Kierkegaard uses two different Danish terms for passion and pathos: *Lidelse*, and *Lidenskab*, which literally mean suffering and passion respectively. In both instances, for Kierkegaard passion implies being “acted upon by a superior force” (Zabalo, 2016: 55) in the sense of a shared purpose, commitment, or motive. For Kierkegaard, the superior force of course pertains towards the religious. This has the added connotation that “the present age” by lacking in passion, also lacks the religious.

Furthermore, this distinction between passion and pathos may be defined in terms of both “interest”, and “emotion” (cf. Roberts, 1984). In the sense of interests, passions are motivations for actions; in terms of emotion, this is the way in which “passion is manifested” (Roberts, 1984: 92). Roberts defines this in terms of “[h]aving a passion *for* something, and being in a passion *over* something” (Roberts, 1984: 88).[[56]](#footnote-56) Consider, by way of an example, a passionate gardener.[[57]](#footnote-57) If one refers to the individual as a passionate gardener, then what one means is that the individual has a keen *interest* in gardening. This entails some kind of inclination, or motivation to garden. However, if one refers to the gardener as being in a fit of passion, perhaps because someone has squashed their prized pumpkin, then what one is referring to is the gardener’s *emotional state*. The key point that Roberts makes clear, is that having a “passion for” something is the necessary disposition for having a “passion over” something. If one had no interest in gardening, then one is unlikely to be affected by the squashing of one’s prized pumpkin – likely because someone with no passion for gardening would never reach the point at which they grew a prized pumpkin, as their indifference (towards gardening) would never equate to (the) action (of gardening). And, if they did have a prized pumpkin, they would be dis-*interested* enough, that someone squashing it would not affect them to the point of arriving at passion (as emotion).

Yet, “the age of revolution” is not lacking in passion. Its defining characteristic is that is an age that is passionate, and in stating this, Kierkegaard moves on to list the sub-characteristics, or the conceptual framework, that such an age of passion entails. Whilst Kierkegaard does not formally give preference to either “the age of revolution” nor “the present age”, he does place “the age of revolution” in “very good conceptual company” (Elrod, 1984: 10). He associates the age with the concepts of form, ethics, culture, propriety or conformity, immediacy, revelation and action. Key to all of these concepts, is that for Kierkegaard, *they require passion* in order to be enacted. Without passion one cannot have, for example, the commitment to act, or the discipline to abide by a code of ethics. Whilst the focus of this chapter will be primarily on the second part of *TA*, and Kierkegaard’s concerns with *reflection* and how this relates to busyness, it is worth briefly stating what Kierkegaard takes to be the key features of “the age of revolution”.

#### Ideality and Passion

Kierkegaard begins his discussion of “the age of revolution” by delineating its defining characteristics. As “essentially passionate” the age has form, is cultured, “violent, riotous, wild [and] ruthless” (TA 63), has a concept of propriety, or conformity, has immediacy, specifically “an *immediacy of reaction*” (TA 65), is “essentially *revelation*” (TA 66) and “has *not nullified the principle of contradiction*” (TA 66), which for Kierkegaard means that it has the potential to become either good or evil. Perhaps most importantly, Kierkegaard argues that individuals in the age of revolution have a *passionate relationship to a shared idea*. Kierkegaard states:

When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them (TA 62).

This passage describing the age of revolution is one reason why individualistic, or isolationist, interpretations of Kierkegaard fall short, and why interpretations that reject a socio-political element to Kierkegaard’s thought make little sense. According to Hong & Hong, this passage

gives an epitome of the dialectic of individuality and community in which authentic persons are related to each other through a third. This is in contrast to the crowd or collectivity, in which there are no authentic individuals and a common third (idea, object of commitment) is not shared by authentic individuals (Hong & Hong, 2009: 62fn7).

This third is for Kierkegaard the *shared idea*, which he argues “unite [individuals] on the basis of an ideal distance” (TA 62-3). Each individual is able to think for themselves, and never thoughtlessly falls in line, nor follows the crowd. (For Kierkegaard, “the third” must of course be religious, though perhaps we can imagine instances where individuals unite that do not require the religious). As we will see this shared idea is lacking in the present age, and is represented for Kierkegaard by the inhabitants of Copenhagen, though of course, Kierkegaard’s theory of modernity – if it may be called that – extends beyond his own time.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Before turning to “the present age”, it is interesting to note the etymology of the word revolution, and the way that it is used in Kierkegaard’s authorship. For the term “revolution”, deriving from the Latin “*revolutio*” – meaning to revolve – emphasises the *dynamism* of the age of revolution; a dynamism or movement that is lacking in “the present age”. To be sure, Kierkegaard “acknowledges that revolutions were creators of *movement*” (Rossatti, 2016: 245), and this places movement and revolution in contrast to stagnation and reflection. Interestingly, as I will aim to argue, whilst “busyness” is a feature of “the present age”, it will be suggested that “busyness” – a seeming display of movement and haste – is, for Kierkegaard, better thought of as stagnation, or pseudo-movement; indeed, I stated in the previous chapter the way in which Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness is well encapsulated in Ivor Southwood’s phrase “non-stop inertia”. This is a theme that will be explored throughout the thesis. For now, however, it is worth noting that the key difference concerning movement is that the movement expressed in “the age of revolution” is *intentional, motivated, and passionate*, and the kind of movement expressed in “the present age” is – albeit deceptively so – *superficial, indifferent, and passionless*, and consequently not really movement at all.

### “Exhausted by its Chimerical Exertions”: The Present Age

In Kierkegaard’s analysis of “the present age”, his goal is to offer a “more general observation” of the themes and concepts elucidated by Gyllembourg in her novel, *Two Ages*. Whilst Kierkegaard aims towards a general critique of the age’s predispositions, he also intends to demonstrate that his critique of “the present age” is applicable to his contemporary Copenhageners. Kierkegaard opens the section, “The Present Age” with a brief definition of his age’s tendencies:

The present age is essentially a *sensible* [*forstandige*]*, reflecting age, devoid of passion* [*lidenskabsløse*]*, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence* (TA 68).

Crucially, unlike “the age of revolution”, “the present age” is defined by its *passionless* nature; that is, a *lack of passion or pathos*, and an over-indulgence in what Kierkegaard calls “the multifariousness of reflection [*Reflexionens Mangfoldige*]” (TA 110 / SV VIII 103). The a*pathetic* present age is defined by Kierkegaard as “an age without passion”, and the aforementioned formulation appears more than one hundred times in the text (Zabalo, 2016: 62). In Kierkegaard’s *Journals*, which expand upon much of what he formulates in *TA,* he writes:

What our times need is *pathos* (just as scurvy needs greens); […]. Understanding and reflection are the curse of the times (KJN IV NB: 202).

Here, again, Kierkegaard demonstrates that his concerns with “the present age” extend beyond his review of Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages*, but more importantly he shows in the above passage how passion stands in opposition to understanding, reason (*forstandige*) and crucially reflection.[[59]](#footnote-59) Having explored passion in “the age of revolution” above, it is now necessary to explore reflection.

#### The Age of Reflection

Reflection is “the principal category of *The* *Present Age*” (Bretall, 1973: 260), and Kierkegaard uses the term in a variety of ways. It should first be stated from the outset that the kind of reflection that Kierkegaard has in mind is closer to a pointless and empty deliberation, than it is to *critical* thought. If anything, it is for Kierkegaard a kind of thoughtlessness or absentmindedness, a dis-*interest*-edness. And, in its conceptual opposition to passion it manifests as a kind of apathy or indifference. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, Copenhagen and “the present age” is defined by “a fatal *lack of thought* *and ideality*” (Thulstrup, 1986: 112),[[60]](#footnote-60) and to be sure, it is this *lack* of thought and ideality present in the overly reflective nature of “the present age” that is the issue for Kierkegaard. This seems somewhat paradoxical. How does reflection for Kierkegaard designate a lack of thought; surely to reflect on something is to think deeply about it?

#### Is Reflection Good or Bad?

In order to define what reflection is for Kierkegaard, and answer the question above, it is necessary to ask the following: is reflection good or bad for Kierkegaard? One issue to consider first, and bear in mind throughout the following discussion, is whether there might be, for Kierkegaard, good and bad types of reflection, or reflective activity. Surely Kierkegaard – an incredibly reflective individual himself – cannot reject reflection entirely!

Let us start with the question: is reflection bad? Not necessarily. Kierkegaard makes this clear when he suggests to his reader, that “it must always be kept in mind that reflection is not something pernicious” (TA 110-111), rather it is in reflection’s misuse and overindulgence that it becomes something dangerous. Consider, that one of Kierkegaard’s many “targets” in *Two Ages* is “the professors”, or the academic establishment of Copenhagen University – thinkers such as Martensen and Heiberg whom subscribe to the systematic philosophy of Hegelianism – as well as the public of Copenhagen. Kierkegaard views these thinkers and the public at large as using reflection to avoid genuine action; mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself, so to speak. We will explore such misuses of reflection below.

So, is reflection good? Not necessarily. That is, not when it leads to the deliberate, and detrimental avoidance of genuine action. Yet, at the same time, reflection is a necessary “ingredient” in the task of acting genuinely, or authentically. In fact, for Kierkegaard it is “the thorough kneading of reflection” that is “the prerequisite for acting more intensively” (TA 111). This process of exhausting reflection is the pathway to the religious. In his *Journals* Kierkegaard writes that “most people live within a certain reflection, and so never do anything altogether immediately, but merely dabble in the immediate and reflection”. And, it is only when “reflection is totally exhausted, [that] faith begins” (KJN JJ, 221). As Gerhard Schreiber has noted: from the standpoint of epistemology, “reflection precedes faith, but faith does not emerge from reflection – nor through mediation, at least, and not without a leap” (Schreiber, 2013: 31). As we will see below, this is one of the reasons why the religious sphere is necessary for the Kierkegaardian individual if they are to escape from the thralls of reflection. Both the aesthetic and the ethical are guilty of remaining in reflection and failing to reach action, precisely because of the lack of passion in the aesthetic and ethical individuals. Only in the religious, with its *passionate* leap of faith, can the individual move beyond reflection, and into action. We will explore how the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious relate to reflection below.

Thus, let us now turn in more detail into the many varieties of reflection of which Kierkegaard views “the present age” as guilty.

#### The Varieties of Reflection

Kierkegaard uses reflection in at least four (arguably, five) different ways.[[61]](#footnote-61) From the outset, it is important to note the two Danish words Kierkegaard uses for reflection: *Reflexion* and *Reflex*. Kierkegaard uses the former “*Reflexion*” to mean the process of thinking something over, of speculating, or deliberating; and the latter, “*Reflex”* to mean the way in which the age’s reflective tendencies are reflected, or re-*imag*ined in the social lives of the city’s inhabitants. In outlining Kierkegaard’s various definitions of reflection below, I will designate which Danish word Kierkegaard uses in parenthesis.

Firstly, reflection (*Reflexion*) is sometimes used synonymously with deliberation, that is, as “thinking about what to do” (Roberts, 1984: 92). Secondly, reflection (*Reflexion*) is sometimes used to mean “calculating prudence or procrastinating indecision” (Hong & Hong, 2009: ix). In this sense, reflection is defined as a “*misuse* of deliberation” to avoid reaching a conclusion (Roberts, 1984: 92). Kierkegaard sees this as emblematic of the inhabitants of nineteenth century Copenhagen, as made clear in the following passage in *The Book on Adler*:

people’s lives go on in such a way that they have premises for living but do not arrive at any conclusion – just like the age, which is an age of movement that has set the premises in motion but is also an age of movement that has not come to any conclusion (BOA 7).

It is also the case that this kind of reflection as procrastination also encompasses the philosophical use of reflection, of which Kierkegaard views the systematic philosophy of Hegelianism as guilty. Thirdly, reflection (*Reflexion*) is used to describe “an ethos, or group spirit, or social inertia” (Roberts, 1984: 92). When Kierkegaard uses reflection in this case, he is describing the *age* as essentially reflective – that is, it is not one individual who is reflective, but rather a crowd of peoples who make up a “web of reflection” (TA 69) that prevents any one of those individuals from initiating genuine action. Reflection is the age’s *zeitgeist*. Fourthly, Kierkegaard also uses reflection in the sense of a reflected image (*Reflex*). In this instance Kierkegaard uses reflection for the way in which the reflective tendencies of the age, are reflected back into “domestic and social life” (TA 96) as a mirror image – a kind of aesthetic infection of the ethical and in many ways a critique of the ethical sphere too[[62]](#footnote-62) that lacks the passion of the religious. There is also a fifth possible way that Kierkegaard uses the word reflection, as a marrying of *Reflexion* and *Reflex*, that is as an image, in the sense of a spectacle. “The present age” is defined by its superficiality in that it plays at action: reflection, *as image*, demonstrates both the age’s desire for distraction and spectacle, but also, the way in which every action is superficial and empty. I think that this final definition of reflection as image neatly summarises Kierkegaard’s various definitions of reflection, and in so doing, points to the connection between the age of reflection and busyness.

Let us consider each of these conceptions of reflection in turn, and then in the next section I will also suggest how reflection pertains to Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness, and thus how *Two Ages* may be seen as demonstrating Kierkegaard’s concerns with busyness in his own age, and more generally.

##### Reflection as Deliberation

When Kierkegaard talks of reflection he sometimes means the *process of deliberation*: that is, as Roberts notes, “thinking about what to do” as well as “non-deliberative thinking” (Roberts, 1984: 92). Let us return to our gardener example. If the gardener decides to grow some broad beans, then one of the first things they will need to do is reflect on – or think about – the variety of broad beans they want to grow, whether they have a suitable spot to plant them, whether it is the appropriate time of year, and climate, to grow broad beans, etc. If our gardener is to successfully grow broad beans, then this kind of rational reflection is a necessary step towards the act of growing broad beans. This process of deliberation is what Kierkegaard sometimes has in mind when he discusses reflection.

Now, it should be clear that for Kierkegaard, this is not necessarily a degenerate form of reflection. In fact, a process of reflection is a necessary prelude to genuine and authentic action: “Reflection is not the evil” Kierkegaard states (TA 96). However, this lack of evil intent in reflection is the case only when passion is present in the reflective individual. Without this passion, reflection is corrupted. That is not to say that our gardener must hold broad-bean-growing with the highest of passions, but without some *interest* in growing broad beans they, for Kierkegaard, would lack the motivation necessary to reach the point in which they could actually end the process of deliberation, and commit themselves to action.[[63]](#footnote-63) If the gardener is a*pathetic* about growing broad beans, then they would never reach the point of action. They would remain in a reflective malaise indefinitely, to the point where they continue to consider only the possibility of growing broad beans. We will see later how this can become a kind of busyness.

Here, we see a link between Kierkegaard’s social criticisms concerning reflection, and his broader philosophical project wherein to remain in apathetic reflection is defined as a variety of despair, and subsequently, sin. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, one of the varieties of despair Kierkegaard – or rather Anti-Climacus – describes is *possibility’s despair*. In possibility’s despair the individual inhabits a world of fantasy, reflecting continuously on the many possible selves they could become, but lacking the enthusiasm, or passion, to commit themselves to any specific one.[[64]](#footnote-64) “[T]his self fantastically reflected [*reflecterede*] itself in possibility” (SUD 36) Anti-Climacus claims, and in doing so uses their reflective capacity as a way to avoid committing to becoming themselves. This places the individual in despair, and because for Anti-Climacus to be in despair is to sin, it might be claimed that in this way too much reflection *becomes evil*. It is interesting to note that Anti-Climacus uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe the way in which the overly reflective individual falls into despair, thereby playing on the double meaning of reflection as thought, as well as a literal image.[[65]](#footnote-65) In Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of the thesis we will see how the despairing “self” in *SUD*  is occupied with a kind of busyness (as a distraction mechanism, specifically).

Thus, if there is no passion, no *interest*, then reflection (as deliberation) is degenerate. Kierkegaard’s concern is that this is precisely what is happening during “the present age”. Reflection, as deliberation, is being manipulated to avoid action. Instances of such tactical diversion that Kierkegaard sees during his own time were, for example, the transformation of Jesus’ word into systematic theology and theological debate, and the previous Socratic aim of philosophy – as a way to guide one’s life – into a dry, systematic, and institutionalised endeavour, existentially irrelevant from the lives of the individuals that practice it. For Kierkegaard, this means that *reflection as deliberation* becomes *reflection as procrastination*.

##### Reflection as Procrastination

Reflection as procrastination takes the notion of reflection as deliberation and corrupts it. It is one of the key ways that reflection in “the present age” is painted in a negative light by Kierkegaard. The procrastinating kind of reflection is closely linked to the notion of “prudence” – the cautious, and hyper-rationalistic consideration of every action. Kierkegaard uses the macabre example of a suicide to illustrate the age’s shrewdness:

Not even a suicide these days does away with himself in desperation but deliberates on this step so long and so sensibly that he is strangled by calculation, making it a moot point whether or not he can really be called a suicide, inasmuch as it was in fact the deliberating that took his life (TA 68).

The first thing to note about Kierkegaard’s example is that the individual, in this case the suicide, never reaches the point at which they themselves act decisively. Time makes the decision for them; presumably they die of old age before they decide to commit suicide. Second, and equally important, is that in doing so – that is, in letting time make the decision for them – the meaning of their death, that it was a suicide, is lost. This is what Kierkegaard means when he states that “the present age” “*lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it*” (TA 77). The outcome appears to be the same, but both the meaning of, and the possibility for, genuine action is lost. There is thus an illusory or superficial nature to the age.

##### The Web of Reflection

With the age’s deliberative, procrastinating tendencies comes the “web of reflection” (TA 69), a societal malaise in which all genuine action becomes impossible. Kierkegaard refers to “*vis inertiæ*” – the force of inertia – as the foundation of the age’s procrastination. However well-intentioned the individual might be, if they lack the necessary passion, they will remain in the web of reflection due to how deeply ingrained within society this apathy is. Robert C. Roberts gives a neat summary of the way in which this “web of reflection” spreads its influence throughout society, and the way in which it affects the individuals within it:

Reflection is like a spider’s web. The individual, who in a weak sense would like to act on conscience, and becomes self-conscious enough to realise this, feels like a fly caught in an ethereal trap. Every time he tries to be himself and fly away on his own, to do what he knows to be his duty, he is able to create nothing more than a little motion *in place*: he is bound by the ethos that whispers in his ear, as it were, “Do not act *yet*; you have not yet thoroughly considered the consequences of your proposed action […]” However, most people, like flies that were *born* in a spider’s web, are quite unaware that they are even caught in the web of reflection: they can, after all, flutter their wings a bit in deliberation, as well as make minor very domestic and socially acceptable leg movements (Roberts, 1984: 97).

There are several things going on in Roberts’ summary of the web of reflection, and it is worth unpacking this passage.

For one thing, noted in the summary are two of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence, and their respective responses to the web of reflection. Firstly, the ethically inclined individual acts with the best of intentions; however, due to the reflective nature of “the present age”, he finds it impossible to fully realise these actions. I mentioned above the way in which in “the present age” the aesthetic sphere “infects” the ethical sphere; this is one instance of this. The ethically inclined individual appears to display the characteristics of an ethical individual – to act on conscience, to do one’s duty, etc. – but in reality it remains only that, *an appearance*. For Kierkegaard, the “individual (however well-intentioned many of them are, however much energy they might have if they could ever come to use it) has not formulated enough passion in himself to tear himself out of the web of reflection and the seductive ambiguity of reflection” (TA 69). Passion is necessary for ethics. Remember, ethics is part of the conceptual makeup of the age of revolution, precisely because it is a passionate age. Below, I will consider in greater detail the way the web of reflection manifests within the ethical sphere.

Secondly, the aesthetic sphere – in relation to the web of reflection – describes those who remain unaware that they are even caught within it. Recall Anti-Climacus’s comments on the individual whom despairs reflecting on the many possibilities that one could become. Later, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus will describe *possibility’s despair* as a form of unconscious despair – the individual is unaware that they are even in a state of despair. In many ways, a similar despairing unawareness describes these aesthetic individuals who remain ignorant that they are prisoners within the age’s reflective malaise. I will now explore the way that the aesthetic sphere “infects” all aspects of “the present age” and defines the aesthetic character of the age.

##### Reflection as Image or Spectacle: The Aesthetic Character of the Age

It is possible to view reflection for Kierkegaard as not only a kind of unthinking abstract speculation as outlined above, but also as a reflected image, or spectacle. In this way, this kind of reflection is fundamentally concerned with the aesthetic (but also ethical) sphere, and the way in which the aesthetic sphere dominates “the present age”. As Bretall notes:

By “reflection” Kierkegaard means not the exercise of our intellectual faculties as such, but rather the tendency to feel one’s reality as “reflected” in something external to oneself – and specifically not in another person (this would be love or religion), but in some collective organisation (Bretall, 1973: 260).

In this case, again, reflection is excessive in both the ethical and aesthetic spheres of existence. In the ethical the apathetic and reflective tendency of ethical individuals manifests in the desire to act “on principle”, and is perhaps played out, as Bretall suggests, in some collective organisation or society. We see this in *Either/Or Volume II*, wherein the ethical Judge William is representative of the desire to be part of an organisation or society. By way of comparison is Kierkegaard’s most well-known aesthetic pseudonym, the ironically unknown writer of *Either/Or Volume I*, referred to only as “A”. A is the paradigm example of the aesthetic way of thinking that Kierkegaard considers to be rampant too in the present age. Unlike the ethically inclined individual who sees their reality as reflected in institutions, or organisations, A sees his reality as reflected – or perhaps re-*imagined* – in the realm of fantasy. In both instances, reflection takes the form of a reflected image, wherein the individual has to do very little thinking of their own. As we will see towards the end of this chapter, both are also instances of busyness, and ways of neglecting self-responsibility. Let us examine both aesthetic and ethical reflection below.

###### Ethical Reflection

In stating that reflection is reflected in the social and domestic lives of nineteenth century Copenhageners, Kierkegaard is making the claim that due to the present age’s reflective tendencies, that is “the web of reflection”, this reflective practice manifests itself in the domestic lives of the people of “the present age”. We can define this kind of reflection as ethical reflection. It is an “ethical” kind of reflection because it concerns the way that the people of the present age view their existence: the majority of people, for Kierkegaard, live out their lives in a way that they consider to be ethically orientated.[[66]](#footnote-66) Yet, for Kierkegaard, many people – members of “the public” – lack the ability to “think for themselves”, and so whilst they are overly reflective, they are not reflective in the sense of critically thinking about something. Rather, they “chatter […] incessantly” (TA 97) about whatever happens to be popular at the time; which is dictated to them by *the press*.

Now, considering Kierkegaard’s strife with *The Corsair*, it should come as no surprise that Kierkegaard views the press as contributing to, and indeed maintaining, the “web of reflection.” For Kierkegaard, the press is the creator of the abstraction “the public”, and thus by extension, the creator of “public opinion”. In this sense it is the press that dictates to the public what should be of “interest” and what is worth “chatting” about. Often what is of interest is arbitrary and fleeting.

Furthermore, in the present age, this kind of reflection manifests as a “dominant propensity and inclination to act ‘on principle’” (TA 100). However, it should be noted that the kind of principle that Kierkegaard has in mind here is corrupted by the overly reflective and passionless nature of the present age. Whilst ordinarily, acting “on principle” would indicate an “inner drive” (TA 101), some kind of genuine duty or commitment, in the present age this inner drive or enthusiasm is absent. And thus, “the principle becomes something external” (TA 101). As something external the principle is rather empty for the individual. As Kierkegaard states: “‘On principle’ one can do anything and what one does is, fundamentally, a matter of indifference, just as a man’s life remains insignificant even though ‘on principle’ he gives his support to all the ‘needs of the times’” (PA 49). If one lacks passion, then the principles one follows – as part of a collective, or organisation – are arbitrary. The needs, or the demands of the times are in constant flux, dictated not by any specific code but rather whatever happens to be in vogue at the time. One may end up following many different principles, and cycling endlessly through them with indifference, thus the present age “*gains in extensity what it loses in intensity*” (TA 97). Kierkegaard, with typical hyperbole, highlights the arbitrary nature of acting “on principle” in the present age by suggesting:

If a man were to have a little button sewed on the breast pocket of his coat “on principle”, that trivial and really expedient precautionary measure would suddenly take on tremendous import – it is not improbable that a society would be founded as a consequence (TA 101).

What we find in the present age is that “ethics” is really a sub-category of aesthetics; and that actions are performed for their aesthetic rather than ethical motivations. As we will see below this is also a kind of busyness, a concern with multiplicity: cycling through principle after principle, choosing almost arbitrarily – though, not entirely otherwise one would be forsaking the ethical for the aesthetic – without passion, and with a calculating reflection in order that one never need passionately commit to anything (TA 100-1).[[67]](#footnote-67) With this in mind, let us turn to the way that reflection may be considered as fundamentally aesthetic.

###### Aesthetic Reflection

Indicated by the way in which individuals in the present age desire distraction and spectacle, reflection as image stresses the fundamentally aesthetic character of “the present age”. In this sense of reflection, the present age is fantastic: with the individuals who occupy it being more concerned with image and spectacle than with reality itself. Take the aesthete, or “*réflecteur*” in *Either/Or* as the paradigm example of this reflective imaginary thinking. As George Pattison notes: “this is a man for whom ‘image’ is not only a means by which to mediate reality, but a substitute for it” (Pattison, 1999: 12). Reflection as image and the aesthetic character of the age demonstrates some of the greatest conceptual links to busyness in Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages*. As we will see in the next chapter, the activity of the aesthete, in creating this imaginary reality, engages in busyness.

###### Reflection as Image: Two Kinds

In summary, there are two ways to view reflection as image: (1) Reflection as image in the sense that one’s reality is constantly reflected back towards oneself; in this case emphasis should be placed on one of Kierkegaard’s main targets in *TA*: *the press*,[[68]](#footnote-68) wherein opinion is dictated and endless chatter encouraged with the ethical responsibility of the individual diminished. Also, reflection as image in this sense stresses the public’s desire for distraction and spectacle. This may be seen in the desire to arbitrarily act “on principle” and in the inclination to follow collectives and organisations, whilst ceasing to be an authentic individual. (2) The second way of viewing reflection as image follows naturally from the first. This second way concerns the means in which reality is in some sense superficial, or corrupt; one sees only the *inverted image* of reality and what appears to be the case is often merely an illusion. In this second sense, the aesthetic character of the age is highlighted, and the “chimerical exertions” of Kierkegaard’s contemporaries in the present age are made clear.

What we will turn to now is the way in which these issues with reflection as an image, or spectacle, link Kierkegaard’s concern with reflection to his concern with busyness; and, subsequently how one of Kierkegaard’s fundamental concerns with the present age is the way in which this *appearance* of busyness masks the *reality* of a deep and worsening societal stagnation.

### The Age of Busyness

Busyness in *Two Ages* may be expressed in three distinct ways. Firstly, in the age’s inability to move beyond reflection and into action; this concerns the age being one of anticipation or procrastination. Secondly, in the superficial and disinterested way that the public flit between a multiplicity of “interests” and thus, on the focus the age places on extensity over intensity. Thirdly, through the way that the aesthetic character of the age disguises its stagnation behind the image of movement and progress. Let us examine each of these in turn.

#### The Age of Anticipation

“The age of great and good actions is past; the present age is the age of anticipation” Kierkegaard claims (TA 71). In order to demonstrate how this anticipatory movement is a kind of busyness for Kierkegaard, let us once again return to our gardener example.

Suppose that our gardener is set on growing broad beans but has yet to commit to the action of actually planting and growing broad beans. In the present age, this process of anticipatory reflection is a kind of busyness for Kierkegaard. Consider that our gardener might first want to reflect upon the variety of broad beans to grow, and whilst they are engaged in this reflective practice they prepare a seedbed ready for the broad beans, when they have decided which variety to grow; suppose now that they worry about pests eating their broad beans, so research elaborate vegetable-cages to protect from birds and butterflies. To any onlookers, this gardener will appear to be thoroughly engaged with the process of growing broad beans. But for Kierkegaard, in lacking passion – as the present age does – as we saw above, this process never makes it beyond reflection and into action. Crucially, for Kierkegaard there is an element of illusion about the “activity” of the gardener: “it seem[s] as if something were happening” (TA 70). This is busyness for Kierkegaard, because, as we will see later, busyness is a thoroughly empty and pointless action that never amounts to anything worthwhile, despite the appearance of movement, haste, and progress, that it expresses.

Of the present age, Kierkegaard states:

If someone were to make an experiment and forget all he knows about the age and the plain fact of its habitual and excessive relativity, if he were to come as if from another world and were to read some books, an article in the paper, or merely talk with a passer-by, he would get the impression: By Jove, something is going to happen this very night – or something must have happened the night before last (TA 70).

However, the reality for Kierkegaard is that the present age never moves beyond this anticipatory motion – this *running on the spot* – and in doing so expresses a kind of busyness, defined as pseudo-action.

#### The Multifariousness of Reflection

Busyness is also expressed in *TA* in the way that the public flit between a multiplicity of interests, and enthusiasms, concerning themselves more with extensity, rather than intensity. Consider Kierkegaard’s opening comments on the present age, as

essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence* (TA 68).

The superficial enthusiasms in which the public find an “interest” are, for example, principles. It is no accident that Kierkegaard describes the inner life of the person seeking principles as “a hasty something continually on the move hunting for something to do ‘on principle’” (TA 101). The individual who demonstrates this kind of short-lived enthusiasm for multiplicity is guilty of busyness. In fact, the language used by Kierkegaard here mirrors his description of The Seducer in *Either/Or Volume I*, who as we will see in the next chapter is engaged in an activity that may be described as busyness.

Furthermore, as we will see, Kierkegaard will define busyness as precisely a concern with multiplicity and externality (WL 90). And, thus in describing the present age as flitting from “interest” to “interest”, principle to principle, Kierkegaard is ascribing to the present age a kind of busyness. To be sure, Kierkegaard describes the present age as having “decked itself out in the multifariousness of reflection [*Reflexionens Mangfoldige*]” (TA 110 / SV VIII 103). In the next chapter, this kind of multifarious reflection will be defined as an aesthetic busyness, represented chiefly by the pseudonym A of *Either/Or* *Volume I*. Furthermore, as we will see in Chapter 5, multifariousness – or multiplicity – is one of busyness’s defining characteristics.

#### Stagnation as Movement

The final way in which Kierkegaard’s critique of reflection in *Two Ages* connects with his wider critique of busyness is through the way that the age’s reflective tendencies, as well as the aesthetic character they give the age, disguise the age’s stagnation and malaise through the fantastical image of the age as fast moving and progressive. To summarise Kierkegaard’s comments on the present age: “nothing happens but still there is instant publicity” (TA 70). We may define this kind of reflection as expressing *busyness as a pseudo-movement*.

In *TA*, Kierkegaard defines the age’s movements as “chimerical exertions” (TA 69). Fundamentally, this means that the exertions or movements of the age are illusory. Later, we will see how busyness is defined as an empty action; and so, whilst busyness might appear to be a display of movement and haste, in reality it is to be better thought of as stagnation. Above, I discussed the way in which Kierkegaard places the age of revolution in the conceptual company of “movement”. With this in mind, and with the previous discussion of the present age as anticipatory, then it is suggestive of Kierkegaard’s critique of the present age that he is concerned with a kind of *movement that does not move*. I will consider throughout the thesis that this kind of movement is what Kierkegaard means by busyness.

### Summary

In this chapter I have presented Kierkegaard’s critique of modernity by focusing on his criticisms of “the present age” in *Two Ages*. Crucially, what should now be obvious is that through his critique of reflection, Kierkegaard is concerned with a kind of “activity” that is defined by its fantastical or illusory nature; it is precisely this kind of “pseudo-action” that is, as we will see, the busyness of which he is so critical throughout his authorship. Indeed, as we explore the way that the concern with busyness is made manifest throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship in the following chapters, we will see these themes of the reflective nature of the age – of illusion, empty spectacle, superficiality, and pseudo-action – repeated, this time however explored as instances of “busyness”.

In this chapter I also drew attention to the aesthetic characterof the age, and the way in which “the present age” is defined by a kind of aesthetic corruption. Indeed, it is to Kierkegaard’s construction of the aesthetic sphere to which we now turn, and in doing so, I aim to demonstrate that busyness, for Kierkegaard, is fundamentally a characteristic of the aesthetic sphere.

# “The Most Ludicrous of All Ludicrous Things”: Kierkegaard’s Construction of Busyness

## 

Kierkegaard was concerned with busyness from the beginning of his authorship. In his first major work, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (*EO*), busyness is critiqued from the aesthetic worldview by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym A. It is also in *EO* that the concept of busyness has received most of its scholarly attention. Most articles, however, tend to consider A’s comments on busyness as characteristic of Kierkegaard’s wider concept of busyness.[[69]](#footnote-69) Whilst A’s comments on busyness are certainly indicative, in the sense that Kierkegaard too sees worldly busyness as futile, nonetheless it is important to recognise that the response to busyness presented in *EO* differs from Kierkegaard’s own. I will draw these differences out throughout the chapter, and the remainder of the thesis.

In this chapter, then, I will explore the notion of busyness in Kierkegaard’s aesthetic sphere: specifically, in *Either/Or Volume I*. In Part I, I will begin with a discussion of the aesthetic *critique* of busyness. This critique – from the aesthetic worldview – sees busyness as *comic*, as *meaningless*, and as incredibly *boring*. It is expressed most vividly in the aesthetic worldview of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym A, in *Either/Or Volume I*. I will consider briefly Kierkegaard’s concept of the comic, and in light of this, A’s comments on busyness in the “Diapsalmata”, in which he views busyness as comic due to its incongruity, its meaninglessness, and its contingency. I will then consider A’s critique of busyness in “Rotation of Crops” in which busyness is seen as the most boring activity of all.

In Part II, I will consider the aesthetic *concept* of busyness; termed *aesthetic busyness*, or *busy idleness*. Here, I will consider whether A’s pursuit of the accidentally interesting in “Rotation of Crops”, which he views as the answer to avoiding boredom (and ultimately anxiety) and *ergo* busyness as “the most boring of all”, becomes itself a kind of busyness. A responds to boredom through a rotation of moods in an attempt to tease out the interesting in his encounters; the question is: is this busyness? Answering in the positive, and considering “The Seducer’s Diary” as the quintessential display of this aesthetic busyness, I will argue that A himself (or Johannes the Seducer at least) is *aesthetically busy*. Of course, Kierkegaard’s discussion of busyness in *EO* is not the final word on the matter; thus, I will endeavour throughout this chapter to note ways in which the concept of busyness will evolve throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship and also note the way that A’s response to busyness will differ to Kierkegaard’s own.

**Part I: The Aesthetic Critique of Busyness**

*“The night is over; the day is beginning in its unflagging activity again, never, so it seems, tired of repeating itself forever and ever” (EO I, 230).*

*“What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun […] What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes, 1:1-11).*

### An Exegetical Note on *Either/Or*

This section deals with Kierkegaard’s writings on busyness in *Either/Or* (*EO*). The text that Kierkegaard considered to be the official beginning of his authorship – excluding his early student work *From the Papers of One Still Living*, and his doctoral dissertation *The Concept of Irony* (PV 5) – *EO* puts forward both an aesthetic worldview (in *Either/Or Volume I*) and an “ethical” response (in *Either/Or Volume II*). The text is pseudonymous, with the name “Søren Kierkegaard” nowhere to be found. *EO* is an edited collection of papers, compiled by the pseudonymous editor Victor Eremita, who found the papers in a secret door of a writing desk (or escritoire). The aesthetic worldview is developed by the nameless pseudonym A in the form of aphorisms and essays, and Johannes the Seducer in the form of a diary. The ethical worldview is developed through two letters sent from the pseudonym Judge William (or, B) to A in an attempt to convince him of the value of an ethical life. The second volume ends with an “Ultimatum”, by a friend of Judge William: the Jutland Priest who signifies the beginning of a religious worldview. These worldviews – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – are referred to as the spheres or stages of existence. Importantly, they are not progressive; one can inhabit the ethical and then the aesthetic, or the aesthetic as well as the religious, etc.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, this section will consider *Either/Or Volume I*, where the aesthetic worldview presents both a criticism and, I will argue, a concept of busyness. We will consider the ethical worldview in Chapter 6.

### Rescuing the Fire Tongs: Busyness and the Comic in the “Diapsalmata”

The majority of A’s comments on busyness can be found in the “Diapsalmata”. Unsystematic in their approach, and aphoristic in style – a preferred form of Romantic expression – the “Diapsalmata” contain A’s musings on a number of topics pertaining to the aesthetic worldview. The “pervasive mood” of the “Diapsalmata” is characterised by “boredom, a sense of homelessness in the world, [and] nihilism” (Harries, 2010: 18). Indeed, these “moods” should be kept in mind when considering A’s comments on busyness. Interestingly, the “Diapsalmata” also contains Kierkegaard’s most frequently cited reference to busyness throughout his authorship; indeed, it is often (mis)taken as representative of Kierkegaard’s own view on busyness.[[70]](#footnote-70) It is thus a worthy starting point for beginning my account of Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness.

Writing in the “Diapsalmata” in what I will refer to hereafter as the “busyness-aphorism”, Kierkegaard’s aesthetic pseudonym A states:

The most ludicrous of all ludicrous things, it seems to me, is to be busy in the world, to be a man who is brisk at his meals and brisk at his work. Therefore, when I see a fly settle on the nose of one of those men of business in a decisive moment, or if he is splashed by a carriage that passes him in even greater haste, or Knippelsbro [bridge] tilts up, or a roof tile falls and kills him, I laugh from the bottom of my heart. And who could keep from laughing? What, after all, do these busy bustlers achieve? Are they not just like that woman who, in a flurry because the house was on fire, rescued the fire tongs? What more, after all, do they salvage from life’s huge conflagration? (EO I 25).

For A, busyness is a laughable (*latterlige*) affair: the *most laughable* of all laughable things (*allerlatterligste*). A views busyness itself as comic. What is it about busyness that A considers comic?

#### The Comic

Firstly, it is necessary to briefly consider what *Kierkegaard* means by *the comic*. Distinct from comedy – and distinct from the *dramatic* distinction between comedy and tragedy – Kierkegaard designates the comic a specific place in his authorship: as an existential state that inhabits several spheres of existence. In other words, the comic is not limited to the aesthetic (Walsh, 1994: 6), and can be viewed from the ethical-religious spheres as well. Indeed, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus defines the comic, in the following: “The tragic and the comic are the same inasmuch as both are contradiction, but *the tragic is suffering contradiction, and the comic is painless contradiction*” (CUP I 514). Whilst, a contradiction usually denotes a logical contradiction, Climacus is here concerned with an *existential contradiction*, that is, an incongruity in a person’s existence; as he continues in a footnote: “the comic is a relation, the misrelation of contradiction, but painless” (CUP I 514fn). Furthermore:

Something that is not intrinsically ludicrous can by way of contradiction evoke laughter. Thus, if a man ordinarily goes around oddly dressed and then finally shows up properly dressed for once, we laugh at this because we recollect the other (CUP I 516fn765).

In this sense, the comic is derived from the incongruity in the person’s existence. To develop this point further, as Will Williams has argued (2018), whilst Kierkegaard views trivial incidents – such as the incongruity in the man’s dress – as comic, cases such as the above are neither the most interesting, nor the most essential form of the comic. Instead, the comic derives its most interesting aspect for Kierkegaard in highlighting the *misrelation between the inner and the outer*.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Indeed, Kierkegaard begins *Either/Or* with the distinction between the inner and outer, stating in the “Preface” through the voice of the pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita: “It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer” (EO I 3). Continuing his “Preface”, Eremita discusses a collection of found papers that came into his possession, hidden quite appropriately in a secret draw of a writing desk (or escritoire), which make up the present work, titled *Either/Or*. These papers, state Eremita, “confirmed my suspicion that the outer is not the inner” (EO I 4). In introducing the pseudonymous authors of *Either/Or*, and in order to demonstrate the truth of his hypothesis, Eremita highlights the misrelation present in their characters between the inner and outer. Of the aesthete, whom he calls A he states, “His exterior has been a complete *contradiction* of his interior” (EO I 4).[[72]](#footnote-72) Of the Judge, whom he calls B, he says: “he has hidden a more significant interior under a rather insignificant exterior” (EO I 4). This contradiction – between the inner and the outer – lies at the heart of the comic.

By way of an example of the misrelation between the inner and the outer, Climacus states: “Hamlet swears by the fire tongs [*Ildtangen*]; the comic is in the contradiction between the solemnity of the oath and the reference that annuls the oath, no matter what the object is” (CUP I 514fn). As Williams argues, Climacus seems to be suggesting that “*no object whatsoever* is truly commensurable with the infinity of human inwardness and passion” (2018: 55), and that not even the highest, and most holy of external objects is commensurable with the subject’s inwardness and passion. All are equally comic in their misrelation, though the more trivial the object, the more apparent the misrelation.

Busyness, then, is considered comic partly because it concerns itself with mere objects, or more broadly, earthly things; and, importantly these objects are lacking in meaning – they are finite, temporary, worldly – and to concern oneself with them, with utter seriousness is comic. A is of course eager to state that these men of business are busy in the world (*Travlt i Verden*), a phrase repeated throughout *EO*. As Climacus continues:

If the reason for people’s hustle-bustle [*travle Løben omkring*] is a possibility of avoiding danger, the busyness [*Travlheden*] is not comic; but if, for example, it is on a ship that is sinking, there is something comic in all this running around, because the contradiction is that despite all this movement they are not moving away from the site of their downfall (CUP I 555 / SV VII 484).

Here we need to be cautious. A’s views on busyness come from an aesthetic worldview, whilst Climacus approaches busyness from the ethical-religious worldview. When Climacus says that through busyness the busy people “do not move away from the site of their downfall” despite their busyness, he has a religious connotation in mind; these busy people are concerned with, and devote their energy to, the wrong thing: they are busy in the world rather than spiritually devoted towards God, as befitting a proper Christian existence. This is comic from the religious world view. For A, who views busyness from the nihilistic standpoint of the aesthetic, the busyness of the busy people is comic because if everything is ultimately meaningless, and without value, then it is comic to be so busily committed to the world; the world itself is “sinking”, so to speak. The contradiction between the *seriousness* in which the men of business approach their worldly busyness, and the *meaningless* of this busyness – from a nihilistic perspective – is comic. Furthermore, in this way busyness demonstrates a contradiction between the emptiness of the task, and the seriousness of the spectacle.

Returning to the busyness-aphorism, there are *two key ways* in which A considers busyness comic. The first concerns the relationship between the busy person and their life, and the lack of meaning inherent in this relationship (which we have touched upon briefly above). The second concerns the sudden disruption or subversion of the busy person’s busyness.

#### Painless Contradiction: Detachment and Commitment

The first aspect of busyness that A finds comic in the busyness-aphorism concerns the paradoxical – or contradictory – relationship between the busy person and their life: specifically, the *immersion* in the world that the busy person supposedly expresses. There is an element to which the busy person’s briskness (*rask*) demonstrates a certain healthy (*rask*) commitment to the world (indeed, they are involved with worldly endeavours), whilst at the same time, demonstrating an absent-mindedness or superficiality to the world: they are unthinkingly quick in what they do. The busy person is, for A, somehow at once both deeply engaged within the world and its “huge conflagration”, yet also deeply disengaged, in their detached everyday busyness.[[73]](#footnote-73) It is this contradiction, as *existentially absurd*, that A finds comic.

This absurd aspect of busyness is demonstrated in the inability of the busy people to achieve anything meaningful *through* their busyness. A expresses this through the simile of the woman, who in her absent-minded haste rescues the “fire tongs” (*Ildtangen*) from her burning house; the item she saves being perhaps the only item that would survive the fire without her intervention! In her haste she shows a detachment from the world; there is a meaninglessness, pointlessness or emptiness, to what she does. Her busyness does not amount to anything. Further then, “rescuing the fire tongs” becomes a metaphor for all the “busy workers” who, through their busyness achieve – or salvage – nothing from “life’s huge conflagration” (*Livets store Ildebrand*). What A seems to allude to, here, is that regardless of whether one is busy or not, the outcome is the same: nothing meaningful, or worthwhile is achieved. Thus, being busy is comic because if nothing meaningful can be gained from life anyway – rescuing the fire tongs is pointless – then it is ridiculous to be busy; one might as well not be busy!

A expands upon this view in a further aphorism, stating:

What, if anything, is the meaning of this life? If people are divided into two great classes, it may be said that one class works for a living and the other does not have that need. But to work for a living certainly cannot be the meaning of life, since it is indeed a contradiction that the continual production of the conditions is supposed to be an answer to the question of the meaning of that which is conditional upon their production. The lives of the rest of them generally have no meaning except to consume the conditions. To say that the meaning of life is to die seems to be a contradiction also (EO I 31).

Besides the social critique that is present in the aphorism above, what really concerns A here is *meaning*, and its place in life. Distinguishing between a working class and the bourgeoise, A claims that meaning does not exist anywhere in life, least of all in being busy working. For A, to work for a living – that is, to be busy – cannot be life’s meaning as it results in a circular argument; the working class (as in a social-class, rather than merely those whom are busy) are busy working in order to sustain (their) life, and therefore their busyness; to be busy working cannot be the *meaning* of life, for A, as it is this working that sustains life, and therefore sustains its meaning. To put it another way, life’s meaning cannot be derived from the internal conditions of life itself, that is, *working*.[[74]](#footnote-74) Further, life’s meaning cannot be contained within the bourgeois class, as their only meaning, for A, is to consume the conditions which make life possible: an idle kind of busyness. Finally, for a similar reason that working cannot be the meaning of life, *to die* is also rejected as the meaning of life, presumably, because death negates the very thing that it would give meaning to, that is, *life![[75]](#footnote-75)*

As mentioned above, A’s worldview is nihilistic, and it is this nihilism that causes A to consider busyness as comic, precisely because he views busyness – and everything else for that matter – as pointless, empty or meaningless.[[76]](#footnote-76) On the busy activity of his age, A states:

I saw that the meaning of life was to make a living, its goal to become a councillor, that the rich delight of love was to acquire a well-to-do-girl, that the blessedness of friendship was to help each other in financial difficulties, that wisdom was whatever the majority assumed it to be, that enthusiasm was to give a speech, that courage was to risk being fined ten dollars, that cordiality was to say “May it do you good” after a meal, that piety was to go to communion once a year. This I saw, and I laughed (EO I 33-4).

Read in light of the busyness-aphorism, (indeed the above passage comes after it chronologically)[[77]](#footnote-77) the above passage points to various other ways that people “busy” themselves in the world: in working; in occupations; in love; in churchgoing religion, etc. A laughs at life’s apparent meaning in the passage above because he sees busyness, and specifically, to be *busy in the world* (*Travlt i Verden*) as an ultimately futile endeavour. Thus, his only response is to laugh.

#### Negation and Accident

The second aspect of busyness that A considers comic is its *negation*. This negation concerns busyness’s momentary disruption or rebuttal. This is comic on two levels. Superficially, it is comic for A in the immediate sense of a sudden contradiction *between movement and rest*. The busy person who is defined by their haste is suddenly arrested; they are still busy, but now their busyness is ridiculous as it is not going anywhere, it is no longer directed towards anything. In fact, we might term this notion of disruption, a *Socratic disruption*: a moment in which the busy person is temporarily halted – by an unexpected inconvenience – from their busyness. The depiction of this “decisive moment” (*afgjørende Øiblik*) as a “fly settl[ing] on the nose of one of those men of business” is particularly pertinent. The fly (*en Flue*) – whether intentionally a reference to a Socratic gadfly, or not – suggests a moment at which the busy individual becomes self-aware; their passive everyday busyness is disrupted[[78]](#footnote-78) by a contradiction – in this case a sudden stoppage to their haste – which, if only fleeting, forces them to confront their busyness, their reasons for their busyness, and indeed themselves.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The sudden disruption to the busy person draws attention to Kierkegaard’s notion of *the* *accidental*. The accidental, or the contingent “signifies that our immanent and immediate conditions are always capable of being transcended by something wholly novel and external that *disrupts* established conditions” (Burns, 2015: 62).[[80]](#footnote-80) For A, “the accidental consists in the unarticulated interjections of fate” (EO I 48). That is a random, disorderly, implicit contingency that permeates our entire existence; indeed, its ever-present possibility is cause for anxiety. Aesthetically, it shares connection with Kierkegaard’s concept of “vortex” (*Hvirvel*), an underlying “force” of nature that is – for Kierkegaard’s aesthetic author – fundamentally metaphorical or *poetic* in character (rather than a literal underlying force).[[81]](#footnote-81) In an aesthetic sense, the vortex poetically represents the ever-present possibility of contingency. As A makes strikingly clear in “Silhouettes”, in which he addresses the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι (Fellowship of the Dead) in celebration of the one year anniversary of their society:

Yes, would that the vortex, which is the world’s core principle, *even if people are not aware of it but eat and drink, marry and propagate themselves with carefree industriousness*, would that it might erupt with deep-seated resentment and shake off the mountains and the nations and the cultural works and man’s clever inventions; would that it might erupt with the last terrible shriek that more surely than the trumpet of doom announces the downfall of everything; would that it might stir and spin this bare cliff on which we stand as light as thistledown before the breath in its nostrils (EO I 168).[[82]](#footnote-82)

The accidental, then – with its aesthetic imagery of the vortex – symbolises the nihilistic worldview of A, and in relation to busyness, demonstrates a negation of any possible meaning to one’s busyness.

There are two ways in which busyness specifically relates to the accidental here, in relation to the busyness-aphorism: the first concerns Kierkegaard’s concept of the *interesting*, whilst the second concerns the *arbitrariness* of busyness itself. The momentary disruption to the busy person qualifies as a feature of the accidental for A, *himself*; that is, as “the most insignificant thing [that] can accidentally become a rich material for amusement” (EO I 300). In other words, the fly’s landing on the nose of the busy person is contingent. It is just an accidental event that A – the aesthete – is able to derive amusement and enjoyment from, and represents an instance of the interesting: the aesthete “enjoys something totally accidental; [and] considers the whole of existence [*Tilværelse*] from this standpoint” (EO I 299). The further events – the carriage, the bridge, the roof tile – represent further accidental instantiations of the *interesting*. This would suggest, if the interesting can *disrupt* busyness, then busyness itself must be un-interesting. Indeed, we will see this idea expressed shortly, wherein busyness is seen to be “the most boring of all” (EO I 288). Ironically, A’s response to boredom turns out to be a kind of busyness that is aesthetic – which in Part II I will term *aesthetic busyness*.

Secondly, busyness relates to the accidental in the sense that busyness *itself* contains features of the accidental, wherein “the accidental outside a person corresponds to the arbitrariness within him” (EO I 300). In this sense, busyness would be defined as manifold, as various “accidents”, which would of course suggest a degree to which busyness *fragments* the individual; one is concerned with many separate, and possibly *unrelated* contingencies. These contingencies external to the individual – a phone call, an email to send, a meeting to organise – become contingencies in the busy individual themselves, and in doing so, cause division (and despair) in the make-up of the self, and ultimately – as we will see – a *loss of self*. In *Either/Or Volume II,* Judge William describes A in this way: “His soul is like soil out of which grow all sorts of herbs, all with equal claim to flourish; his self consists of this multiplicity [*Mangfoldighed*], and he has no self that is higher than this” (EO II 225). Indeed, this notion of busyness as an occupation with multiplicity – and a subsequent loss of self – is repeated by Kierkegaard throughout the authorship, and will find its most ardent expression in Kierkegaard’s religious critique of busyness, specifically in *Works of Love* and *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.

Furthermore, the notion of the accidental raises the question, which seems to be of major importance to A: *what is the point in one’s busyness if it can be so easily stopped by some external accidental contingency? In other words, how can one’s busyness have meaning if it is so arbitrarily arrested?*

We saw this aspect of busyness symbolised in the idea of the vortex, in which A’s nihilistic worldview – “the downfall of everything” – emphasises that events can always be otherwise. Where busyness is concerned, the accidental interruption of one’s busyness, leads to the *subjective* “realisation that things could always be otherwise [and this] is what creates the experience of anxiety for the subject” (Burns, 2015: 64). To return to one’s busyness *after* the accidental interruption is a way to avoid this anxiety and, further, flee from one’s self and one’s subjectivity. When one is faced with one’s own anxiety about the many vortices of life, one *busies* oneself in distraction.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Ultimately, from the aesthetic view, one’s busyness can have no meaning. The realisation of this leads the aesthete to consider busyness comic. For the busy individual however, a realisation that one’s busyness lacks meaning leads to either boredom, or anxiety. Somewhat paradoxically, the only way out of busyness – for Kierkegaard – aesthetic or otherwise, will be a subjective acceptance of the contingency at the heart of existence; a taking up of religious faith.

In order to further consider the concept of busyness in the aesthetic writings, let us examine the relationships between busyness, boredom, and anxiety from the aesthetic point of view. To do so, it is necessary to consider A’s short essay “Rotation of Crops”, and the category of demonic boredom.

### “The Most Boring of All”: Busyness, Boredom, and Anxiety in “Rotation of Crops”

“Rotation of Crops” seeks to put forward an aesthetic response to boredom through the development of a “theory of social prudence” which A names “rotation of crops” (EO I 281-300). In “Rotation of Crops” A begins with the basic principle that “all people are boring” (EO I 285) and argues that the corrupting nature of boredom makes boredom – not idleness – “the root of all evil” (EO I 285). Crucially, A sees the present age as boring: “Denmark is floundering – it is a matter of life and death; it is floundering on boredom, which is the most fatal of all” (EO I 288). Boredom is both a personal and societal malaise. We might ask: what it is about nineteenth century Denmark, and its people, that A finds so boring? The answer lies in busyness.

Echoing his comments in the “Diapsalmata” (EO I 31) A distinguishes between two classes of boring people: a working class and an idle bourgeoise. The working class, that is, “the plebians, the crowd, the endless train of humanity in general” are those who bore others. A compares this working class with the “lower classes of animals” (EO I 289). In contrast, the bourgeoise, “the chosen ones, the nobility” (EO I 288), are those who bore themselves. Of those who do not bore themselves – that is, the working class – A suggests they are “busy in the world in one way or another” (EO I 288). These individuals are even more boring for A precisely because of their busyness, and are “the most boring of all, the most unbearable” (EO I 288). Those busy workers who do not find their *own* busyness boring, are bores to others.

A expands on the boring nature of busyness, stating that those who lack a sensitivity for idleness are busy *in perpetuum*. These busy people possess “indefatigable activity” and “must instinctively *always be in motion*” (EO I 289).[[84]](#footnote-84) This prevents them from becoming truly human, entering the world of spirit, and “places [them] in a class with the animals” (EO I 289). A elaborates on the boring lives of the busy people:

There are people who have an extraordinary talent for transforming everything into a business operation [*Alt til Forretning*], whose whole life is a business operation [*Forretning*], who fall in love and are married, hear a joke, and admire a work of art with the same businesslike zeal [*Forretnings-Iver som den*] with which they work at the office” (EO I 289).

In identifying busyness as the “most boring of all”, busyness is presented as the height of the category of the boring. It is worth then considering how A understands boredom, how it is distinct from idleness, and what its relation to busyness means for Kierkegaard’s concept and critique of busyness.

#### Boredom and Idleness

In order to further define boredom, A distinguishes it from *idleness*. Ordinarily, A suggests, idleness is viewed as the root of all evil: “*otium est pulvinar diaboli* [idleness is the devil’s pillow]” (EO I 289). However, “happy idleness”, or what A calls *feminine idleness*, that is, idleness which does not fall prey to boredom, is for A “a truly divine life” (EO I 289), and therefore not the root of all evil, but “the true good” (EO I 289).[[85]](#footnote-85) In order, then, for one to live a truly divine life in happy idleness – the ultimate aim of the pleasure seeking aesthete – boredom must be prevented. One consideration of A in order to prevent boredom – as an ever-present danger to the idle individual – is work (*Arbeide*). This however, A contends, is a false dichotomy. Whilst it is true that idleness might be annulled by work, it is not necessarily the case that boredom can be. Again, the reason for this concerns busyness, as the height of the category of the boring. As A goes on to suggest:

To say that it [boredom] is annulled by working betrays a lack of clarity, for idleness can certainly be cancelled by work, since this is its opposite, but boredom cannot, as is seen in the fact that the busiest workers of all [*allertravleste Arbeidere*], those whirring insects with their bustling buzzing, are the most boring of all [*allerkjedsommeligste*], and if they are not bored, it is because they do not know what boredom is – but then the boredom is not annulled (EO I 290).

Again, connoting the animal-like nature of the busy people – this time as insects, “*emsige Brummen mest snurrende Insekter*” (SKS 2 279) – A suggests that the true dichotomy is between idleness and work, rather than boredom and work. This is because, work – as busyness – is the height of boredom. The busy people – even if they are not bored – are the most boring of all. Busy working then cannot be a way to avoid boredom. A’s response to boredom then, and his way to avoid it in his search for happy idleness must therefore exclude busyness in any form. How does A define boredom, and does his response successfully exclude busyness?

#### Demonic Boredom

A makes a distinction between “two kinds of boredom” (EO I 290-1). He suggests that boredom is partly “an immediate genius” and partly “an acquired immediacy” (EO I 290). The first of these is an immediate boredom, exemplified through the English tourist, who in his utterances, which consists of “a single monosyllable” (EO I 290) exemplifies the “undifferentiation of admiration and indifference in the unity of boredom”. The second, boredom as an “acquired immediacy”, is “a fruit of misguided diversion” (EO I 290). In other words, it is the boredom that is *acquired* after seeking a remedy to boredom. For example, one might try to alleviate one’s immediate boredom through a walk in the countryside; however, one might then find this activity boring, and in doing so one has acquired an immediate boredom. Whilst, then, there are two kinds of boredom, they are both “joined in the category of boredom” (EO I 291).

A considers this category demonic,[[86]](#footnote-86) calling boredom the “demonic pantheism” (EO I 290). Unlike pantheism, which is defined by a fullness, and specifically a fullness of God, A – by means of the demonic – inverts pantheism’s meaning, and suggests that boredom as the demonic pantheism is “built upon emptiness” (EO I 291) and by implication – we might add – an emptiness, or absence of God. These comments on boredom’s emptiness foreshadow Vigilius Haufniensis’s comments in *The Concept of Anxiety*, where anxiety is described as an emptiness. Furthermore, like Haufniensis’s concept of anxiety, A’s concept of boredom is described in much the same way. Like anxiety, boredom is described as dizziness:

Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence [*Tilværelsen*]; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss (EO I 291).

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down (CA 61).

Haufniensis’s question in *The Concept of Anxiety* – whether one had *not* looked down with one’s own eyes – emphasises the *subject’s* role in the psychological phenomena of boredom and anxiety. Boredom, then, like anxiety is characterised by Kierkegaard as a mood (*Stemning*), alongside “the related moods of irony, melancholy, anxiety and despair” (McDonald, 2009: 63). Demonic boredom “arises when the melancholic aesthete affects boredom in an ironic pose to distance himself from the mundane busyness of modern life” (McDonald, 2009: 62). In other words, demonic boredom arises when the *subject ironically appropriates* the category of boredom as a mood into their own existence. What does Kierkegaard mean by a mood?

Distinct from emotions, which tend to be defined as “concern-based” (Roberts, 1988: 184), moods are indeterminate, lacking a determinate object, and condition the whole of one’s existence towards them. This is why A, suffering from demonic boredom, is completely lacking in interest or enthusiasm for anything. Consider, for example, A’s comments in the “Diapsalmata” wherein he expresses his lack of enthusiasm for existence in the following aphorism, which interestingly also expresses the first either-or in *Either/Or*:

I don’t feel like doing anything. I don’t feel like riding – the motion is too powerful; I don’t feel like walking – it is too tiring; I don’t feel like lying down, for either I would have to stay down, and I don’t feel like doing that, or I would have to get up again, and I don’t feel like doing that, either. *Summa Summarum*: I don’t feel like doing anything (EO I 20).

The aphorism expresses a lack of concern towards the world. The phrase “I don’t feel like doing anything” (*jeg gider slet ikke*) can also be translated as “I couldn’t be bothered doing anything”. It suggests that A is “emotionally numb” (McDonald, 2009: 64), and unable to become invested in anything. In ironically directing the whole of his existence *towards* demonic boredom (as a mood), A is “transfixed by […] an attunement to his own emptiness, which prevents him from relating with concern to anything” (McDonald, 2009: 64). Having looked into the “abyss”, A sees existence as empty, and the pervasiveness of demonic boredom emphasises this emptiness. This is why A sees busyness as comic, as meaningless, and as equally empty; his whole existence is conditioned by a demonic devotion to the emptiness of the abyss; which is expressed through the mood of boredom.

Considered in terms of a *mood*, A – and Kierkegaard, also – sees boredom as both a personal, but also a societal malady.[[87]](#footnote-87) Demonic boredom, as a social issue, is “generated by a culture of narcistic reflection, superficial distraction, gossip, *busyness*, and secularity” (McDonald, 2009: 63).[[88]](#footnote-88) The aesthete (and Kierkegaard, too) decries his age as one of boredom, precisely because it is dis-interested, dis-invested, etc. It is *without passion.* In *Either/Or*, then,A foreshadows Kierkegaard’s later critique in *Two Ages*, stating: “Let others complain that the times are evil. I complain that they are wretched, for they are without passion. People’s thoughts are as thin and fragile as lace” (EO I 27). The social critique of a disengaged and apathetic public advanced in *Two Ages* echoes A’s critique of societal boredom in *Either/Or*. As McDonald suggests: “The demonic aesthete himself diagnoses boredom as a failure of imagination. This failure is a product of industrial, urban temporality, with its acceleration of life into a mechanised busyness, and the levelling of values in mass society” (McDonald, 2009: 62).

#### Seeking the Accidentally Interesting

In order to overcome, and prevent demonic boredom, then, A proposes – as a theory of social prudence – that we ironically seek only the *accidentally interesting*. He calls the proposal “rotation of crops,” and seeks to distinguish two dimensions: extensive and intensive. The extensive variant of crop rotation is unusually defined as “continually changing the soil” and “depends upon the boundless infinity of change” (EO I 291). In other words, the extensive variant is thus concerned with changing the scenery, as it were. As an example, A considers someone who, bored with the countryside, moves to the city; who, bored with their country, moves abroad: “an endless journey star to star” (EO I 291). Of course, there is another variation of crop rotation he considers – still extensive – that changes the scenery on a smaller scale: “One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold” (EO I 292). Both extensive variations concern (seemingly) infinite possibilities.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Key in the extensive variant of crop rotation, is the idea of *novelty*. One continually seeks out something new, in order to seek out the interesting. In doing so, A is aware that “the extensive employment of the rotation method must lead to an ever accelerating and in the end self-defeating race for novelty” (Harries, 2010: 96). Thus, seeking the interesting *extensively* becomes a kind of *aesthetic busyness*. And, as would be expected from busyness, seeking the interesting extensively will – as busyness – become boring, and make the individual unhappy.[[90]](#footnote-90) A is aware of this, and this is why he considers another variant of crop rotation: *intensive crop rotation*.

The intensive variation of crop rotation consists in how we would usually define crop rotation, which “like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops” (EO I 292). This method of seeking the interesting requires that one learns “to *move more slowly*, more deliberately” (Harries, 2010: 96).[[91]](#footnote-91) The key factor here is limitation, in which the aesthete limits their resources in order to gain in *intensity*, what they lose in *extensity*.[[92]](#footnote-92) Imagination here is crucial; the intensive method of crop rotation requires invention on the part of the aesthete. More crucial still is the “kinds of crops”. One searches for *interesting accidents*: the splash of a carriage, a bridge tilting, a roof tile falling: “[o]ne enjoys something totally accidental; one considers the whole of existence [*Tilværelse*] from this standpoint” (EO I 299). Seeking the interesting is a “subjective injection” (McDonald, 2009: 61): *one becomes one’s own source of the interesting*. A offers an elaborate example:

There was a man whose chatter I was obliged to listen to because of the circumstances. On every occasion, he was ready with a philosophical lecture that was extremely boring. On the verge of despair, I suddenly discovered that the man perspired exceptionally much when he spoke. This perspiration now absorbed my attention. I watched how the pearls of perspiration collected on his forehead, then united in a rivulet, slid down his nose, and ended in a quivering globule that remained suspended at the end of his nose. From that moment [*Øieblik*] on, everything was changed; I could even have the delight of encouraging him to commence his philosophical instruction just in order to watch the perspiration on his brow and on his nose (EO I 299).

Thus, for the aesthete, given an inventive imagination the possibilities for seeking the interesting are endless. Demonic boredom, as emptiness is annulled by a moment (*Øieblik*), in which the aesthete “ha[s] his eyes [*Øie*] open for the accidental” (EO I 300) and in doing so, observes the interesting.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Seeking the interesting *intensively* is “essentially a flight from reality” (Harries, 2010: 97). In this vein, A suggests several ways that a person ought to detach themselves from civic life – and the ethical-religious worldview – in order to avoid aesthetic boredom, and to continue to seek out the interesting. One should: “Guard against *friendship*” (EO I 295); “Never become involved in *marriage*” (EO I 296); “Never take any *official post*” (EO I 298).[[94]](#footnote-94) In doing so, it is “essential to have control over one’s moods” (EO I 298). We might consider “changing the *method* of cultivation” as the need to change one’s moods; or, the existential approach one takes towards things. Though A says it is not possible to change moods “at will”, prudence and limitation demand that one be able to *rotate* to a new mood at the most opportune moment. Further, one can also use one’s moods to evoke the interesting in others, to “see what is inside a person” (EO I 299). Playfully, A states “Just as an experienced sailor always scans the sea and detects a squall far in advance, so one should always detect a mood a little in advance” (EO I 298-9). Thus, the aesthete avoids boredom through a rotation of moods. He remains disengaged, *not inactive, but aimless* (EO I 298), poised carefully to rotate to a new mood in order to seek out the interesting. The crop rotating aesthete is

a diarist who enjoys not so much life itself as the entries in his diary, he puts life at a distance, filters it through the medium of his reflections […] it is precisely this distance that safeguards his freedom and enables him to pick out some things and leave out others, transforming life into something more interesting (Harries, 2010: 98).

All this, to avoid demonic boredom.

The question that needs asking then, is: how does A’s response to demonic boredom, his theory of social prudence – crop rotation – avoid becoming an aesthetic kind of busyness, which would, if true, risk once again becoming boring? The extensive method of crop rotation collapses back into boredom, through becoming a kind of busyness; can the same be said for the intensive method?

**Part II: The Aesthetic Concept of Busyness**

*“We must cut down on all this dashing about that a great many people indulge in, as they throng around houses and theatres and fora: they intrude into other people’s affairs, always giving the impression of being busy […] Their roaming is idle and pointless, like ants crawling over bushes, which purposelessly make their way right up to the topmost branch and then all the way down again. Many people live a life like these creatures, and you could not unjustly call it busy idleness” (Seneca, 2005: 96).*

*“It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion” (EO I 285).*

### An Aesthetic Kind of Busyness?

The question this part of the chapter will answer is: does the intensive method of crop rotation overcome demonic boredom, or does it degenerate into an aesthetic busyness, that therefore becomes boring from the perspective of the aesthetic worldview? In other words, is boredom inescapable for the aesthete because of the “most boring” nature of busyness? I will argue that the intensive method of crop rotation advocated by A in “Rotation of Crops” risks becoming an aesthetic kind of busyness. Hence, I suggest that Kierkegaard’s concept of aesthetic busyness is derivative from the response to boredom advocated by A in *Either/Or*. Thus, the features that A considers to be indicative of busyness from the aesthetic worldview, namely that: (1) busyness is detached from the world, therefore comic; (2) busyness is futile and aimless; (3) and busyness is concerned with the manifold, and the arbitrary – are all applicable to A’s response to boredom. Through the intensive method of crop rotation one becomes “busy in idleness”, and therefore cannot avoid becoming bored: through the intensive method of crop rotation (1) one must remain detached from the world (EO I 295-299); (2) one must be aimless (EO I 298); (3) one must concern oneself with many arbitrary moods, and many arbitrary instantiations of the interesting (EO I 298-300). Evidence for these claims will be considered from A’s musings on boredom, and examined in “The Seducer’s Diary”, which represents a “case study” of the intensive method of crop rotation, and therefore, an aesthetic busyness.

### Aesthetic Busyness in “The Seducer’s Diary”

Telling the story of Johannes the Seducer, and his pursuit of Cordelia, “The Seducer’s Diary” demonstrates an examination of what Victor Eremita calls the “reflective seducer in the category of the interesting” (EO I 9). Haunting, and provocative, “The Seducer’s Diary” provides many different – and conflicting – interpretations[[95]](#footnote-95) of what Kierkegaard’s aim is, in presenting to us an aesthetic worldview concerned with the seduction, engagement, and then breaking of engagement of a woman (and indeed various different women afterwards). In this section, I will add to these interpretations, and suggest that Johannes’ pursuit of Cordelia is an aesthetic kind of busyness, that demonstrates that it impossible for the aesthete to escape from boredom; and that ultimately, the aesthete’s busyness – which is viewed as comic from the aesthetic view, and tragic from the religious view – can only be escaped through the religious worldview.

It should be noted that Johannes’ pursuit of Cordelia is not *necessarily* sexual. (Indeed, there is some debate as to whether Johannes’ diary entries indicate sexual intercourse took place).[[96]](#footnote-96) Rather, Johannes’ pursuit of Cordelia is essentially *intellectual*: Johannes derives aesthetic pleasure from “the intellectual excitement of the chase” (Watkin, 1998: 105). Further, Johannes is no mere hedonist, ignorant of the other ways of living – either ethically or religiously – and seeking only sensual pleasures. He has made a *conscious decision* to follow an aesthetic ideal in seeking the accidentally interesting (though of course, from the point of view of the ethical-religious, how much of that is really a “decision” or choice in the truest sense is debateable).

Thus, it is my claim that “The Seducer’s Diary” offers us a way to think about an *aesthetically busy* individual. This section then will address the question: what is Johannes *doing* in “The Seducer’s Diary” that would qualify as “busyness” for Kierkegaard?

#### Who is the Author of “The Seducer’s Diary”?

“The Seducer’s Diary” presents us with further exegetical problems. Whilst, as noted above, the viewpoint from which its author writes is aesthetic, it is not necessarily the case that the author is A, that is, the author of the previous aesthetic works discussed in *Either/Or*: “Diapsalmata” and “Rotation of Crops” (discussed above). This is somewhat problematic for my present concerns, as I am arguing that the “project” taken up by Johannes the Seducer is a kind of busyness, derivative from A’s theory of social prudence, or *intensive* method of crop rotation. However, I suggest that we have good reason to believe that Johannes the Seducer either *is* A, or is a *pseudonym* of A,[[97]](#footnote-97) and therefore his “project” is derived from A’s theory of “crop rotation.” This would make sense when considering *Either/Or* chronologically, as “The Seducer’s Diary” directly follows “Rotation of Crops”.

In Victor Eremita’s “Preface” we are told that A lists himself as the *editor* of “The Seducer’s Diary”, whilst its author is known only as Johannes (EO I 8-9). Eremita stresses that this deception, this apparent *pseudonymity* “is an old literary device”, and that because “the prevailing mood in A’s preface [to “The Seducer’s Diary”] somehow manifests the poet”, we have good reason to believe that Johannes the Seducer is a pseudonym – or indeed the real name – of A.[[98]](#footnote-98) This, Eremita notes (as editor of *Either/Or*) raises further difficulties for his own position, and causes it to become “enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle” (EO I 9). One must note Kierkegaard’s irony here as the “true” *author* of *Either/Or*. Yet, the question must be asked: even if A *is* Johannes the Seducer, why does he feel the need to distance himself in some way from the diary of Johannes the Seducer? Eremita considers this question, and suggests that it is likely that A became so disturbed and afraid by the “fiction” he had created that he listed himself only as its editor (EO I 9). This “distancing” would suggest that Johannes the Seducer is located even further within the aesthetic than A himself. It would also, as I will discuss below, suggest a fragmentation, or fracturing, of the aesthete’s self.

#### Johannes’s Frenetic Busyness, or, *False* Restlessness in “The Seducer’s Diary”

Reading “The Seducer’s Diary” one feels an overwhelming sense of speed. Johannes hurries, moving always quickly towards his goal: the seduction, engagement, and then breaking of engagement of Cordelia. There is in the text a key motif of “motion” and “movement”. The diary begins with A’s “Preface” in the following way:

Hide from myself, I cannot: I can hardly control the *anxiety* that grips me at this moment [*Øieblik*] when I decide in my own interest to make an accurate clean copy of the *hurried transcript* I was able to obtain at the time only in the *greatest haste* [*Hast*] and with great uneasiness (EO I 303).[[99]](#footnote-99)

The allusions to motion continue for much of the diary, and are captured in the following: A’s view that Johannes’ consciousness manifests itself as a “sterile restlessness” allowing for “no rest” (EO I 309); the “restlessness and vehemence” of Johannes’ soul (EO I 324); its “dreadful momentum” (EO I 325); “the turbulent sea of [Johannes’] mind” (EO I 325); Johannes enjoyment “to be in motion with oneself” (EO I 326); his fear that “the world will come to a halt out of boredom!” (EO I 327);[[100]](#footnote-100) his impossibility of controlling “a certain restlessness” (EO I 331) within him; the “haste” in which he chases after Cordelia (EO I 334), where he “walk[s] faster” and follows her “in the greatest haste” (EO I 338); that he is “constantly on the go” causing Cordelia to believe that he has “a host of *business affairs* […] One, two, three, four schemes at a time” – note, the allusion to multiplicity (EO I 341);[[101]](#footnote-101) “the greatest haste [and] hurried[ness]” that he continues to pursue Cordelia (EO I 361); the “abundan[ce] of inner motion” of Johannes’ various moods (EO I 403); the need to “set everything in motion” in order to keep Cordelia “inspired” (EO I 404-5); then when “[e]verything is set in motion”, Cordelia’s subsequent “agitation” (EO I 424); that the “idea [of the aesthetic] is present in motion” (EO I 437); and of course the *ever present notion of time*, and Johannes’ attempt to ignore its passing: first, through the dates that slowly disappear from the diary entries, then through his alarm at his “black tooth” (EO I 427) – a tell-tale sign of his mortality – and finally in his longing for *more time* that “such a night [could] last longer” (EO I 445), none of which can be remedied by the aesthetic sphere.

“The Seducer’s Diary” can be characterised by a certain commitment to motion, that we might describe as a kind of busyness. Indeed, one commentator, Bradley R. Dewey makes a similar observation – though he does not make the connection to *busyness* – that the “life of the aesthete is not an easy one. The reader is deliberately, if subtly, made aware that it requires plain hard work” (2005: 188). The seducer’s project means he must learn various skills, from dancing to *agronomic literature* (EO I 346). Dewey describes Johannes’ aesthetic pursuit of Cordelia as a *frenzy*, stating: “[Johannes’] amorous pace can be seen as a kind of frenzied relay race in which he is his team’s sole runner; when exhausted, he can only pass the baton from one of his hands to the other” (2005: 189). Through his seductions, repeated again and again, with different women (Cordelia is not the first) – for “no love affair should last more than a half a year at most” (EO I 368) – Johannes is locked into a prison of his own making: “a circle from which he cannot find an exit” (EO I 309). He moves restlessly, and constantly.

Yet, this preoccupation with movement is, *prima facie*, misleading. Because whilst Johannes appears to be engaged in a project of busyness, characterised by its *movement* – a methodological movement from one stage of the seduction to the next, as well as allusions to actual, *physical* movement – nonetheless as Clare Carlisle has argued in her study of Kierkegaard and movement, “[t]he indifference, impotence, melancholy, and preoccupation with the past exhibited by the aesthete’s reflections are described in terms of *stasis* (Carlisle, 2005: 53). What could be meant by this?

##### Motion and Stasis

Johannes the Seducer’s *haste* is in fact *inertia*. This is implied in a scene in which Johannes is served tea at an acquaintance’s residence just outside of Østerport. Positioning himself by a window in order to keep watch for Cordelia’s passing-by, Johannes drinks tea and lies in wait for Cordelia. On seeing her nearing the house, Johannes states the following:

I hastily grabbed my hat and my cane with the intention of passing her by and dropping behind her again many times until I discovered where she lived – when in my haste I jolted a woman’s arm just as she was offering tea. […] But just as if everything had conspired against me, my host had the dismaying idea of following up my comment and declared loudly and solemnly that I would not be allowed to go before I had enjoyed a cup of tea and had made restitution for the spilled tea by serving the ladies myself […] there was *nothing to do but remain* (EO I 334).[[102]](#footnote-102)

In his attempt at haste, Johannes is *physically* arrested, and the reason for his movement – to chase after Cordelia – in fact *causes* him to remain at rest. Whilst the above stresses a physical instantiation of Johannes’ inertia, the *reason* for his movement – to chase after Cordelia – and the method he employs also demonstrates inertia.

Thus, his methodological movement – what I am calling *aesthetic busyness* – also demonstrates an inertia, or stasis, rather than the outward haste and motion it initially suggests. We have already suggested that Johannes’ seducing is akin to the intensive method of crop rotation recommended by A to avoid boredom. Indeed, this project, which seeks the interesting, finds its “object”, that is – the source of the interesting – in Cordelia. The questions we must now answer are: (1) in what way is the intensive method of crop rotation recommended by A, and practiced by Johannes a kind of busyness; and (2) how is this busyness defined as inertia?

### The Aesthetic Concept of Busyness: Detachment, Aimlessness, and the Many Accidents

In order that A’s method of avoiding boredom, and Johannes’ project which employs this method is to be considered as an aesthetic kind of busyness, it ought to share qualities of the very busyness that the aesthete is so critical of. Thus, to qualify as aesthetic busyness it is necessary for the aesthete to demonstrate (1) a detachment from the world, (2) an aimlessness, and (3) a concern with many accidental occurrences. I will address each of these features in turn.

#### Detachment

Does one remain detached from the world through the intensive method of crop rotation? Yes. A argues in the final pages of “Rotation of Crops” that one should avoid committing to social and civic life. As we have seen, he argues that one must remain clear of friendship, marriage, and official posts; one must avoid partaking in social and civic life, in order that one avoid becoming “just a plain John Anyman, a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic” (EO I 298). However, there is a key difference in the kind of detachment from the world that the busy person expresses, compared with the response to demonic boredom the aesthete advocates. If we remember, the busy person is not aware that they are detached from the world – indeed, it is from this that the comic nature of busyness is derived – instead, they appear as though they are very much attached to the world in their “healthy” worldly busyness, none the wiser that they lack the inwardness and subjectivity necessary for selfhood. The demonically bored aesthete on the other hand is aware of this detachment and could therefore be described as tragic.[[103]](#footnote-103)

In “The Seducer’s Diary” this detached view might be described as a “solipsism” (Dewey, 2005: 186-8). Noting that Johannes “lives in two worlds”, Dewey suggests that beyond the world of everyday things that Johannes is only superficially attached to, there exists “the second, glittering aesthetic world” (Dewey, 2005: 186-7). Johannes prefers the aesthetic world, wherein he “mentalises”, and creates his own world. He says of Cordelia: “I may yearn after her, not in order to speak with her, but merely to have her image float past me” (EO I 361). Dewey defines this as a distinction between an “agent self” – the self who is a part of the actual world of everyday occurrences – and the “hovering self”, who uses the everyday world as a “storehouse” to be accessed to provide the stimuli necessary for “the interesting”. The danger is that the aesthete becomes lost in the secondary world, and the hovering self; eventually disappearing in abstraction. As Johannes suggests: “Everything is a metaphor; I myself am a myth about myself” (EO I 444). This then would suggest – as is the case concerning Kierkegaard’s wider comments on busyness – that the aesthete’s busyness will lead to a loss of one’s self. As Dewey notes:

[“The Seducers Diary”] can be seen as a surrogate experience for readers who permit themselves to participate in its slowly mounting terror. Clearly, the Seducer’s way leads to luxuriously ornamented and richly stimulating experiences. But, simultaneously, it leads step by irretraceable step toward the demonic, demented, inevitable dissolution of both his surrounding world and, ultimately, his own self (Dewey, 2005: 188).

In an attempt to avoid boredom, and by extension busyness, the aesthete has created their own detached existence, in which they have become closer to being aesthetically *busy*, and therefore *boring*.

#### Futility and Aimlessness

Is one aimless in one’s pursuits through the intensive method of crop rotation? Yes, this is a point A stresses. In order to avoid committing to the world, in social and civic life, one must remain aimless. However, in order to once again distinguish his solution to demonic boredom from idleness, A states that “one should nevertheless not be inactive but attach great importance to all the pursuits that are *compatible with aimlessness*; all kinds of unprofitable pursuits may be carried on” (EO I 298). We might distinguish this from busyness primarily by considering that the demonically bored aesthete, unlike the busy person is aware that his pursuits are aimless. The busy person busily pursues his or her tasks, unaware that they are ultimately aimless. Consider again that it takes some disruption to the busy person’s busyness in order for them to become aware of its aimlessness. Returning to the demonically bored aesthete – who employs the intensive method of crop rotation – whilst aimless like the busy people, again shows a degree of awareness of this aimlessness, and indeed an avowal of it. Unlike the aimlessness and futility of busyness, comic because the busy person is unaware of it, the aimlessness of the demonically bored aesthete can again be described as tragic.

Is Johannes the Seducer aimless? Or, in other words, is Johannes’ pursuit compatible with aimlessness? *Prima facie*, this does not appear to be the case. Johannes has a very specific goal in mind: the seduction, engagement, and breaking of his engagement with Cordelia. However, we must remember that Johannes’ goal is not primarily the seduction of Cordelia, but rather the seeking of the interesting; Cordelia is merely a means to this purpose. So, whilst from the aesthetic point of view, Johannes’ project might have a clear aim in mind – even though it is not what it initially looks like – from the ethical (and religious) point of view, A is clearly aimless. In *Either/Or Volume II* (the ethical viewpoint), Judge William writes to A, stating: “You love the accidental. A smile from a pretty girl in an interesting situation, a stolen glance, that is what you are hunting for, that is a motif for your *aimless fantasy*” (EO II 7).[[104]](#footnote-104) In its aimlessness, Johannes’ project looks very much like the busyness he is so critical of in the “Diapsalmata”.

#### The Many Accidents

Does the demonically bored aesthete, through the intensive method of crop rotation concern themselves with the manifold/accidental? This is clearly the case for the *extensive* method of crop rotation, wherein one concerns oneself with novelty, and the desire to “change the soil”, that is, to change the scenery. There, one concerns oneself with many objects, and as A himself admits, “[t]his method cancels itself and is the spurious infinity” (EO I 292).[[105]](#footnote-105) It can therefore easily be described as a kind of busyness, and therefore becomes “the most boring,” once again. The *intensive* method on the other hand, also becomes a kind of busyness, and ultimately cancels itself too. In the intensive method one is still concerned with the manifold. However, this time it – like the demonic is wont to do – inverts the “object” of one’s concern. Here, the manifold in which one “busies” oneself is internal, that is, it is one’s own moods, and mental states and their effects on others; or, more precisely, it is the interesting occurrences that arise from one’s own moods and mental states. As A states: “One does not enjoy the immediate *object* but something else that one arbitrarily introduces […] One enjoys something totally accidental; one considers the whole of existence from this standpoint” (EO I 299).[[106]](#footnote-106) Hence, one arbitrarily cycles through moods. As A goes on to suggest, “[s]omething accidental is made into the absolute and as such into the *object* of absolute admiration” (EO I 299).[[107]](#footnote-107) Thus, one concerns oneself with many accidents; this time however, once again with an increased awareness of their arbitrary and accidental nature. One can be said to be busy with a heightened awareness of its meaninglessness. Thus, again, one can be described as tragic.

The same is once again true of Johannes the Seducer. Indeed, the diary itself is “not indicative, but subjunctive” (EO I 304), and therefore explicitly concerned with the contingent/accidental. For Johannes, as stated above, through his seduction of Cordelia – and his employment of the intensive method of crop rotation – he utilises his moods to discover the interesting. Johannes’ “project” concerns the accidental in two ways. Firstly, the meetings and events that occur concerning Cordelia are accidental (though it might be argued that Johannes attempts to bring order to this chaos),[[108]](#footnote-108) and it is through Johannes’ mood that the interesting is discovered. Johannes’ “multitude of finite thoughts” (EO I 309) are concerned with prising the interesting out of accidental events. Secondly, that Johannes is concerned with Cordelia *at all* demonstrates a feature of the accidental; as A says of Johannes in his Preface: “individuals were merely for stimulation; he discarded them as trees shake off their leaves – he was rejuvenated, the foliage withered” (EO I 308). It may well not have been Cordelia.

In these three ways (detachment, aimlessness, and the multiplicity of the accidental) Johannes’ seduction of Cordelia, as an instantiation of A’s intensive method of “crop rotation” demonstrates the same characteristics of the busyness of which the aesthete is so critical. We can call this flight from busyness – as the height of the category of the boring – *aesthetic busyness*.

#### Aesthetic Busyness as Inertia

Finally, it is worth briefly considering in further detail that this aesthetic busyness – despite appearing to be in constant motion – is better defined as inertia or stagnation. In A’s Preface to the diary, Johannes’ reflective consciousness is said to “manifes[t] itself as a restlessness that does not indict him even in the profounder sense but keeps him awake, allows him no rest in his sterile restlessness” (EO I 309). Johannes’ sterile restlessness is characterised by an attempt to seek *the accidentally interesting*, and therefore (unlike true restlessness that Kierkegaard will later define, which is defined by its *essentiality*), Johannes’ restlessness is false: it is characterised by the *accidental*, the contingent, the aimless. It is therefore far closer to what we might call “busy restlessness” in Kierkegaard’s *For Self-Examination*.

In *For Self-Examination*, and elsewhere, Kierkegaard – in an attempt to define the restlessness of faith – contrasts true restlessness with busyness. Of busy restlessness, he states:

These thousands and thousands and millions, each one is looking after his own business; the public official is looking after his, and the scholar his, and the artist [*Kunstneren*] his, and the businessman his, and the slanderer his, and the loafer, no less busy [*travlt*], his, and so on and on; everyone is looking after his own business in this criss-crossing game of diversity [*Mangfoldighedens*] that is actuality (FSE 19/SV XII 310).

This false restlessness is in contrast to a passionate restlessness, that is:

restlessness in the pregnant sense, the restlessness of infinity, the joyous, robust originality that, rejuvenating, invigorating, healing, stirs the water […] this restlessness signifies something very great; it signifies the first fieriness of an essential genius. And this *restlessness does not signify anything accidental* (CD 309).

This distinction between two kinds of motion, between a *busyness* and a *restlessness* – one that seeks the accidental, and one that seeks the essential/ one that is concerned with the many, and one that is concerned with the singular / one that is not really going anywhere, one that is seeking some meaningful purpose – allow us to consider how busyness for the aesthete (and also the Danish Hegelians, the mass public, and Danish Christendom) is better defined as inertia. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s response to busyness will involve a “halting”, which Kierkegaard paradoxically defines as movement.[[109]](#footnote-109) This is expressed through the act of confession, and a taking up of faith and commitment to God. I will consider the idea that “halting is movement” in Chapter 5. For now, suffice to say that for the aesthete, their motion (as busyness) is not truly motion for Kierkegaard, but is defined as stasis. As A remarks in the busyness-aphorism: “What, after all, do these busy bustlers achieve?” (EO I 25). The answer, it now seems, is nothing.

### Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to give an account of “busyness” as it is conceived and critiqued within the aesthetic sphere. We have seen how the aesthetic concept of busyness, which I termed “busy idleness”, or “aesthetic busyness” is defined by a commitment – if indeed, commitment is the right word – to detachment, aimlessness, and the pursuit of a multiplicity of accidental occurrences. It is in this way that “busyness”, for Kierkegaard, is a category that is fundamentally, and primarily, at home in the aesthetic sphere. To be busy is to occupy the aesthetic sphere. Furthermore, I also alluded towards the way that through the aesthetic sphere, the apparent movement of busyness is inverted – and instead, is indicative of a kind of stagnation or inertia, rather than any authentic (inward) movement.

As we will see, in the remainder of this thesis, it is through these aesthetic characteristics of busyness that Kierkegaard will present his critique. In the following chapters I will consider Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness, as put forward from the religious worldview, where – as indicated by the failure of the aesthetic sphere to escape busyness – it is only through the religious that busyness can be overcome.

# “Living in Idleness”: Busyness in the Christian Tradition

“*Be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10)

## 

Before considering Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness in his religious writings, it is worth expanding upon the way that the concept, “busyness”, has been understood more generally in the Christian tradition. Kierkegaard is by no means the first Christian writer to consider busyness in a negative light; even today, the majority of literature written about the perils of “busyness” comes from the Christian tradition – mostly in the form of popular “self-help” books.[[110]](#footnote-110) Indeed, *The Bible* itself often refers pejoratively to busyness; the most pertinent case being Jesus’ reception by Mary and Martha (*Luke 10:40*). In this chapter then, I will consider (1) the Biblical usage of “busyness”, and the way that this is appropriated by Kierkegaard, and (2) note other Christian thinkers for whom “busyness” is a concern.

### Busyness in the Bible

In *Luke 10*, one finds specific mention of busyness as antithetical to following Jesus. The parable is short, and thus worth quoting in full:

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her (*Luke 10: 38-42*).

Simply put, Martha’s busyness – i.e. her pre-occupation around multiple different things – prevents her from finding the still and quiet contemplation necessary to hear the word of Jesus, as Mary does. The moral is a simple one: if you are too busy, you will not be able to hear the word of God. Other editions of *The Bible* often use the term busyness,[[111]](#footnote-111) as in “Martha was too busy”, which is also occasionally substituted for worry, or anxiety, as in “Martha was anxious”, etc. As Melvin Tinker writes: “The problem with Martha is that in all her busyness she has placed herself outside the sphere of hearing God’s Word” (Tinker, 2011: 464). The key point then in this parable is that busyness, or a concern about a multitude of other things, is preventative of a relationship with Jesus, and the ability to hear the word of God.

Kierkegaard’s use of Biblical passages is as vast as it is complex. As a result, there are multiple references – both direct and indirect – to this parable throughout Kierkegaard’s corpus. Indeed, as we will see throughout the remainder of the thesis, Kierkegaard refers frequently to “the one thing needful” – a clear reference to *Luke 10* (see: UDVS). Elsewhere, for instance, in “Three Upbuilding Discourses” (1843), Kierkegaard refers to those who “in busy service allowed themselves not a moment’s quiet; they fragmented their souls in multifarious expectancies” (EUD 211).

In his *Journals*, Kierkegaard draws directly upon *Luke 10: 38-42*. In one entry, from 1850 referring to the medieval Scottish philosopher and theologian, Richard of St. Victore, Kierkegaard writes:

It is very well put by Richard of St. Victore. He points out that one must not be busy [*travl*] like Martha, but “idle” like Mary. Then he adds that there are nonetheless many whom this does not help either, for they certainly are free of the busyness of work [*Arbedidets Travlhed*], are not employed [*beskæftigede*], “but all the same do not understand how to make a Sabbath of the Sabbath” (KJN NB15: 44).

The entry draws upon an interesting Kierkegaardian theme concerning busyness contra idleness; that is, that idleness *per se* is not necessarily free from the pitfalls entailed by busyness. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, idleness itself can become precisely the kind of busyness that it seeks to evade; we termed this *aesthetic busyness*. It seems that Kierkegaard is making a similar point here. Firstly, that one is not necessarily rid of the dangers of busyness when one is idle. And, as a consequence, in one’s busyness – as in idleness – one is equally far from the *rest* that a true Christian discipleship promises; i.e. the making a Sabbath a Sabbath.[[112]](#footnote-112) As if to confirm this similar relationship between busyness and idleness, in another *Journal* entry – also from 1850 – Kierkegaard writes: “Bernard. He said it beautifully: ‘Let us not forget that Martha and Mary after all were sisters’ (that is, that the other side of life is also to be included” (KJN NB21: 144). In other words, for Kierkegaard, whilst contemplation is necessary for true Christian discipleship, this also requires activity, or action. Kierkegaard’s critique of the reflective “media public” (cf. *Two Ages*) argues for an imbalance in the direction of contemplation, whilst his critique of busyness highlights the emphasis some place on activity, at the expense of thought and meaning. In both instances, nothing of substance, or meaning, is achieved.

Elsewhere in *The Bible* we see reference to busyness *as analogous to idleness*, in cases where an individual acts as a “busybody”. In *2 Thessalonians 3*, Paul writes: “For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (*2 Thessalonians 3:11).* “Disorderly” is sometimes rendered “living in idleness” (cf. *ISV*). As was the case with Johannes the Seducer, these idle individuals are busy in some roundabout way. They are “busybodies”[[113]](#footnote-113) – busy in distracting themselves with various trivialities. This kind of busy idleness is also likened to the “not merely idle, but also gossips” (*1 Timothy 5:13*). Hence, where Kierkegaard’s authorship is concerned, one might place these busybodies within the context of “the crowd” or “media public” from *Two Ages*, those individuals whom in their chatter (*at snakke*) represent “the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking” (TA 97), i.e. aimless talk. In the “busybody” passage from *2 Thessalonians 3*, Paul continues: “Now them that are such [i.e. busybodies] we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with *quietness they work*, and eat their own bread” (*2 Thessalonians 3:12*).[[114]](#footnote-114) Again, as in *Luke 10:38-42*, quietness is seen to be the refutation of this busy idleness, this chatter, this preoccupation with trivialities. It should come as no surprise then to find that when “busyness” is considered by writers in the Christian tradition, quietness and quiet contemplation are seen in direct opposition with busyness. Nowhere is this expressed more succinctly than by Blaise Pascal, who decries that not only busyness, but all of mankind’s unhappiness “springs from one thing alone, his incapacity to stay quietly in one room” (Pascal, 1999: 44). It is to Pascal and other Christian writers to whom we now turn.

### Busyness and Christian Writers

Following the pejorative usage of “busyness” in *The Bible*, it should come as no surprise to find Christian authors express disdain for busyness, and warn against its dangers. Here, I would like to discuss (briefly) some of the ways that busyness has been considered by Kierkegaard’s predecessors. I will consider the writings of the French Catholic philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) as well as the lesser-known work of the English Puritan poet and theologian, Richard Baxter (1615-1691). Whilst of course the former had some influence on Kierkegaard,[[115]](#footnote-115) there is (to my knowledge) no interaction with Baxter by Kierkegaard. Despite this, it is interesting to note Baxter’s concern with busyness, as it helps to demonstrate the point that “busyness” is very much an issue in the Christian tradition; and furthermore, considering Kierkegaard’s and Baxter’s familial resemblance in the Protestant tradition, it makes sense that both thinkers would concern themselves with similar themes.

#### Blaise Pascal

Kierkegaard was rather fond of Pascal – both as a writer and as an individual (Buben, 2011: 69). In many ways Kierkegaard viewed Pascal as a kindred spirit, concerned with the cheapening of Christianity and the disinterest and apathy of its followers. Indeed, Kierkegaard is sometimes described as “the Pascal of the North” for this very reason (Marino, 2018: 151). So, it should be expected that Pascal was to deal with many of the same issues that would later occupy Kierkegaard: busyness being one of them. Whilst busyness is a frequent concern of Pascal, for the sake of brevity I will focus on one section from his *Pensées* in which a discussion of busyness may be found.

In “§ IX. Diversion”[[116]](#footnote-116) of his *Pensées*, Pascal muses upon the notion of distraction and the many ways it manifests itself in human life. Pascal is specifically concerned with distraction in relation to unhappiness, or, in what makes a person unhappy. For Pascal, “the natural unhappiness of our feeble, mortal condition, [is] so wretched that nothing can console us when we really think about it” (1966: 67). Thus, we are driven towards certain phenomena that occupy our time, in such a way as to distract us from ever having to consider our own earthly demise. Diversion or distraction, Pascal asserts, always “comes from somewhere else, from outside” (Pascal, 1966: 66). It manifests itself, then, in externalities: conversation, gambling, war, occupations, etc. This is why, Pascal asserts, “men are so fond of hustle and bustle”, and why “men who are naturally conscious of what they are shun nothing so much as rest; they would do anything to be disturbed” (Pascal, 1966: 68). Continuing this line of thinking later in the *Pensées,* Pascal asserts:

Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair (Pascal, 1966: 235).

Thus, in order to prevent ourselves from falling into despair, we occupy our time with external concerns, such as busyness. We keep ourselves busy enough to avoid boredom and anxiety, and thus, to avoid the possibility of considering ourselves and our wretched situation.

The need to seek this distraction emerges from our “feeble mortal condition”, and the very makeup of ourselves. For Pascal, a person is comprised of two “secret instincts”. The first of these, deriving from the *wretchedness* of human existence, leads the person to seek “distractions and occupations”, never to contemplate, reflect, or consider; never able to be left alone with oneself. The second, deriving from the *greatness* [*grandeur*]of our nature suggests that “happiness lies only in repose, not in frantic activity” (Pascal, 1966: 46). This contradiction in our nature means that human existence flits between busyness and boredom – between movement and rest. We busy ourselves with something or other, accomplish what we intend, and then in our rest become bored, before finding something else to busy ourselves, lest we fall into anxious contemplation. As Pascal states:

The whole of life goes on like this. We seek repose by battling against difficulties, and once they are overcome, repose becomes unbearable because of the boredom it engenders. We have to get away from it and beg for commotion (Pascal, 1966: 46).

Thus, due to the contradictory nature of the self we do not seek either “soft peaceful existence” in which we will be left to reflect upon our “unfortunate condition”, yet nor do we seek “the dangers of war or the burden of office”, but instead a meaningless in-between: “the bustle which distracts and amuses us” (Pascal, 1966: 45). Thus, it seems that the self for Pascal desires *neither* a passive reflective existence, *nor*an active practical one, but rather an *anesthetising distraction from existence itself*.

It is worth noting that whilst Pascal – and as we will see momentarily, Baxter – view busyness as a problematic way of being in the world, for both of them their discussion of busyness seems rooted in its opposite: idleness. For Pascal, we seek busyness because we fear boredom; much like the aesthete of *Either/Or Volume I*, it is our idleness and boredom that leads us to busyness. As the aesthete writes: “It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion” (EO I 285). This way of thinking in the writings of Pascal (and, as we will see, also Baxter) is rather unsurprising when we consider that the generally held view of busyness at the time of their writings was that *busyness emerged from idleness*. As Josef Pieper puts it:

At the zenith of the Middle Ages […] it was held that sloth and restlessness, ‘leisurelessness’, the incapacity to enjoy leisure, were all closely connected; sloth was held to be the source of restlessness, and the ultimate cause of ‘work for work’s sake’. It may well seem paradoxical to maintain that the restlessness at the bottom of a fanatical and suicidal activity should come from the lack of will to action (Pieper, 1952: 48).

Indeed, for Pascal it is precisely this “suicidal activity” – literally, the attempt to quell any serious reflection on the *self* and its situation – that motivates the individual to seek distraction and busyness.

#### Richard Baxter

Whilst – despite their Protestant heritage – there is no direct link between Baxter and Kierkegaard, Baxter’s discussions of busyness help to elucidate Kierkegaard’s own consideration of the concept, as well as at the same time demonstrate the Christian fascination with busyness. For indeed, both Baxter and Kierkegaard explore busyness within similar conceptual frameworks: both view busyness as a distraction akin to idleness, as a waste of energy, as in some way an empty form of action, and also consider the concept in relation to time.[[117]](#footnote-117) The most explicit discussion of busyness by Baxter is found in *A* *Christian Directory*, a monumental work published in 1673; in the text Baxter warns the Christian individual against becoming concerned with *materiality*, or *externality*, and wasting their time on these worldly pursuits. The part of the text that is of most interest to our present concerns is a section subtitled “The Directions for Redeeming or Well Improving Time” – and whilst there is not the space in the present thesis to explore this chapter in detail, it is worth highlighting several of its key themes.

In “The Directions for Redeeming or Well Improving Time”, Baxter explores the passage from *Ephesians 5:15-16*: “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time”. In many ways Baxter’s writings in *A Christian Directory*, specifically the chapter of present interest, is a precursor to the slew of Christian self-help, or time-management literature which – as noted above – is particularly chiding of busyness. In fact, according to one commentator, within Baxter’s works is contained “an unparalleled emphasis on the stewardship of time” (Cooke, 1994: 58). Appropriately, then, Baxter’s aim in this “direction” is to elucidate not only “what is meant by *Time*” but also what is meant “by *Redeeming* it” (§.1).

From the outset, Baxter makes it clear that time concerns one’s “*special Opportunity* which is fitted to a special work” (§.2), and it is in this capacity that it is to be redeemed. He goes on to consider the many various ways in which the Christian individual may spend their time (§.5), before asserting what is contained within the notion of “redeeming time”. Here, he asserts seven properties contained within “redeeming time”: (1) to redeem one’s time is to “see that we cast none of it away in vain; but use every minute of it” in the pursuit of one’s duty; (2) that we should always be doing good with our time, and that this good is that “which we are able to have a call to do”; (3) that one should not only strive to do the good things, but that one should do them to the fullest degree “in the best *manner* and in the *greatest measure*, and do as much good as we possibly can”; (4) we should “watch for special opportunities”; (5) “take them when they fall” as well as “*improve* them when we *take them*”; (6) reject that which can be parted with “to save our *time*”, and similarly; (7) “forecast the preventing of impediments […] and the obtaining of all the Helps to expedition and success in duty”, that is, to reject that which prevents us from completing our duty – and the special work that we are called to do (§.5).

As a consequence, anything that “gets in the way” of one’s commitment to the Christian life should – if duty dictates – be set aside. This includes busyness. Baxter writes:

*Time must be Redeemed* from *worldly business* and *commodity*, when matters of greater weight and commodity do require it. Trades and Plow, and profit must stand by, when God calls us (by necessity or otherwise) to greater things. *Martha* should not so much as *trouble* her self in providing meat for Christ and his followers to eat, when Christ is offering her food for her soul, and she should with *Mary* have been hearing at his feet (§.7).

What follows is a lengthy consideration of how one spends one’s earthly time. Does one, like “the distracted Time-wasters” (§.8. Direct.1) – like Martha – spend it in busyness, idleness, or general earthly pursuits, *or*, - like Mary – does one spend one’s limited time in the service of God. Anticipating Kierkegaard’s “At a Graveside” (1845), Baxter also invites a reflection on one’s death as a way to consider how one should spend one’s earthly time: “O spend thy Time as thou wouldst review it!” Baxter implores (§.11. Direct.4); similarly, “How short a Time is it betwixt this and the digging of thy grave” (§.17. Direct.10). Baxter emphasises the ease at which one’s time is lost to busyness and idleness: “*Remember the swift and constant motion of your neglected Time*. What hast[e] it makes! And never stays! […] And is *Time* so *swift*, and *you* so *slow*?” (§.15. Direct.8). In doing so, Baxter recommends that one always “*Consider soberly the ends*” of one’s activities (see, §.20. Direct.13), and the proper application of one’s *work*.

It is here, in contrast to the time-wasting busyness of “idlers” and “loiterers” that Baxter introduces his notion of genuine work, that is, how the Christian individual should rather “spend their time”:

in praying, and preaching, and holy conference, and in doing good, and in the works of their outward callings in subservience to these: But not in Cards, or Dice, or Dancing, or Stage-playes, or pampering the flesh, nor in the pursuit of the profits and honours of the world (§.25. Direct.18).

Further, concerning the little time that a person has in relation to their work:

It is the *Work* that makes the *Time* a mercy: The *Time* is for the *Work*: If my *work* were done, which the good of the Church and my soul requireth, what cause had I to be glad of the ending my Time, […] *Lord, now letterst thou thy servant depart in peace* (§.20. Direct.13).

For Baxter, *work* – contra *busyness* which is purely a waste of time – does allow for some of this time “back”, in the form of rest. Of course there is the eternal rest awaiting the individual once their work is done, but it seems that Baxter also alludes to a temporal (and temporary) rest, wherein “rest, and recreations must be but such and so much as fit thee for thy work; and as helps it on, and do not hinder it” (§.20. Direct.13). In other words, whilst God does not permit the individual “one minute to spend in vain” (§.20. Direct.13), genuine work as set out above does allow the individual some time for rest and recreation, as long as it is in service to one’s work.

What follows is essentially a rally against hesitation, or procrastination. For whilst Baxter states that different works “all have their *particular seasons*” and that “the *present Time* is the *season* to works of *present necessity*” (§.28), the Puritan writer is eager to stress that one’s work should begin immediately: “*it is the great difference between the happy Saint and the unhappy world, that one is wise in time, and the other is wise too late*” (§.28. Direct.1). Baxter uses a farming metaphor to emphasise this point: “*Remember that the neglecting of the season is the frustrating and destroying of the work* […] If you sow not in the time of sowing, it will be in vain at another time” (§.29. Direct.2). It is left to the busybodies and idlers to procrastinate and distract themselves into never beginning their work. An interesting aside to note here concerns the way that Kierkegaard too emphasises the link between the procrastination of one’s work, or worldly actions, and the relation these have to death, time, and busyness.[[118]](#footnote-118)

Baxter then sets out several *practical* concerns on how the Christian individual should make use of their time, and carry out their work. Notably, the individual should “see that the great work of a sound conversion or sanctification be certainly wrought within”, whilst also “Make sure of your saving interest in Christ: get proof of your adoption and peace with good and right to ever lasting life” (§.38. Direct.1). If such is done, then the individual will face no loss of their time, having “secured the main” (§.38. Direct.1). What follows are further practical steps towards proper Christian time-management, such as learning the importance of one’s duties (§.39. Direct.2), the importance of knowing *when* to do one’s duties (§.40. Direct.3), and how to *organise* and *manage* one’s duties to maximise the time one has (§.40. Direct.3).[[119]](#footnote-119) At the practical level, Baxter follows Luther, and claims that in all the work that one does, “If you live as under the Government of God, you will still be doing *his* work […] This will keep you from all Time-wasting vanities” (§.41. Direct.4).

Concerning busyness directly, he writes:

*Do your best to settle your selves where there are the greatest helps and smallest hinderances to the Redeeming of your Time: And labour more to accommodate your habitation, condition and employments to the great ends of your life and time, than to your worldly honour, ease or wealth.* Lie where is best trading for the soul: You may get more by Gods ordinary blessing in one year, in a godly family, or in fruitful company, and under an able godly Minister, than in many years in a barren soil, among the ignorant, dead-hearted, or prophane, where we must say as *David, I held my peace even from good, while the wicked is before me* – Psalm 39: 1-2. And when we must do all the good we do through much opposition; and meet with great disadvantages and difficulties, which may quickly stop such dull and backward hearts as ours: If you will prefer your profit before your souls in the choice of your condition, and will plunge your selves into distracting busyness and company, your Time will run in a wrong unprofitable channel (§.43. Direct. 5).

Like Kierkegaard, then, and perhaps somewhat more explicitly, Baxter distinguishes between what he terms busyness and a more genuine work; one could view this genuine work as a kind of Christian calling, a concern with “*the great ends of your life and time*”. Busyness, on the other hand toils aimlessly “in a barren soil”, an eternally fruitless task in which one’s “Time will run in a wrong and unprofitable channel”. As we will begin to see in the next two chapters, with it being set out more explicitly in Chapter 6, Kierkegaard in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* distinguishes between a busyness that considers only the end – that is, earthly reward, or esteem, etc. – and a kind of Christian calling or striving, wherein the means are “unconditionally just as important as the end” (UDVS 142). Baxter’s position in many ways anticipates Kierkegaard’s later critique of busyness; though of course, the contexts in which both Christian authors were writing, and the levels of busyness itself, remains vastly different.

The chapter ends with Baxter defining twelve “thieves or Time-wasters” that the Christian individual should do their upmost best to avoid. These time-wasters include: (1) “*idleness, or sloth*” (§.50. *Th.*1); (2) “*Excess of sleep*” (§.51. *Th.*2); (3) “*inordinate adorning of the body*” (§.52. *Th.*3); (4) “*Unnecessary pomp*” (§.53. *Th.*4); (5) *“gluttony*” (§.54. *Th.*5); (6) “*idle Talk”* (§.55. *Th.*6); (7) “*Vain and sinful company*” (§.56. *Th.*7); (8) “*needless, inordinate sports and games*” (§.57. *Th.*8); (9) “*excess of worldly cares and business*” (§.58. *Th.*9); (10) “*vain ungoverned and sinful thoughts*” (§.59. *Th.*10); (11) “*Reading of vain books*” (§.60. *Th.*11); and “an *unsanctified, ungodly heart*” (§.61. *Th.*12). Whilst all time-wasting activities are interesting, due to the focus of the present work I will consider only three: idleness, idle talk, and busyness.

**Idleness**. Baxter considers idleness “*One of the greatest* *Time-wasting sins”* (§.50. *Th.*1). The idler, for Baxter, spends his time in “fruitless wishes” (§.50. *Th.*1), always wishing that he were somewhere else, doing something else. Such an individual follows lusts and pride, and never commits properly to anything. Even when the idler gives the appearance of *doing something*, this is only an illusion. “Yea, when *he is in duty*, the *slothful* is still losing Time. He prayeth as if he prayed not, and laboureth as if he laboured not” (§.50. *Th.*1). He is “*slothful in his work*” (§.50. *Th.*1) and thus achieves nothing of great importance or worth. Worse still, such an individual is “lazie in their *Callings*” (§.50. *Th.*1).

**Idle talk.** The individuals who engage in “the consumption of so much *idle talk*” are, according to Baxter, worse than those who sit in silence. These individuals are “so full of *Vanity*” that they are “empty” (§.55. *Th.*6). These idle talkers “can find and feed a discourse of *nothing*, many hours and days together”, with “little matter they can handsomely fill up an hour!” (§.55. *Th.*6). But of the words these people speak, “the sum and conclusion of them is *nothing*” (§.55. *Th.*6). As with the idler (above), Baxter *emphasises the empty and meaningless* nature of the lives of such persons.

**Busyness.** An engagement with “*excess of worldly cares and business*” (§.58. *Th.*9) is, for Baxter, not only a strain on the physical, but also mental lives of its practitioners. The worldly pursuits of busyness “dwell upon the mind, and keep possession, and keep out good”. Such is its pervasiveness that busyness “take[s] up the greatest part of the lives of those that are guilty of them” (§.58. *Th.*9). Baxter continues to emphasise the way in which worldly busyness takes up almost all of the individual’s time, if they are not careful to avoid it. Worldly concerns are the first thing to be thought of in the morning, and the last at night: “The World devoureth all the Time almost that God and their souls should have: It will not give them leave to Pray, or Read, or Meditate, or Discourse of holy things: even when they seem to be praying or hearing the Word of God, the World is in their thoughts” (§.58. *Th.*9). Hence, busyness follows idleness in presenting an illusion, though this time instead of illusory work, it is the religious aspects of one’s existence that are illusory. Whilst a person might appear to be praying, etc. they are in fact still busy with their worldly concerns.[[120]](#footnote-120)

In the final few paragraphs, Baxter emphasises that it is especially important for those who hold official positions within the world, those “*who are in any office, or have any opportunity of doing any special or publick good:* especially *Magistrates* and *Ministers*” (§.68. *Sort. 7*) to be particularly attentive towards “redeeming time” – “for it much concerneth them”. For it is these individuals caught up in their worldly busyness whom have much to lose by failing to redeem their time; and as Baxter gravely reminds them: “Your life will not be long: your office will not be long”.

### Summary

Busyness, it can now be asserted, occupies a significantly important place within the Christian tradition. Whilst the scope of the present work does not allow a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which busyness is appropriated in the Christian tradition (such as for instance in the work of other writers),[[121]](#footnote-121) it should be clear from the direct references to busyness in the Bible, and the prominent treatment the concept receives in the writings of two major Christian authors – Blaise Pascal and Richard Baxter – that Kierkegaard is not the only one who views busyness as an inherently problematic way of being. Hopefully this chapter does sufficient work to place the concept of busyness contextually within the Christian tradition, and the allusion to other concepts explored above – such as idleness, externality, temporality, work and calling – will be further elaborated upon specifically in relation to Kierkegaard’s own critique of busyness in the remainder of the thesis.

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# “Divided and Scattered”: Kierkegaard’s Religious Critique of Busyness

*“The busy ones, who neither labour nor are burdened but are only busy, presumably think that they themselves have escaped if they themselves have avoided suffering in life; therefore they do not wish to be disturbed by hearing about or thinking about terrible things. They have indeed escaped, they have also escaped having a view of life and have escaped into meaninglessness.” (UDVS 106-7).*

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“An Occasional Discourse”, or “Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing” as it is frequently rendered, is one of three of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding, or edifying discourses to be found in the 1847 published work *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* [*Opbyggelige Taler i Forskjellig Aand*].[[122]](#footnote-122) These discourses thus appeared during Kierkegaard’s “second authorship” with the other discourses in the collection consisting of “What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds in the Air: Three Discourses” and “The Gospel of Sufferings: Christian Discourses”. Whilst according to Kierkegaard they were written from the viewpoint of the “ethical-ironic”, these discourses are some of Kierkegaard’s most theologically, and religiously charged writings; according to Eduard Geismar, “nothing of what [Kierkegaard] has written is to such a degree before the face of God” (Geismar, 1927: 11). The first of these discourses, which will be our present focus, appropriately takes on the style of a sermon, though with the usual Kierkegaardian irony added in for good measure. In the “Preface” Kierkegaard makes it clear that this particular occasional discourse – which as we will see is the occasion of a *confession* – lacks the occasion that makes the speaker the *speaker* and gives him authority. In other words, the text is intended to be read (aloud) by the individual, and the occasion is merely imaginary. Thus, like much of Kierkegaard’s religious writings, Kierkegaard aims to speak *without authority*, and hand over the power of interpretation to the reader.[[123]](#footnote-123) In the “inwardness of appropriation” (UDVS 5), through which Kierkegaard hopes the reader will engage with the text, the onus of understanding and meaning lies solely with the reader. Thus, the meaning of the text is firmly in the hands of “the beholder” (UDVS 5) and through the reader’s appropriation of the discourse, and hopefully adoption of its edifying message, Kierkegaard hopes to disappear quietly into the background, and allow the work to stand alone, and more importantly the individual reader to think for themselves.

The aim of “An Occasional Discourse” is for the reader to strive towards, if not reach, the ability to “will one thing” (UDVS 7), whilst avoiding double-mindedness. The one thing that should be willed is “the all-encompassing good which is the will of God” (Arbaugh, 1968: 243). Or, in other words the project – as it would be retold two years later by Kierkegaard’s overtly Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus, in *The Sickness Unto Death* – is to gain a unity within the self, find the quietude necessary for the God-relationship, whilst avoiding the despair that comes with a conflicted will, that Kierkegaard defines as double-mindedness. Further, contained within this religious goal is one of Kierkegaard’s socially charged criticisms of what he calls “Christendom”, that is, the Christian society of nineteenth-century Denmark. One of Kierkegaard’s criticisms of Christendom, specifically concerning double-mindedness, brings attention to the problem known today as the “Sunday-Monday Gap”; that is, the disconnect – or *discontinuity* – between the teachings during the Sunday sermon, and the return to daily life on Monday. As one contemporary author puts it: “[for the majority of Christians] it seems that the lessons acquired at church on Sunday ‘disappear’ from their lives once the workweek begins – and not necessarily unintentionally” (Tucker, 2010: 24). To put it another way, the busyness of the everyday is an affront to the ability to will one thing. Kierkegaard’s discourse draws attention to his gap, or tension, and sets to at the very least make the reader aware of this problem, and at best to overcome it.

The allusion in the text to willing one thing, double-mindedness and indeed the name that the discourse was once known by – “Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing”– alludes to James 4:8, and the passage:

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Crucially, doublemindedness, as this chapter will suggest, is one of the key features of busyness. Kierkegaard sees the contemporary Christian culture of his day, i.e. Christendom, as immensely double-minded; and in that sense, busy: for “*in busyness there is double-mindedness*” (UDVS 67) Kierkegaard will stress. And, whilst busyness is not necessary for double-mindedness (though it certainly helps, and indeed is its most common form (UDVS 64-77)), double-mindedness *is* a necessary condition for busyness. *For busyness in the Kierkegaardian sense, the individual must necessarily be double-minded*.

The aim of this chapter will be to show how Kierkegaard criticises busyness from the religious perspective, and specifically, as busyness is criticised in “An Occasional Discourse”. I will elucidate Kierkegaard’s task in ‘An Occasional Discourse,’ where he sets out the specific ways in which a person may be led away from willing the good and into double-mindedness. Furthermore, I will also focus in on the way that double-mindedness is a necessary condition for busyness, and in doing so will demonstrate one of the many ways that Kierkegaard places the pre-*occupation* with worldly busyness in stark opposition to the religious life, and one’s calling or *vocation*.

I will begin with a discussion of confession in “An Occasional Discourse” and the way in which it is defined by Kierkegaard. In order to do this, I will consider the three activities that Kierkegaard views as insufficient for the act of confession: (i) contemplation or reflection on one’s sins; (ii) knowledge or understanding of one’s sins; (iii) desire to be rid of one’s sins. After having adequately defined the act of confession, as the precondition for willing one thing, I will turn to the four “attitudinal modalities” that Kierkegaard considers to be preventative of willing one thing. These are instances of *double-mindedness* and consist in: (i) willing the good, for *reward*; (ii) willing the good out of fear of *punishment*; (iii) willing the good, for individual *victory*; (iv) willing the good, but only to a “certain degree”. The latter of these modalities, and the most common of all double-mindedness, is where Kierkegaard explicitly links double-mindedness with busyness, and in doing so places busyness in opposition to the religious act of confession. I will spend some time unpacking Kierkegaard’s discussion of busyness in “An Occasional Discourse” before returning to Kierkegaard’s definition of the act of confession. Here, in opposition to busyness, confession will be understood as a “halt”, and paradoxically as a halt that is also movement; in doing so it will be argued that whilst true movement for Kierkegaard is in the halting act of confession, true stagnation and inertia is to be found in the frenetic haste of busyness. This final section will also explore the distinction between busyness and restlessness, the latter concept being the fundamentally Christian stance of rest and unrest.

### The Act of Confession

Whilst the text is called “An Occasional Discourse”, the particular part of the essay that concerns us is called “On the Occasion of a Confession”. Here, Kierkegaard begins the text with a “Prayer”, that consists of the claim that one’s aim – above all – should be to *will one thing*; the one thing being the good, which is the will of God. In the face of victories, distractions, and sufferings the aim should be always to will the good. In order that one will one thing, that is, will the good, it is necessary that one *confesses* one’s sinfulness. The act of confession which the discourse is formulated around is thus the *precondition for willing one thing*. The act of confession should come as an interruption, or suspension, to the individual’s daily life, a kind of removal from the everyday hustle and bustle: “it is an interruption of the usual task […] a halting of work” (UDVS 7). In this vein the 1847 edifying text has been “likened to shock therapy” in the way that it attempts to get the reader to stop and re-evaluate their choices and decisions, and “bring the reader to a fearful honesty with himself” (Arbaugh, 1968: 242). Hence, it should come as no surprise that the religious act of confession – later defined by Kierkegaard as a “halt”, a stop, or a shock [*standse*] – stands in both *spiritual but also literal* opposition to the busyness of the everyday.

It is apt, then, that Kierkegaard should emphasise the continual and persistent nature of the task at hand; that is, to confess and to will one thing. Confessing is not a one off event, but is a *daily concern*. The tension within the human being, between the temporal and the eternal, is a common theme in much of Kierkegaard’s authorship, and *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* is no exception. Here, this dichotomy appears in “An Occasional Discourse” as the two ways in which a person might approach their confession. For Kierkegaard, regret and repentance have no place in the temporal world, wherein individuals only come to an inauthentic or superficial reflection upon their sins. If the individual repents temporally he still clings to the temporal, to “the false and superficial notion of the insignificance of guilt; he fortifies himself with a deceptive and busy notion of the length of life – that person’s regret is not in true inwardness” (UDVS 15). Repentance in the temporal sense is *impatience*: it wants to be rid of guilt, “forgotten with the passage of time” (UDVS 17) and make repentance an infrequent, or one off, activity.[[124]](#footnote-124) Instead, the individual must allow repentance to “ask eternity for time” to prepare itself for the task (of confession), wherein repentance becomes a daily concern. The argument regarding the eternal criteria of repentance here bears some similarity to the way in which Kierkegaard argues for reflecting earnestly on one’s death in “At a Graveside”. Similarly, here Kierkegaard asserts that one should repent during, a presumably, metaphorical “eleventh hour”; like in “At a Graveside”, one should live as if each hour was “the “eleventh hour [wherein] one understands life quite differently than in the days of youth or in adulthood’s busy time or in the final moment of old age” (UDVS 15). In this “eleventh hour” *repentance is, and remains, a daily concern*.

When repentance, as a daily concern, is given the adequate time to prepare, then it will be ready for the occasion: *confession*. The occasion of confession is, for Kierkegaard, like changing one’s clothes:

Just as a man changes his clothes for a celebration, so a person preparing for the holy act of confession is inwardly changed. It is indeed like changing one’s clothes to divest oneself of multiplicity in order to make up one’s mind about one thing, to interrupt the pace of busy activity in order to put on the repose of contemplation in unity with oneself. And this unity with oneself is the celebration’s simple festive dress that is the condition of admittance (UDVS 19).

Like changing their clothes, the individual rids themselves of multiplicity in order to turn their focus to will one thing. Otherwise, they see everything through a “distracted mind”, with “half an eye, with a divided mind” (UDVS 19/20). Likewise, in “busy activity” – which as we will see is precisely what is meant by multiplicity – “one can be concerned about many things, begin many things, do many things at one time and do them all halfway – but one cannot *confess* without this unity within oneself” (UDVS 20). Crucially then, the act of confession acts as an *interruption* to one’s busyness; hence, as we will see in the final part of this chapter, Kierkegaard defines the act of confession as a “halting”.

It is also worth highlighting that, as noted, for the act of confession, the self is necessarily *unified*.[[125]](#footnote-125) Thus, as we will see, it is necessary that the individual confessing has already overcome the despair associated with lacking a complete self as discussed by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*. As Kierkegaard formulates it here: “is not despair actually double-mindedness; or what else is it to despair but to have two wills!” (UDVS 30). Thus, this double-mindedness, or multiple wills, or even despair must be overcome before confession is possible. To clarify; confession is not the act of becoming an individual, but rather, the “accounting” (UDVS 151) of that individuality: “The act of confession is not the occasion for realising or establishing self-hood; rather, only selves have the requisite existential sense that will permit true confession” (Hough, 2005: 39).

Finally, it is worth noting that for the act of confession to take place, it is necessary that the individual is *quiet*: “But the person who truly made up his mind, that person is *quiet*” (UDVS 20). The reason for this quietness is that the person who confesses needs to be able to “listen”, spiritually speaking, to their own confession. For Kierkegaard, it seems that in the act of confession the person discloses themselves to themselves, rather than to God; for, after all “the Omniscient One does not find out anything about the person confessing, but instead the person confessing finds out something about himself” (UDVS 22).[[126]](#footnote-126) Thus, because of this, the condition of the person before the act of confession is one of ignorance, and therefore of *self-deception*. Thus, the activities that they engage in – before committing to making confession a daily concern – are self-deceiving. The self-deceived person “talks about the much and the multifarious […] is much ensnared and much fortified by the multifarious” (UDVS 23). Hence, such an individual lacks “the one thing needful”, that is “to will one thing” (UDVS 24).

Recall in Chapter 1, the way in which Kierkegaard uses imagery of the countryside and nature as an escape from, and an opposition, to the busyness of the city. One dichotomy detailed there was the notable noise of the city, contrasted with the quietude of the countryside. Here again Kierkegaard employs natural imagery in order to emphasise the quietude necessary for the individual to confess, and to juxtapose such quietude with noisy busyness. However, it is important to note that as before, Kierkegaard does not romanticise nor deify nature, or its imagery, but instead shows how it can – in opposition to the busy haste of city life – lead one towards religious self-unity:

When the traveller leaves the noisy main highway and comes to the quiet places, he feels as if he had to talk with himself (for the quietness is soul-stirring!), feels as if he had to say what lies hidden in the depth of his soul. […] But what quietness means, what the surroundings are saying with this quietness: that is the inexpressible. The trees’ wonder, provided it is the trees that contemplate the traveller in wonder, explains nothing. And the echo […] the echo throws back the voice however loudly the traveller shouts (UDVS 20).[[127]](#footnote-127)

Firstly, then, the individual is led away from the daily hustle and bustle, and into a place of quietude. Of course, this natural imagery is merely a metaphor for quiet reflection and contemplation – which as we will see below are, whilst necessary, on their own not sufficient for confession. Here too the individual is left wanting, as this – what we might call *simple quietness* – is not able to offer the individual what they seek:

So it is with the inexpressible. It is something like the murmuring of the brook. If you are walking deep in your own thoughts, if you are busy, you do not notice it at all in passing, you are not aware that it exists, this murmuring. But if you stop, you discover it; and when you have discovered it, you must stand still; and when you standstill, it persuades you; and when it has persuaded you, then you must bend down listening to it; and when bending down you listen to it, it captures you; and when it has captured you, you cannot tear yourself loose from it; and when you cannot tear yourself from it, you are overcome-infatuated, you drop down beside it; every moment it seems to you as if the explanation has to come in the very next moment, but the brook goes on murmuring, and the traveller at its side only grows older (UDVS 21).

Again, Kierkegaard stresses that this simple quietness, this self-contemplation is not enough for confession. To be sure, the emphasis on the traveller aging places this kind of quietude well within the temporal world: a world of contingency and change. *Real quietness*, in contrast to the *simple quietness* above, requires a deliberate and decisive break with the everyday, with temporality. As Kierkegaard states:

[…] with the one who is confessing. The quietness grips him also, yet not in misunderstanding’s pensive mood but with the earnestness of eternity. Nor is he like the traveller, led to these quiet places without really knowing how […] No, to confess is a holy act, an act for which the mind is collected in preparation (UDVS 22).

Thus confession is a decisive act, wherein a person halts their daily work. One must deliberately seek it, and know the reason for seeking it. In its decisiveness confession is suggestive of an interruption, a change of course.

I have alluded here to the way in which contemplation is insufficient for confession; in the following I will explore the three ‘activities’ that Kierkegaard sees as insufficient for the act of confession, before turning at the end of the chapter to the way that Kierkegaard defines confession: firstly as *halting* in opposition to the haste of everyday busyness, and secondly as its inversion, as *movement*; from this latter definition of confession, as a halting that is also movement, is cemented the notion that busyness, despite its appearance of haste and movement is in fact stagnation – and that for Kierkegaard, to truly *move* one must be *still*.

#### Contemplation, Knowledge, and Desire

As noted, the act of confession is the occasion around which the discourse is formulated, and it is the precondition for willing one thing; in fact, it is the act in which the will is “reset”, in order that willing one thing be possible. However, for Kierkegaard, there are three main ways in which the individual deceives themselves into thinking that they have confessed: (i) contemplating or reflecting upon their sin; (ii) having knowledge of their sin; (iii) desiring to be rid of their sin. Whilst these acts might be considered in terms of confession – for example, the individual stops to contemplate themselves, and their sin, they have the knowledge or understanding that they are sinful, or they passionately desire to be rid of their sin – they are in fact merely imitating confession; they are what Kierkegaard calls instances of “counterfeit eternity” (UDVS 63). And indeed, whilst all three of these acts are necessary on the way to confession, considered on their own they are insufficient. Let us examine each in turn in order to define what confession *is not*.

In these cases, as is the case in much of Kierkegaard’s religious writing, he is describing instances of sub-par religious practice, or, in other words, the other stages on life’s way: the aesthetic and ethical. We should bear this in mind as we examine these temporally bound, pseudo-confessional activities.

(i) **Contemplation**. For Kierkegaard, “despite all its clarity, [contemplation] easily conceal[s] an illusion” (UDVS 72). What is this illusion? Presumably, the illusion is that in the act of contemplating the individual is deceived into believing that they have confessed. Kierkegaard pulls an example from cartography and suggests that the most detailed map could never be as big as the country that it is mapping, and so must become “infinitely smaller” (UDVS 72) in order to be useful. However, in doing so the map’s clarity is really just an illusion, for if the reader of the map “were suddenly set down in the actuality of that country, where the many, many miles have all their force, he very likely would not be able to recognise the country or gain any notion of it or as a traveller gets his bearings in it” (UDVS 72). In this case the map (contemplation) is useful, but inferior to the actual landscape itself (confession) for moving around the country. As one commentator eloquently summarises: “A contemplative survey of the life-terrain is necessary but, as we should surely suspect, radically insufficient for confession” (Hough, 2005: 39).

Indeed, it is worth bearing in mind the view of the Kierkegaardian stages or spheres of existence. The reflexive, or contemplative, stage of the aesthetic sphere is the precursor to the ethical and the religious. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that contemplation is a necessary, but not sufficient, step on the way to confession.

(ii) **Knowledge**. Similarly, knowledge of sin is also not the same thing as confession, for it too suffers the same imitation of confession. This criticism – that knowledge of sin is not the same as confession of sin – is distinctly anti-Hegelian. According to Hough, Hegel, (or, more accurately the Danish Hegelians) “argue that the act of confession must have cognitive content, [and] must bring the penitent to a greater understanding of her or himself” (Hough, 2005: 41). However, for Kierkegaard this necessarily creates a false sense of confessing: a sort of imitative- or pseudo-confessing. For Kierkegaard, the pseudo-movement of Hegelian thought amounts to a mere “going further”; and, here, we see that this “going further” also negates the possibility of halting and, thereby confession:

But of what good is it to a person if he goes further and further and it must be said of him, “He is continually going further”, when it must also be said of him: There was nothing that halted him (UDVS 153).

Considered in this way one could always gain more knowledge and understanding of one’s sinfulness, without ever reaching the decisive point of confession; for instance, one might use the pursuit of knowledge as a way to prolong, or infinitely delay, the act of confession. In this sense, if there is nothing to “halt” the Hegelian, then there is also no way that he can confess. So, like contemplation of sin, knowledge and understanding of sin are not sufficient for confession. However, like contemplation, knowledge/understanding are a necessary *precondition* for confession. As Hough puts it: “knowledge is the *means* to the [confession], and not its content or product. Knowledge of sin must be in place for the [confession] to happen: the [confession] is not a further insight into that sinfulness” (Hough, 2005: 41).[[128]](#footnote-128)

It is also worth noting the distinctly anti-Socratic view of knowledge here. For Socrates knowledge of the Good is sufficient for doing the Good, for those who act against the Good do so from a position of mere ignorance of what the Good is, rather than from a decision to not do the Good. Conversely, for Kierkegaard mere knowledge of the Good is not enough. One must always *choose* the Good. For Kierkegaard, whilst knowledge is useful, and indeed does contribute to the choice one makes (in the sense that one’s choice is not absent of knowledge, else it would be arbitrary) it is one’s faith that allows one to commit to, and act upon, the decision. The decision required by the individual is thus key. Hence, the same can be said of one’s sin; knowledge of one’s sin, for Kierkegaard, is not sufficient for confession. There is still a decision to be made as to whether one acts upon this knowledge.

(iii) **Desire.** The third act that Kierkegaard dismisses as insufficient for confession is desire, and specifically a desire for the good, and to be free of sin. Like both contemplation and knowledge, desire is helpful and indeed necessary on the way to confession: the individual must desire that they be rid of their sin, otherwise they lack the motivating force in order to arrive at confession. However, the mistake that the double-minded individual makes is that they consider their desire alone to be sufficient, or worse a replacement, for confession. Kierkegaard describes such a double-minded individual as having “*a feeling for the good*, a vivid feeling” (UDVS 68). That is, the individual considers that the desire to do the good, and be rid of sin, is enough. And whilst what Kierkegaard calls the “immediacy of feeling” is needed, crucially,

this feeling must “be kept” […] cleansed of selfishness, kept from selfishness; it must not be left to its own devices, but, on the contrary, that which is to be kept must be entrusted to the power of something higher that keeps it (UDVS 71).

So, whilst the individual may have the desire to confess their sins, a desire for the good, “this gained no power, and the seed of double-mindedness lay in the inner psychical misrelation” (UDVS 74). In other words, it must also require the assistance of a *higher power*, in order to be acted upon. It is clear that for Kierkegaard this higher power is God; indeed, God is the “power” that establishes and maintains the tension in the make-up of the self. Without God, the self fails to actualise, and remains in this “psychical misrelation”, or “despair” (cf. SUD). Hence, what Kierkegaard seems to be alluding to here, is that without the grounding power of the religious, one cannot – however hard one tries – will the good. Thus, the earlier stages on life’s way – the aesthetic and the ethical – remain inadequate for confession; these individuals are, for Kierkegaard, still in some way self-deceiving. In other words, as in the above, the individual requires *grace* to act upon this desire; and, thus to confess.

The second worry, then, is that whilst one must maintain this desire for the good, in considering desire alone to be sufficient, one adopts the attitude of selfishness. As alluded to above, the inner psychical misrelation of which Kierkegaard writes is indeed the misrelation in the makeup of the self, set out by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849)*.* For the self to *rest*, that is to reach the existential position whereby double-mindedness (despair), and thus busyness, is avoided, it must “rest [*grunder*] transparently in the power that established it” (SUD 14). For it is indeed this which is the requirement of faith and therefore by extension *confession*: as Edward Mooney suggests: “what goes for Kierkegaardian faith is the utter absence, the ultimate impossibility, of anything like self-deception” (Mooney, 2013: 97). The double-minded individual, then, in considering that their desire for the good is sufficient, lacks the correct self-relation, and in doing so deceives themselves into thinking that they can, as it were, “go it alone” (cf. the aesthete in *Either/Or Volume I*). In the *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard labels such an attitude “defiance”.

To summarise: for Kierkegaard confession is neither contemplation, nor knowledge of sin; nor is it the desire to be rid of sin. To confess one must be an individual, and to be an individual one must have purity of heart, which is to will one thing. In order to will one thing, one requires the aid of a higher power, i.e. God.

### Double-Mindedness

In opposition to willing one thing, Kierkegaard sets out a series of difficulties – or “attitudinal modalities” (Nelson, 2005: 97) – that the individual may face and suggests ways – conscious or unconscious – that individuals evade willing one thing. These modalities are: (i) willing the good, but only for the sake of their own earthly *reward*; (ii) willing the good but only out of fear of *punishment*; (iii) willing the good, but only in so far as the victory of the good is also the individual’s *selfish* *victory*; (iv) willing the good, but only to a “certain degree” due to one’s *multifarious* earthly endeavours and commitments. Let us examine each of these in sequence, before turning in more detail to the last modality, which Kierkegaard links explicitly with busyness.

#### Reward

For Kierkegaard, the person who wills the good for the sake of reward is double-minded. Here, Kierkegaard suggests that the reward is essentially temptation away from willing the good; in that vein, it is purely the “world’s reward” (UDVS 37) rather than any eternal reward that the individual seeks. Kierkegaard likens the individual chasing earthly reward through willing the good to a traveller at a crossroads (a metaphor he frequently returns to in “An Occasional Discourse”). The crossroads, though perhaps better imagined as a fork in the road, stand at the point between willing the good and earthly reward; the individual believes he has discovered a “third road” by walking both roads at once – however, such a journey is impossible, and thus the individual who wills the good for the sake of his own reward really does not move at all: he is stuck, “pondering and deliberating” and “remains standing there: a symbol of double-mindedness” (UDVS 41). Metaphors aside, of what does this reward consist? In other words, what does the individual who wills the good, but only for want of his own reward, actually will?

As noted, the reward is fundamentally of the earth, and consequently the individual wills earthly things. By way of an example one might consider this kind of double-minded individual as a corrupt, or uncaring, politician: that is, someone who seeks what is popular if it is personally beneficial, rather than whether it is right or wrong, or in line with one’s own ideals. Kierkegaard states:

[H]e wants the good and abhors vice – when it *seems* to be abhorrent; that he wants the approval of good people – when they are in the majority and have the power; that he wants to be useful to the good cause – when it is so good as to be useful to him (UDVS 42).

These rewards that the double-minded individual seek are “like the clouds, the wind, and the smoke from the chimney” (UDVS 42), they are fleeting and *temporary*: merely appearances. Thus, the individual who wills the good for the sake of reward is really only concerned with the appearance of willing the good and the earthly reward such practice gives him. If the winds change and it is beneficial for this individual to will something else, then he will do so. The allusion to appearance and to the fleeting motivations and interests of double-minded individuals is one of Kierkegaard’s major complaints about the age in which he lived. As we saw in Chapter 2 – where in *Two Ages* Kierkegaard decries the superficiality with which his age engages with the world – the age and the individuals within it are fundamentally aesthetic in character. In other words, their interests are largely superficial, fleeting, and can change on a whim defined not by whether something is meaningful – in this case willing the good – but rather by whether something is beneficial to them, whether that be aesthetically, politically, or financially, etc. As Kierkegaard suggests, a person cannot will the good when concerned with *seeming*, as “in his wooing deference to appearance he only covets the changing semblance and its reflection in public favour” (UDVS 53). Of course, this is not busyness *per se*, but the focus of the individual who wills the good for the sake of reward in the earthly and immediate, and such an individual’s desire for appearances, shows the conceptual similarities between the category of double-mindedness, and the way that it is necessary for busyness. Furthermore, the fact that such an individual flits between many different things, in order to acquire favour or benefit, is in itself a kind of busy activity – an engagement with multiplicity. However, the link between double-mindedness and busyness will be most explicit in the final attitudinal modality: willing the good to a certain degree, or, *multiplicity*.

#### Punishment

Another way the individual avoids willing the good in truth, is to will the good out of fear of punishment. In essence, this is the opposite of willing the good for the sake of reward. In an attempt to define exactly what such an individual fears, Kierkegaard first alludes to *eternal punishment*. Here, the double-mindedness of the individual lies not in willing the good out of fear of eternal punishment, but rather in the individual’s ambivalence as to whether such a punishment exists, and is to be feared at all. The double-mindedness lies in the *if*, i.e. if there is a punishment in eternity: “[W]hen a person is going to act and there is double-mindedness in him, it is immediately present in his immobilising ‘if’” (UDVS 48). In other words, if the punishment is eternal – and if this is what the individual uses as his motivation behind willing the good – then it is not the motivation as such that makes him double-minded, but rather the uncertainty regarding whether such a punishment exists, and is to be feared. Thus, the individual lives his life as “a slave” to the good, but only out of fear of possible eternal punishment (UDVS 51-52). For the individual who wills the good in truth, then there is no doubt nor hesitation in one’s faith that this eternal punishment exists. To be sure, the honest man “*even hopes for punishment*” (UDVS 55) to set him on the right path towards the good.

However, the individual who equivocates around willing the good, and does so through fear of eternal punishment, makes a show of loving God and willing the good – supposedly due to the fear of being discovered. Hence, as Kierkegaard suggests, this individual is “*continually doing what he does not really will*, or what he still has no pleasure in doing” (UDVS 50). In other words, he wills the good because in some twisted way it is beneficial to him; that is, better than the alternative, i.e. the punishment. However, in doing so he fails to recognise that the good and punishment are intimately linked; and, even worse he wishes that the punishment did not exist. Kierkegaard uses the example of a father-son relationship to highlight the errors in the individual’s way of thinking: by wishing that the punishment did not exist, the individual fails to see how the punishment is necessary to will the good. In the same way that the father “invent[s] punishment for the love of the child” (UDVS 51), the double-minded individual who wills the good only through the fear of punishment fails to see the apparent beneficial relationship between the two.

Kierkegaard then considers *temporal punishment*. Here it is clearer how the individual is double-minded in willing the good through fear of temporal and earthly punishment. It is in many ways a reversal of the first modality above, i.e. willing the good for the sake of reward. Like the individual who wills the good for the sake of reward, this individual is concerned with the possibility that such temporal and earthly “goods” may be lost. Hence, rather than viewing them as the potential for reward he views them with suspicion. In this case, the individual fears loss of money, loss of esteem, loss of reputation and opinion. If he were to will the good in truth, he would not fear such earthly, and temporary losses; he has in Kierkegaard’s view misplaced his source of value (cf. Stern & Watts, 2019). The reason the double-minded individual fears earthly and temporal punishment is because he believes, along with the rest of Kierkegaard’s age (according to Kierkegaard!), that the good is to be found in the earthly and temporal. This “deification of our world” (UDVS 56) that Kierkegaard alludes to here shows how the individual takes the good as given, and it is only its loss that requires one’s concern. Kierkegaard makes it clear that the modern world sees the Divine good as immediately rewarded, and no sacrifice is required to attain it: “the earth is the kingdom of God” (UDVS 56).

#### Selfish Victory

The third attitudinal modality sees the individual will the good through a self-willingness to achieve its victory. In other words, such an individual will only be satisfied with willing the good, if the good’s victory is also his own. As Kierkegaard suggests, this kind of double-mindedness is more cunning, it is “a powerful delusion that seems to come closest to the purity of heart that wills the good in truth, although it is the furthest removed” (UDVS 60). Despite Kierkegaard describing this attitudinal modality as “*self-willfully*” [*Selvraadighed*] willing the good, the intention behind the word translated by the Hongs as “self-willfully” is more negative than positive. Instead of connoting determination and striving, *Selvraadighed* seems to suggest more of a stubborn or headstrong attitude towards willing the good, and perhaps even a selfishness too.[[129]](#footnote-129) The individual wills that the good be victorious “*through him,* that he shall be the *instrument*, he the *chosen one*” (UDVS 61). He does not want the earthly reward of the world – “which he scorns” – nor does he want the admiration of people – whom he “looks down upon” (UDVS 61), he only wants the good to be victorious if he himself can be too.

Kierkegaard calls this kind of double-mindedness *violent*. It is violent due to the way that individual makes a claim on the good; even when this claim is disguised or hidden from others, or worse, from himself. This individual is willing to sacrifice everything but himself for the good’s victory (for supposedly, if he sacrificed himself he could not be victorious in the good’s victory). Here Kierkegaard again introduces the distinction between the eternal and the temporal. The double-minded individual who wills the good’s victory, if only it is also his own in some way, fails to understand that despite being eternal, the good must work its way through the “slowness of time”, and in doing so introduce an element of uncertainty as to whether it will ever be victorious. The double-minded individual confuses enthusiasm with impatience, and “hurls himself into time” (UDVS 62), i.e. into temporality. Kierkegaard returns to the crossroads metaphor, and suggests that the double-minded individual stands at the crossroads with two visions ahead of him: (1) the good, and (2) the good in its victory, or even its victory through himself. The former is eternal, and the latter, temporal. It seems that the double-minded individual is unable to distinguish between the two.

#### Multiplicity

The final attitudinal modality that Kierkegaard cites as in opposition to willing one thing, is to will one thing to a certain degree, due to one’s multifarious earthly commitments. This “*multifarious* [*mangfoldige*] *double-mindedness*” is the most common of all the double-mindedness that Kierkegaard discusses, and is “*the double-mindedness of weakness* as seen in actual everyday life” (UDVS 64). It is important to note that in all the previous cases of double-mindedness discussed above the individuals were still willing one thing, though in some divided, or misdirected way; such individuals were torn between an existential crossroads with *two options*, hence double-or two-minded (*Tvesindede*). However, here, the individual who is double-minded in willing one thing to a certain degree is not willing one thing, nor two, but *many*. This form of double-mindedness, as noted, is the most common form of double-mindedness for Kierkegaard, but it is also the most philosophically interesting in terms of its social, political, and psychological implications, and it is also the only kind of double-mindedness that Kierkegaard explicitly links with busyness. Ironically, too, as the most common form of double-mindedness, Kierkegaard regards this form as the most difficult to discuss, for it “resembles everything”, and varies constantly (UDVS 65). Let us turn in detail to what we might call *multi-mindedness*.

### Busyness in “An Occasional Discourse”

The double-mindedness of weakness is noteworthy for being the only kind of double-mindedness that Kierkegaard describes as concerned with *multifariousness* over *willing one thing*: thus we have termed it multi-mindedness. Equally important is that it is the main kind of double-mindedness Kierkegaard links explicitly with busyness. There are two key defining aspects of multi-mindedness worth exploring: (i) that it is truly *multifarious*; (ii) that it wills one thing *to a certain degree*. A discussion of its link with busyness will help us draw out what Kierkegaard means by these aspects of double-mindedness of weakness, or multi-mindedness.

#### Multifariousness

As a brief interruption to the present task, it is important to note that in various places throughout his writings, Kierkegaard uses the term “Mangfoldige”. The term has been translated in different ways in different works. For instance, in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, the Hongs translate “Mangfoldige” as “multifarious”, whilst in *Works of Love*, they translate it as “multiplicity”. Regardless of the Hongs’ inconsistency in translating this term, the importance is that Kierkegaard uses the same word in, for example, both of these texts in the same context, that is, in his discussion regarding busyness. We might, most simply, translate “Mangfoldige” as “manifold”[[130]](#footnote-130) (mange/many, folde/fold), but it also carries the connotation of doing something “many times over”. So, in our context, where busyness is concerned, one might consider the term “Mangfoldige” to be defined as a concern with many things at once, or with doing something many times. Yet, it also connotes diversity and variety.[[131]](#footnote-131) In any case, when I discuss “Mangfoldige” I will refer to both multifariousness and multiplicity interchangeably (if only for the sake of variety!).

To return to the task at hand, in order to understand what Kierkegaard means when he states that the double-mindedness of weakness is concerned with “Mangfoldige”, it might be fruitful to turn to another of Kierkegaard’s texts, published also in 1847: *Works of Love*. Here, in considering busyness Kierkegaard attempts to define the concept:

What is it to be busy? […] To be busy is to occupy oneself, divided and scattered (which follows from the object that occupies one), with all the multiplicity [*Mangfoldige*] in which it is simply impossible for a person to be whole, whole in all of it or whole in any particular part of it, something only the insane can succeed in doing. To be busy is, divided and scattered, to occupy oneself with what makes a person divided and scattered (WL 98).

For Kierkegaard, in *Works of Love*, busyness is defined not by the *manner* in which someone acts, that is, in the perhaps hasty way that they conduct their affairs, but rather, by the *object* of their attention, which in this case is multiplicity. Hence, someone can appear on the outside perhaps indolent and sluggish, yet for Kierkegaard, still qualify as busy if the object that occupies them is multiplicity.

Recall, by way of an example, the aesthete from *Either/Or Volume I*, and his short essay “Rotation of Crops” that I discussed in Chapter 3. There we had an individual who engages with, and actively seeks, multiplicity. In his essay, the aesthete, A, described two kinds of response to boredom: extensive crop rotation, and intensive crop rotation. Extensive crop rotation is much more simplistic than the latter and consists in varying what one engages with in order to avoid boredom; A poetically describes it as “an endless journey star to star” (EO I 291). This certainly fits Kierkegaard’s definition of busyness, as concerning oneself with multiplicity, or diversity, and could also perhaps fit the common understanding of a busy person – rushing around engaging oneself with many different things. (Alternatively, it also fits the seemingly idle person; imagine an individual reclined on their sofa switching between the television channels. Both the obviously busy and the seemingly idle person in this case qualify as busy, for Kierkegaard; the object of their concern is multiplicity. Further, we saw in the previous chapter the way in which idleness and busyness are linked). The latter variety of crop rotation was a little more sophisticated and – predicated on a kind of imaginative reflection – transformed the outer search for novelty into an inner self-creation of diversity. Instead of seeking out new engagements in the external world, one instead internalises novelty, and by focusing on a single event, derives the possibility for infinite entertainment, and thus avoids boredom; recall that A uses the example of following a bead of sweat dripping from a professor’s forehead to his nose as a source of aesthetic pleasure (EO I 299). However, in adopting intensive crop rotation, one is still engaged with multiplicity; it is only one’s outward appearance that has changed. One still seeks variety, and whilst one perhaps learns to “move more slowly, more deliberately” (Harries, 2010: 96), the object of one’s concern – that is, multiplicity – remains the same. The individual is therefore said to be busy due to the object of their engagement, even if the manner of their actions suggests otherwise.

To return to the text at hand, and the concept of confession, in “An Occasional Discourse” Kierkegaard gives a lyrical description of the multifariousness involved in being double-minded:

Motley-coloured, it plays not only in all possible colours, but there is not even any law for this play of colours that blends the colours and shades of colours in ever-new confusion – so there is continually something new under the sun, and yet it is continually the old double-mindedness (UDVS 65).[[132]](#footnote-132)

And, furthermore,

in busy activity one can be concerned about many things, do many things at one time and do them all halfway – but one cannot *confess* without this unity within oneself (UDVS 19).

The allusion to doing many things, but only halfway, is an attempt to describe the way in which the busy individual lacks any kind of completeness, or any kind of unity. As Patrick Sheil argues, Kierkegaard “recognises that the very condition of being pulled in many directions and divided across many concerns will often deprive a person of a definite clear vantage point” (Sheil, 2011: 43). And, in doing so the individual lacks the vantage point necessary to will one thing; instead, the individual wills multiplicity thus the individual “is not only double-minded but is also divided in himself” (UDVS 27).

#### Certain Degree

The second aspect of multi-mindedness is that it “*wills the good only to a certain degree*” (UDVS 64). What is meant by this? Firstly, Kierkegaard admits that “[t]o say that double-mindedness wills the good only to a certain degree is basically the expression for all double-mindedness in its relation to the good” (UDVS 64). However, unlike the previous three forms of double-mindedness, what we have termed multi-mindedness is genuinely concerned with multifariousness, whilst it could be argued that the previous forms all “did at least have a semblance of oneness and unity […] insofar as it was a single thing that was pursued with one-sidedness” (UDVS 64). The previous forms of double-mindedness were, for Kierkegaard, concerned with “great matters”, whilst the multifarious double-mindedness – or genuine double-mindedness – is concerned only with “the transactions of daily life”, which are “not in great matters” (UDVS 64). In other words, whilst we have seen above that multi-mindedness is concerned with multifariousness, here we see this multifariousness presented as an engagement in a kind of triviality:

In daily life, the transactions are made in smaller matters, whereby the double-mindedness becomes *more multifariously compounded* in the single individual (UDVS 64).

This double-mindedness is a condition for busyness:

And in the busy life, in all the dealings from morning to night, it is not such a scrupulous matter whether a person completely wills the good – as long as he is enterprising, not to mention a thief, in his job, as long as he saves and accumulates, as long as he has a good reputation and, incidentally, avoids scandal (for whether he is actually guilty or not is of minor importance, something neither he nor the world has time to investigate – the only danger of scandal is the halting [*standsning*] of his enterprise): "What is the point of such a delay in the midst of the rush of busyness!" And in the world there is always hustle and bustle. Yes, it is quite true, this is how it looks in the world (UDVS 66).

So, what is it about this kind of double-mindedness that means that it only wills the good to a certain degree? Certainly the multifarious nature of busyness means that the individual cannot commit fully to will one thing, but instead has a “distracted mind [and] divided mind” (UDVS 19/20). However, to some extent the answer also concerns the way in which the individual relates to *time*.

We have seen above how Kierkegaard juxtaposes the eternal and temporal in relation to willing one thing: double-mindedness is thoroughly committed to the temporal world. Here, Kierkegaard links the double-minded individual’s commitment to the temporal world as synonymous with their relation to their worldly engagement, i.e. busyness: both “time and busyness think that eternity is very far away” (UDVS 66). It will then come as no surprise later that in order for the individual to overcome their double-minded busyness, and therefore mark their transition into the religious, it will be necessary, that for “the individual’s further moral-conceptual growth Kierkegaard prescribes the suspension of time, or rather [a suspension] of an interest in temporality” (Hannay, 1999: 215). As Kierkegaard suggests, “the person who had lived in time according to the ways of time and busyness, […] now could try his hand at adopting the customs and practices of eternity” (UDVS 66). The eternal demands of us that we become pure of heart, which as Kierkegaard states is to will one thing. And in order to do this we must cast aside our double-mindedness, our busyness, and our engagement with multiplicity.

At this point in the discourse, removing any doubt, Kierkegaard states outright:

So, then, *in busyness there is double-mindedness*. Just as the echo lives in the forest, just as stillness lives in the desert, so double-mindedness lives in busyness.

He continues:

Therefore, that someone who wills the good only to a certain degree is double-minded, has a distracted mind, a divided heart, scarcely needs to be explained. But the basis may well need to be explained and developed – that in busyness there *is neither the time nor the tranquillity to acquire the transparency* that is necessary for understanding oneself in willing one thing or for just temporarily understanding oneself in one’s unclarity. No, in busyness – in which one continually goes further and further, and noise, in which the true is continually forgotten more and more, and the multitude of circumstances, incentives, and hindrances – continually makes it more impossible for one to gain any deeper knowledge of oneself (UDVS 67).

And, if this knowledge of oneself is impossible, if one fails to become an individual, one fails to will the good. One remains busy.

#### Distraction, Diversion, and Self-Deception

So, what is busyness for Kierkegaard in “An Occasional Discourse”? We have seen that busyness is both a (i) multifarious engagement with the world, that is an engagement with diversity and variety; (ii) and a lack of commitment to willing the good, i.e. to God, as due to one’s multifarious engagements one can only will the good to “a certain degree”. In both these definitions of busyness we discover a third definition – which is really just an amalgamation of the two: that is, busyness as *distraction*. To be sure, Kierkegaard alludes to busyness as distraction in a *Journal* entry from 1847, the same year *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirts* was published, in which he writes:

[I]n every human being, there is quite certainly a prudent fear of really getting involved with God; they wish to have that relationship at a distance, and therefore they really employ their lives in the diversions of temporality; for all the busyness of life is, after all, really diversion (KJN NB 174).

And, in a later entry from 1854:

[P]eople live their lives guarding themselves carefully against any earnest engagement with God. With the help of diversions and busyness (which, from a Christian point of view, is more or less the same as diversion), they preserve themselves in a chaotic consciousness so that the divine is never able to approach them (KJN NB30 40).

Kierkegaard then, firmly identifies busyness with diversion, or distraction.[[133]](#footnote-133) In Clancy Martin’s paper (2005), he argues that busyness as it appears in “An Occasional Discourse”, in its *double-mindedness*, is indicative of the psychological phenomena of self-distraction, and self-deception.[[134]](#footnote-134) Hence, it is worth making a distinction, noted in the psychological literature on distraction, between distraction (D) and self-distraction (SD), and a further distinction between the two kinds of self-distraction: not necessarily self-deceptive self-distraction (-SD), and necessarily self-deceptive self-distraction (+SD). Let us examine each in turn.

**(D)** Distraction, put simply, is a loss of focus, or concentration on one’s current task. According to Clancy Martin (2005: 56), this is depicted as *spontaneous distraction*, in which the agent concerned *does not choose* to become distracted; rather, their distraction is a result of some external event: breaking news, a car horn, a phone call, etc. In this instance there is no (apparent) self-deception involved, as the agent concerned is distracted from their present concerns for a genuine reason.[[135]](#footnote-135) For example, perhaps whilst writing I am distracted mid-sentence by an email alert, or some other “push-notification”, which I attend to before continuing writing. Whilst this kind of distraction may be the most common in today’s hyper media-focused society,[[136]](#footnote-136) it is of less interest to the psychology of distraction, which tends to focus on what is termed “self-distraction”; that is, where the agent makes a concerted effort to distract themselves.[[137]](#footnote-137) However, as we will see for Kierkegaard there is always the possibility that simple distraction is masquerading as self-distraction in disguise.

**(-SD)** If distraction can be called spontaneous, in that one’s task is interrupted by some sudden external influence, self-distraction suggests one makes a conscious choice or decision to become distracted. Indeed, in the psychological literature, it is generally suggested that self-distraction is “an engagement in trivial activities when we *wish* to avoid a more important task” (Wegner, 1994: 58).[[138]](#footnote-138) This kind of self-distraction, what we might term not necessarily self-deceptive distraction, or not necessarily self-deceptive *self*-*conscious* distraction, describes the situation in which an agent deliberately chooses to occupy themselves with an activity in order to distract themselves from their current situation, and more crucially, the unwanted thoughts that accompany it. In this sense, not necessarily self-deceptive self-distraction has “the property of being a negative or subtractive motivation, a desire not to think, not to feel, not to do, not to be” (Wegner, 1994: 73). One immediately recalls the aesthete of *Either/Or Volume I,* whom in their desire for distraction states simply “*Summa Summarum*: I don’t feel like doing anything” (EO I 20). However, whilst one cannot force oneself to stop thinking about a particular thing, one can self-consciously create the situation whereby one eventually stops thinking about it, through distraction. For example, one might be anxiously waiting to receive an email back from a prospective job offer, and in order to stop feeling anxious, and *thinking* about the possible responses, one might engage in some other activity (instead of sitting in front of the computer, refreshing one’s email), that will (hopefully) distract oneself from the unwanted anxieties. For example, one might go for a run; watch a film; read a book, etc. According to Martin, the technique of distraction deployed here “does not look necessarily self-deceptive” (Martin, 2005: 57). Rather, in this case, one *consciously* makes the *choice* to remove oneself, and thereby distract oneself, from the current situation. Yet, it is also possible to see how this technique might be used self-deceptively, i.e. distracting oneself from one’s commitments and duties. For example, one might *choose* to spend an hour or two discussing trivialities with friends, rather than work on one’s current project. However, it is important to note that whilst one might use this technique for self-deceptive purposes as described above, “the technique is not itself an instance of self-deception” (Martin, 2005: 57). Here, the individual always chooses to distract themselves; they are always *conscious* of the decision to distract themselves, however the decision made to deceive themselves must be followed by the *forgetting* that they made this decision in the first place; otherwise they will continue, for instance, to think about precisely that from which they are trying to distract themselves! Here, it is the *process* that is deceptive.

**(+SD)** The second kind of self-distraction, what we might term necessarily self-deceptive self-distraction, or necessarily self-deceptive *sub-conscious* distraction, “involves choosing to be distracted without consciously acknowledging that one is so choosing” (Martin, 2005: 57). Indeed, for this reason, unconscious distraction is “straightforwardly and necessarily self-deceptive” (Martin, 2005: 57). Here, a person chooses – whilst at the same time *refusing to acknowledge that they have made a choice* – to be distracted. They deceive themselves into thinking that they have not made a choice to be distracted. This seems completely paradoxical; how does such a thought process happen? According to Béatrice Han-Pile, this kind of choosing may be described as “medio-passive” (2009: 308). Such medio-passivity in choice, “forces us to depart from the rationalist model of decision making and to consider a much less voluntaristic version that […] does not require reflective deliberation” (Han-Pile, 2009: 308). It is in many ways a state of being, where the individual caught up in the flow of the busyness of everyday life never reaches the point of still, quiet reflection, necessary for decision making; such deliberation is pushed to the “back of the mind”, so to speak. Here, then, we arrive at precisely the kind of self-distraction that Kierkegaard takes to be so problematic in his conception of busyness, which contains the necessary condition that the individual be *double-minded*. Key in this depiction of self-distraction, then, is the inability to acknowledge one’s self-distraction, that is, the *self-deception*. As Kierkegaard states, through double-mindedness one can “live in the continual and continually changing delusion that one does and does not have a conviction” (UDVS 70). It is very likely that Kierkegaard views all of the above forms of distraction, as ultimately collapsing into the same kind of necessarily self-deceptive self-distraction as outlined here – indicative of the double-minded individual who fails to commit to willing one thing, and instead irrationally wills multiplicity itself “something only the insane [*Afsindige*] can succeed in doing” (WL 98).

As noted, then, if double-mindedness is itself a sub-conscious form of self-distraction, and double-mindedness is one of the key features of busyness, then there should be no doubt that busyness is one of the ways in which this unconscious self-distraction manifests itself in the world. So, the question follows: for Kierkegaard, from what is busyness a distraction?

There are four possible answers. **(1)** As we have seen, busyness is one of the ways in which the individual *avoids willing one thing*, i.e. the good, and more broadly perhaps, any serious or devoted conviction. Such an individual is too busy with the multifarious, and as such, wills the good – or any other serious commitment – only to a certain degree. The double-minded individual distracts themselves from willing the good, through busyness, but also **(2)** from the fact that the good, is the good of confession. Hence, in failing to will one thing, the individual also fails to arrive at the point wherein they can confess, that is, wherein they have the attitude of faith. As Arne Grøn suggests:

[D]ouble-mindedness can manifest itself in busyness where there is no time or tranquillity for gathering ourselves together. Even though we may feel like a victim of busyness, while, nonetheless, seeking it, busyness can, in fact, be a way of keeping the task at a distance (Grøn, 2008: 104)

Busyness, then, is also suggestive of **(3)** a literal *self-*distraction; it is preventative of the individual ever developing a self; that is, one of the key tasks of Kierkegaard’s authorship. In distracting *oneself* from the task of confession, one distracts oneself from developing in genuine Christian selfhood. As we will see, one of Kierkegaard’s aims across his religious writings is to awaken a sense of inwardness in the individual, which interestingly he characterises as *restlessness* – a kind of activity that is opposed to mere busyness. As Grøn continues: “It may be hard to understand that the busy person has given up on or abandoned himself; he is after all busy, maybe even with himself, but he avoids becoming aware of himself in busyness” (Grøn, 2008: 140). This is expressed by Kierkegaard – or Anti-Climacus – himself in *The Sickness Unto Death*, whereby the individual, in a state of unconscious despair over willing to be himself, keeps

himself in the dark about his state through diversions and in other ways, for example, through work and busyness as diversionary means, yet in such a way that he does not entirely realise why he is doing it, that it is to keep himself in the dark (SUD 48).

In this way then busyness presents itself as a kind of self-deception. One adopts the attitude of busyness, even though one perhaps is not really sure why. Busyness is thus **(4)** evasive of choice; and, the self-deceptive aspect of this evasion is due to the *unwillingness* of the individual to acknowledge that they have a choice. As Martin suggests, “[t]he point of this hurried worldly activity is not what is achieved by the actions one takes, but avoiding thinking about what one truly ought to be doing” (Martin, 2005: 65). Thus, the busy person makes excuses for their behaviour, and attempts to justify their activity as in some way worthwhile, when for Kierkegaard it can never be as important as the spiritual and eternal task of selfhood. The great irony is of course that in being busy, in engaging with the multifarious, one has seemingly many choices. However, for Kierkegaard these choices are somewhat arbitrary and superficial. This is one of the reasons why busyness for Kierkegaard is a *fundamentally aesthetic category*; being busy is a distraction from ever having to commit seriously to one thing. I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter on the distinction between vocation and occupation.

One final point on distraction: In “An Occasional Discourse”, Kierkegaard – as he often does – employs the metaphor of a mirror to describe the distracting, and self-deceptive nature of busyness (UDVS 67-8). The busy people, Kierkegaard argues, carry with them the “mirror of possibility”, and whilst these busy people may occasionally glimpse themselves in the mirror, they forget the image they have seen in the haste of their everyday busyness: the self they glimpse remains a mere possibility. In this way busyness *annuls the possibility of becoming oneself*. In order then that one see *oneself* in the mirror – rather than the *blur* or *multifariousness* of busyness – what is required, as Patrick Stokes suggests, is a “*subjective orientation* to the image” (Stokes, 2007: 75). In other words, the busy person must be halted from their “multifarious busyness” (UDVS 68) and “must stand still” (UDVS 67) to realise the possibility of becoming oneself; and therefore to will one thing (i.e. be pure of heart) and be able to confess. This *disruption* to one’s busyness is *Socratic*, and the possibility of the development of *oneself* is maieutic, in that the busy person must realise that the possibility to become oneself, and with that the possibility to will one thing as well as the possibility of confession was “carried with them” (UDVS 67) all along.

Let us turn now to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter: what exactly is confession, and why does it stand in opposition to busyness?

### Confession is Halting is Movement

In this final section, I will consider the notion of confession as a halt. Further, I will explore the paradoxical idea that halting is movement, and how this relates to Kierkegaard’s comments on busyness. I will also explore the distinction between *busyness* and what Kierkegaard in several places throughout his authorship refers to as *restlessness*.

#### Confession and Stillness in ‘On the Occasion of a Confession’ (1845)

“On the Occasion of a Confession” (1847) is not the only upbuilding discourse that Kierkegaard devotes to the subject of confession. Two years prior, in 1845, Kierkegaard published *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*; the first discourse in this series was also called “On the Occasion of a Confession”. Interestingly for the purposes of the present study, in the earlier “On the Occasion of a Confession” Kierkegaard focusses on both confession and *stillness* (*stilhed*). It might be suggested that in this text we see the embryonic form of Kierkegaard’s later identification of confession with *halting* (*standse*), in which “there is a stillness in which every human being becomes guilty” (TDIO 14). In both cases, confession is linked by Kierkegaard to a cessation of movement – the cessation of the movement seemingly typified by Kierkegaard as busyness.

For Kierkegaard, in “On the Occasion of a Confession” (1845), the stillness of confession is not an external, but rather an inner state of being. That said, it is important to note that Kierkegaard underscores the importance of stillness in confession initially in external terms. The discourse starts with the significance of quietude in “God’s house [where] there is peace [*Fred*]”, and the “enclosure [*det Omfredede*]” with the “closed room” in which one confesses (TDIO 9). Kierkegaard argues that the one who is confessing “seeks [this] stillness” (TDIO 10); and that “it is difficult to find stillness in life’s noise [*Livets Larm*]” (TDIO 10/SV V 178). Elsewhere, in “Four Discourses at Communion on Fridays” (1848) Kierkegaard makes the point to contrast this noise and hubbub of the workday outside (it being a Friday), with the inner stillness and quietude of God’s house; and further, suggests that it is the contrast between the noise of the world and God’s house that is crucial for an understanding of stillness, and its importance to the individual:

The noise of the daily activity of life out there sounds almost audibly within this vaulted space, where this sacred stillness is therefore all the greater. The stillness that public authority can command civilly is nevertheless not godly stillness, *but this stillness, while the world makes noise, is the godly stillness*. (CD 270).[[139]](#footnote-139)

The individual must draw themselves away from the busyness of the world in order to “seek this stillness”. According to Patrick Sheil, this makes the stillness Kierkegaard is concerned with *dialectical* in the sense that the stillness is not to be found in a specific *place*: “because with the noise of the world outside it is not only a matter of encountering the stillness that is, as it were, *firmly located* in this, the place of worship. Rather, there is also the matter of the stillness that can be *brought along*” (Sheil, 2011: 40). Recall in Chapter 1, our discussion of the “symbolic church”, as an escape from the busyness of the city; the Church where one finds respite from busyness is not necessarily literal. Similarly then, it should come as no surprise that in “On the Occasion of a Confession” (1845) the place wherein one seeks stillness, and therefore the possibility of confession (and thus an escape from busyness), is described by Kierkegaard as “*et Bedested*”, meaning literally “a place of prayer”, but also as a “rest stop” on a journey: that is, something that the individual finds, or perhaps even creates, themselves. The Hongs translate “*et Bedested*” as “biding place […] where one pauses and collects one’s thoughts and makes an accounting” (TDIO 12). Thus, we see in Kierkegaard’s qualification of the significance of stillness – as an external phenomenon – that for the act of confession to be possible that there is also an *inner importance*; that is, the stillness that is something that the individual themselves must create. Hence, for Kierkegaard, stillness stands in opposition to “busy absentmindedness [*travle Tankers Aandsfraværelse*]” (TDIO 17) wherein one lacks the ability to create this inner stillness; there is thus more to stillness than purely the cessation of external motion.[[140]](#footnote-140)

*For Kierkegaard, stillness is fundamentally an inner state of being*. The change stillness brings is internal; what changes is *us*, rather than some external reality. It converts our ordinary state of being into something extra-ordinary. Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of a sailor in a storm to signify the internal nature of genuine stillness:

Let us imagine a first mate and assume that he has passed with distinction all the examinations but as yet has not been out to sea. Imagine him in a storm: he knows exactly what he has to do, but he is unacquainted with the terror that grips the sailor when the stars disappear into the pitch darkness of the night; he is unacquainted with the sense of powerlessness the pilot feels when he sees that the helm in his hand is only a plaything for the sea; he does not know how the blood rushes to the head when in such a moment one must make calculations – in short, he has no conception of the change that takes place in the knower when he is to use his knowledge. *What fair weather is for the sailor, going on living at the same pace with others and with the generation is for the individual person, but the decision, the dangerous moment of collecting himself when he is to withdraw from the surroundings and become alone before God and become a sinner – this is a stillness that changes the ordinary just as the storm does* (TDIO 36).[[141]](#footnote-141)

Genuine stillness for Kierkegaard is a storm rather than, say, the ocean in “fair weather”. Considering the storm metaphor in the light of busyness, one sees that stillness’s conversion of the ordinary to the extraordinary can be couched in the movement from busyness to rest. As Oliver Norman maintains: “The storm metaphor merely signifies a rupture in the continuity of the ordinary; stillness disrupts my everyday life by throwing me head first into something unusual for me. For one living in the midst of the noise of the world, sudden stillness is anxiogenic” (Norman, 2016: 9). Of course, for Kierkegaard, what is revealed to the individual in their stillness is that they are alone before God, naked in their sinfulness. The act of becoming still functions as a command – “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) – in which the individual is made aware of their sinfulness.

To be sure, the act of becoming still is difficult, made all the more so by the society of busyness in which Kierkegaard suggests we inhabit. Kierkegaard stresses that “it is much easier to look to the right and to the left than to look into oneself […] to stand alone and silent directly before the sharp expert is more difficult than to speak in a common harmony of equals” (TDIO 31). But, despite this, it is precisely because of its difficulty that this kind of stillness – that one is able to create in the midst of busyness – is important; and, in thinking about stillness in this way one arrives at the fundamentally *religious* *nature* of stillness. As Oliver Norman continues: “In stillness, our attention is fixed, riveted on ourselves.[[142]](#footnote-142) Only when our attention is thusly riveted can we think of our sins, can we *know* God. When we go to confession we seek the privacy and stillness of the confessional. Is it not this very stillness and privacy that is the ‘biding place’ on the road to salvation?” (Norman, 2016: 10). This “biding place”, this stopping point, is the possibility of stillness and of confession; and yet it is always a choice by the individual. One chooses to “be still”. In stopping and remaining still one discloses themselves to God, and confesses. *The fundamental religious nature of genuine stillness is that it positions us, disclosed, before God; and its qualification is that we must be the ones to find this resting place amidst the busyness of the everyday.[[143]](#footnote-143)*

With the above in mind, the notion of stillness as an internal state of being, an internal “biding place”, is helpful for considering the way in which halting, too, is crucial for the act of confession; and furthermore, how halting is both a literal and spiritual opposition to busyness.

#### Confession is Halting

At the end of “An Occasional Discourse”, Kierkegaard speaks directly to his reader – to “That Single Individual” to whom the book is dedicated – outlining his wish for the present discourse:

If you, my listener, know much more about confession than has been said here, as indeed you do, know what follows the confession of sins, this delaying discourse may still not have been in vain, provided it actually has *halted* you, has *halted* you by means of something you know very well, you who know even much more (UDVS 153).

The something that is known well by the reader is of course confession: *confession is the halt*.[[144]](#footnote-144) Hence, even if throughout the discourse the reader has learned nothing new about confession, that the occasion of the discourse *is* confession, it – the occasion – has halted them anyway. Thus, Kierkegaard’s hope is that the discourse *itself* will halt the busy person. As Bruce Kirmmse states: “The world cannot bear to be stopped or interrupted, and the whole purpose of repentance and of this discourse is to encourage the individual to pause, to interrupt the world’s busyness” (Kirmmse, 1990: 282). Hence one can view the entire discourse – both *content* and *structure* – as a rallying cry *against* busyness. In the opening prayer Kierkegaard describes the aim of the discourse as “an interruption of the usual task […] a halting” (UDVS 7). And as Kierkegaard suggests: “far from delaying anyone who wills the good in truth or calling anyone away from useful activity, [the discourse] might nevertheless halt a busy person” (UDVS 66). Through beginning and ending the discourse with the same prayer (in which God provides “the beginning and the completing” (UDVS 7/154)), Kierkegaard emphasises the importance of confession being a “daily concern”, a daily interruption. Furthermore, the “shape” of the discourse highlights the significance of halting, wherein “the prose itself quite self-consciously stops in a number of places to review what has already been said” (Hough, 2005: 42fn4). This structural halting aligns the occasion, confession, with the halt. When Kierkegaard suggests that confession is a halting, what does he mean?

We saw in Section 1 that confession was neither the activities of contemplation, knowledge and understanding, nor desire; this leads Sheridan Hough to question whether one must just stop doing these things, and whether the halt amounts to “a kind of radical syncope, a flash of some manner of not being” (Hough, 2005: 40). The halt *is* a break with one’s present reality – just as stillness is an interruption to the ordinary.[[145]](#footnote-145) Hough defines the halt in the following:

It is a kind of *existential break* – a halt, an interruption that has nothing to do with content – that Kierkegaard’s actual confession involves (Hough, 2005: 44).

The halt is some kind of “accounting” of one’s single individuality and admittance of one’s sins. In the “accounting” all is disclosed before God, as Kierkegaard writes:

But in eternity everyone as a single individual must make an accounting to God, that is, eternity requires of him that he must have lived as a single individual. And eternity will bring out before his consciousness everything he has done as an individual, he who had forgotten himself in noisy delusion; and in eternity he, the single individual, will be dealt with very scrupulously, he who thought he was in the crowd, where things are not done very scrupulously. Everyone must make an accounting to God as an individual; the king must make an accounting to God as an individual, and the most wretched beggar must make an accounting to God as an individual – lest anyone be arrogant by being more than an individual, lest anyone despondently think that he is not an individual, perhaps because in the busyness of the world he does not even have a name but is designated only by a number (UDVS 128).

As Hough summarises: “[i]n a moment of being hauled up and out of the busyness of the everyday, a person *is* her or his sin” (Hough, 2005: 47). The halt is a break with the present reality, “the usual task”, wherein one must treat the interruption to one’s busyness “as if it were a day of rest when the penitent […] in the confession of sin is alone” (UDVS 7). Recall that in the storm metaphor from “On the Occasion of a Confession” (1845), Kierkegaard asserts that “[w]hat fair weather is for the sailor, living at the same speed as others and the generation is for the individual human being” (SV V 200).[[146]](#footnote-146) In other words, the busyness that Kierkegaard describes is the status quo, that must be disrupted by means of the confession, wherein one makes an accounting. This halt, is thus a radical cessation of the superficial movement of busyness.[[147]](#footnote-147)

#### Halting is (Inward) Movement: The Distinction Between *Busyness* and *Restlessness*

For Kierkegaard things are never quite so simple. Whilst the halt is defined as a break in the usual task, a stopping of one’s daily work, the halt is also its inversion: *halting is also movement*. Crucially, it is an inward movement:

Halting is not indolent resting [*Ro*]; halting is also movement. It is the heart’s inward movement, it is self-deepening in inwardness; but merely to proceed further [*gaae videre*] is the course straight ahead on the surface (UDVS 153/ SV VIII 241).

And, whilst this assertion seems counterintuitive, considering what we now know about the halt, I suggest that one way we can comprehend exactly why halting is also movement is when we consider halting in light of its apparent opposite: busyness. Furthermore, if halting is also movement, then it follows that busyness – its opposite – whilst appearing to be movement, may also be the absence of movement, or rather a kind of superficial, or pseudo-movement: “busyness – in which one continually goes further and further [*gaaer videre og videre*]” (UDVS 67 / SV VIII 169) is “merely to proceed further […] the course straight ahead on the surface”, in aimless multiplicity, in externality in which one will never arrive at willing *one* thing.

In asserting that halting is not indolent resting, Kierkegaard seeks to remove any doubt that the kind of halt required by the individual bears any resemblance to the busy idleness of aesthetic worldview. For the aesthete one can only *observe* a cessation of movement, whether that is the stillness of the night, or the romanticised stillness of nature. Consider *Either/Or Volume I,* wherein the bored aesthete himself cannot *be still*, cannot *halt*: the aesthete’s defining boredom has “such a capacity to initiate motion” (EO I 285). In Chapter 3 I argued that the idleness – defined as aesthetic busyness – for the aesthete could also be defined as inertia, wherein whilst it appears that he is moving, from an existential view, he is not getting anywhere. Here again we see a similar conceptual inversion.

In its movement, halting – like stillness – is an *inward movement*. The self-deepening of inwardness, or inward-deepening is precisely this movement. What is it to say that the heart’s inward movement is “self-deepening in inwardness”? Kierkegaard’s notion of inwardness (*Inderlighed*) or inward deepening (*Inderliggjørelse*), is best described as an inner spiritual process, specifically concerned with the cultivation of a certain kind of individual within a certain kind of Christianity. There are two aspects of inwardness worth noting, both pertinent to our discussion of busyness: (1) inwardness as inwardness; in opposition to externality or outwardness: an inward facing spiritual process, and; (2) inwardness as passion. The self-deepening inwardness that Kierkegaard describes in “An Occasional Discourse” as the heart’s inward movement, that is, *a halting that is also a movement*, as we will see is later described in *For Self-Examination* (1851), as a “*restlessness* orientated toward inward-deepening” (FSE 20).[[148]](#footnote-148) We have seen that Kierkegaard’s aim in “An Occasional Discourse” is to halt the individual, in order for them to adopt this inward movement; Kierkegaard reiterates this in *For Self-Examination*, where he states it has been the aim of his authorship to promote this restlessness, this inwardness, this passionate Christian faith (FSE 20).

To consider the notion of halting as movement, I will examine the distinction between *busyness and restlessness* in *The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of An Actress* and *For Self-Examination*. Whilst the subject matter differs radically in these texts, the discussion of restlessness is helpful in defining it.

##### *The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (1848)

In *The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (hereafter, *Crisis*), Kierkegaard refers to restlessness. This time, restlessness “in the sense of the hubbub of finitude” is contrasted with “restlessness in the pregnant sense” (CD 309). In other words, Kierkegaard expresses a distinction between an aesthetic restlessness – that is a restless activity engaged with finitude, externality, temporality, and the like; i.e. busyness, in contrast to a Christian *restlessness* – and the passionate inwardness that Kierkegaard advocates. In *Crisis*, Kierkegaard is describing the restlessness of the youth of the actress, Johanne Luise Heiberg. However, for Kierkegaard, the actress’s youthfulness has nothing to do with her real age; rather, her youthfulness is given to her purely by her restlessness. What concerns us in this text is not the reason for Kierkegaard’s focus on this actress, nor in fact what he considers to be her youthfulness; instead, what is important in this text is Kierkegaard’s description of her restlessness. He writes:

Restlessness, in the sense of the hubbub of finitude, soon palls; but restlessness in the pregnant sense, the restlessness of infinity, the joyous, robust originality that, rejuvenating, invigorating, healing, stirs the water is a great rarity, and it is in this sense that she is restlessness. Yet in turn this restlessness signifies something very great; it signifies the first fieriness of an essential genius (CD 309).

The restlessness “in the sense of the hubbub of finitude [*Endelighedens Spektakel*]” is precisely busyness: the outward appearance of movement and agitation that is aesthetic, purely superficial, purely *spectacle*. The restlessness that the actress displays, that is *true restlessness*, “the restlessness of infinity [*Uendelighedens*]”, is the kind of restlessness that the halt expresses. As Katalin Nun asserts: “we are concerned with a paradoxical concept since ‘restlessness’ does not mean a disturbed state of mind. On the contrary it is a kind of controlled restlessness which shows itself in an opposite effect” (Nun, 2009: 204). As Kierkegaard himself states:

And this restlessness [*Uro*] does not signify anything accidental; it does not mean that she cannot stand still [*staae stille*]; on the contrary, it signifies that even when she is standing still one has an intimation of this inner restlessness, but, note well, in repose [*Ro*] (CD 309).

And, whilst *Crisis* is concerned with restlessness from a primarily aesthetic point of view, in *For Self-Examination* we see the religious application of this concept.

##### *For Self-Examination* (1851)

The halt is further clarified as movement when we consider it in contrast to busyness. Again, *For Self-Examination* is a useful comparison work here; for, in *For Self-Examination* Kierkegaard distinguishes between two types of movement which one might define as busyness and restlessness.

False restlessness (i.e., busyness) in *For Self-Examination*, is described in the following:

These thousands and thousands and millions, each one is looking after his own business; the public official is looking after his, and the scholar his, and the artist his, and the businessman his, and the slanderer his, and the loafer, no less busy, his, and so on and on; everyone is looking after his own business in this criss-crossing [*krydsende*] game of diversity [*Mangfoldhedens*] that is actuality (FSE 19 / SV XII 310).

And whilst Kierkegaard does not explicitly call this false restlessness *busyness*, I argue that we can infer that Kierkegaard clearly has busyness in mind due to his allusion to *diversity* (i.e., the manifold), and also the fact that an almost identical description of busyness appears in “An Occasional Discourse”, wherein Kierkegaard describes the individual who, “busy with small errands on the inland waters of double-mindedness […] sails only with the speed of the delaying factors”, and “the moving force he makes into something that delays, or at least into something intrinsically immovable” (UDVS 75). Such an individual:

steps out into the multifariousness [*Mangfoldighed*] of the world like someone who comes from the country into the big noisy city, into the multifariousness [*Mangfoldighed*] where people busily [*travlt*] and hurriedly rush past each other, where everyone tends to his own business in the vast criss-crossing [*Krydsen*] where everything is in the process of passing, where at each moment what one has learned seems confirmed and at the very same moment refuted, yet without any halt [*Standsning*] in the unrest [*Uro*] (UDVS 75-6 / SV VIII 176).

Hence, busyness as described by Kierkegaard, implicitly in *For Self-Examination*, and quite explicitly in “An Occasional Discourse”, as something that both appears to be moving – “without any halt in the unrest” – but at the same time “immovable”, is unambiguously contrasted with *restlessness*: which is precisely the inclusion of the halt in the unrest.

True restlessness on the other hand, as described by Kierkegaard is a fundamentally Christian category: “if one has become a Christian, restlessness continues. Christianity is the most intense, the most powerful restlessness. No Christian can remain at rest and security” (JP IV 4489). The difficulty, for the Christian, is to find “the resting place between rest and unrest” (JP I 511). One immediately recalls the resting place from “On the Occasion of a Confession” – *et Bedested* – the *biding place* which requires stillness to find. Hence, we see that the resting place – *between movement and rest* – that makes confession possible, is really the *requirement of faith*. Edward Mooney captures the transparent definition of Kierkegaardian faith in the following: “what goes for Kierkegaardian faith is the utter absence, the ultimate impossibility, of anything like self-deception” (Mooney, 2013: 97).[[149]](#footnote-149) In casting aside busyness and double-mindedness, it should come as no surprise that “Christianity is a life of intense restlessness not because restlessness in itself is to be preferred, but because the Christian, recognising the importance of the matter, will be unwilling to rest with only an approximate understanding of herself” (Davis, 1992: 152). The Socratic declarative “Know Thyself” appears here as the way in which the single individual must disclose themselves to God in the act of confession, and in doing so adopt the stance of faith. This requires a kind of restlessness – an inward deepening – that is in stark contrast to the pseudo-movement of busyness.

### Summary

This chapter has explored Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness in “On the Occasion of a Confession”. I began with a discussion of busyness and double-mindedness, and proposed Kierkegaard’s notion of the halt as a religious response to busyness. Throughout, we have seen how Kierkegaard characterises the task of the Christian single individual to be to adopt the halt, the stance of restlessness, and in doing so gain the potential to will one thing. A question one might have at this stage can be expressed in the following: if Kierkegaard – even in speaking “without authority” – seeks to arouse a sense of restlessness in the individual in order that they avoid the busyness of the everyday and will one thing, what is it that Kierkegaard *really* wants us to do? It seems a somewhat momentous ask for the majority, one wonders whether it is even possible. Avoiding busyness seems easy when one has the luxury of wealth and time; however, for “all those who labour and are burdened”, how can one live in the everyday world of work, financial and social obligation, and still avoid busyness?

In the penultimate chapter I will consider Kierkegaard’s comments on *occupation contra vocation*. In doing so, I seek to consider and further clarify Kierkegaard’s criticisms of busyness; and at the same time, attempt to argue that Kierkegaard’s “demands” are not so unreasonable; and that the task of faith that restlessness demands is one that has great appeal, for both the religious and the secular reader.

# “What I Am To Do”: Work, Occupation, and Vocation

*Humanly speaking, there is something pleasant about having secure employment, comfort; there is something agreeable about working for a living. – And then there are only two classes of people who come together in the opposite kind of life. Wrecked subjects, fallen persons – and those who seriously and truly live for an idea. Ah, and in the eyes of the world, it’s far too easy to confuse the two (KJN NB11: 20).*

## 

In Chapter 1, I considered Kierkegaard as the philosopher *in the city of Copenhagen*, and argued that unlike many other philosophers, Kierkegaard must be understood as intimately connected to the environment in which he lived. For it was precisely in this environment – in Copenhagen with its bustling streets, and prosperous economic standing – that Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness emerged. It was in this chapter also, that I considered Kierkegaard’s *personal reflections on his own life-task*, his own *vocation*. In demonstrating Kierkegaard’s use of the countryside and nature as an opposition to the busyness of city life I noted the “Gilleleje Journal” entry, some of Kierkegaard’s earliest writings, wherein he reflected upon himself:

What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know […] It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing to do is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die* (KJN AA:12).[[150]](#footnote-150)

Of course, that truth was his authorship; and throughout his life, Kierkegaard considered his authorship to be his vocation, his calling (as well as, of course, the ultimate task of becoming a Christian; though indeed he saw the two as connected). It was this God-given task that gave his life meaning; the Danish, *kald*, which means “vocation” or “calling” “connotes meaning with regard to a person’s very life […] feeling a need to dedicate one’s life to some duty or purpose” (Puchniak, 2016: 145). Yet, despite the fervour with which Kierkegaard committed himself to this duty, to his life task, to his authorship, he on occasion doubted it. Shortly after “The Corsair Affair”, Kierkegaard considered becoming a country pastor. However, this other “calling” to become a pastor, which Kierkegaard reflected “appealed to me and has been in the background of my soul”, was ultimately something he could not commit to, for – among many other factors[[151]](#footnote-151) – it would, he believed, make him “something other than I am” (KJN NB 107). Contained within Kierkegaard’s own deliberations on his life’s calling, one sees a distinction – at the simplest level – between “an earthly calling” (for instance to become a country pastor, to take up an official position, and a well-respected occupation in Danish society), and “a divine calling” to become a religious author (Puchniak, 2016: 145). One might further draw a distinction between these kinds of callings in terms of (1) an occupation or work, and (2) a vocation. For Kierkegaard, one must be careful not to confuse the two. For, whilst there is “something agreeable” about an *occupation*, it pales in comparison to those individuals who “truly live for an idea”, those who have a *vocation* (KJN NB11: 20). This chapter, then, will explore how Kierkegaard conceptualises the difference between occupation and vocation throughout his authorship, and the way in which both ideas relate to busyness.

As with all discussions of a concept in Kierkegaard’s authorship, one must consider the *plurality* of the pseudonyms through which said concept is developed. This is certainly true for Kierkegaard’s treatment of the concepts of occupation and vocation; the concept of occupation is often itself contained within Kierkegaard’s discussion of vocation. According to A. P. Nelson, the concept vocation, and with it occupation, “receives attention at the hands of three different authorial personae in the Kierkegaardian corpus: Judge William, S. Kierkegaard, and Anti-Climacus” (Nelson, 2005: 85). Each of these voices interpret vocation in slightly different ways. Judge William “presents a caricature of the Lutheran doctrine of earthly vocation”; S. Kierkegaard,[[152]](#footnote-152) as we alluded to in the previous chapter, “explores the ways in which individuals deceive themselves into thinking that they are in their calling”; and Anti-Climacus “resurrects the originally religious sense of the term ‘call’” (Nelson, 2005: 85). I find Nelson’s account convincing, and thus, all three of these voices are necessary to consider, in order to determine how *Kierkegaard’s* – or rather, the *Kierkegaardian* – concept of vocation is ultimately understood; and further, how it relates itself in opposition to the Kierkegaardian concept of busyness.

In this chapter, following Nelson’s interpretation of vocation in Kierkegaard (Nelson, 2005), I will consider the ways the various pseudonyms understand vocation and (within it) occupation, before turning to the way in which Kierkegaard’s concept of vocation is an antidote to the vice of busyness. In Section 1, I will begin by examining Judge William’s account of vocation in *Either/Or*, in opposition to the idleness and anti-work attitude of the aesthete. Then, in Section 2, I will consider Kierkegaard’s own account of vocation, as considered in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and elsewhere in opposition to a life of mere occupation. Finally, in Section 3, I will consider Anti-Climacus’s account of vocation in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*, for it is here that vocation is fundamentally understood as divine in origin. In discussing vocation in Kierkegaard’s various pseudonyms I will also aim to demonstrate how this concept stands in opposition to, and is an antidote for, busyness. This will raise the question that the final chapter will attempt to answer: does vocation’s opposition to busyness mean that it is only through the religious that busyness can be overcome?

### Judge William: “My Station and Its Duties”

In *Either/Or Volume II*, the ethicist Judge William gives an account of vocation, and “brings the concept of vocation within the sphere of the ethical, [signifying] that the principal currency of the concept of vocation is registered in this sphere” (Nelson, 2005: 93). In other words, for the Judge, one’s vocation is intimately bound up with one’s ethical existence. This is in contrast to both Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard, who as we will see view vocation as an ultimately religious, or perhaps even spiritual, endeavour. Three aspects of Judge William’s conception of ethical existence are summarised by Michael Plekon, as: that one “should work to earn a living and struggle for life’s necessities […] one should have a calling […] and that what every human being can accomplish is *his* or *her* task in life” (Plekon, 1995: 134). Let us examine each of these in turn, for within these aspects of ethical existence is found Judge William’s concept of vocation.

#### Work

Before considering the Judge’s comments on work, it is worth reminding ourselves of A’s position on work in the first book of *Either/Or* – for the Judge’s comments are of course a response to A’s existential outlook. Most simply, A is *anti-work* – he is an *idler*. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 3, A’s idleness is not as idle as it seems; it is in fact, ironically, just another kind of busyness. Hence, more specifically A is anti- a certain *kind* of work, namely the kind of work that commits a person to a life of responsibility, and in A’s view, violates their freedom. For instance, in the case of seduction, A is quite willing to work hard for his own goals; indeed, in Chapter 3 I argued that this was a kind of busyness wherein A treats seduction like a business enterprise. Despite this, he is hostile to the kind of work that we might consider to be more appropriate to one’s occupation in life; one can hardly make a living as a serial-seducer! Indeed, A warns his reader in his essay on boredom, “Rotation of Crops”, to “[n]ever take any *official post*”, for to do so is to become “a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic” (EO I 298). Similarly, in the “Diapsalmata”, he considers the businessman to be engaged in “[t]he most ludicrous of all ludicrous things” – busyness (EO I 25), a meaningless activity. Later he states outright that “to work for a living cannot be the meaning of life” (EO I 31). A’s anti-work attitude is one directed towards the everyday, “nine-to-five” conception of work which was steadily becoming the social-norm in the century before Kierkegaard was born, and during his lifetime – as the country transitioned from feudalism to capitalism.[[153]](#footnote-153) Also, of concern to A is the “division of labour”, wherein one specialises in one thing: in contrast A seeks diversity. Thus, the aesthete A “who always join[s] in games” (EO I 329), recommends *play* in place of work; and who in the guise of the Seducer frequently refers to the hard work of seduction as no more than a game.

One might admire A’s observations on work, and, viewed in the light of anti-capitalist thinkers – such as Bob Black or David Graeber[[154]](#footnote-154) – one notices interesting similarities. For instance, as its title suggests Bob Black’s 1985 essay “The Abolition of Work” argued for the abolition of work and the “creating [of] a new way of life based on play; in other words, a *ludic* conviviality, commensality, and maybe even art”, wherein one has “the right to be lazy”, and where to “be ludic is not to be ludicrous” (Black, 1985: 1-2). This resemblance between A and Black gives further credence to the view that A is, at his core, anti-work. As Black argues, nearly all “work is useless or worse” and we should abolish it, and, from what remains “transform it into a pleasing variety of game-like and craft-like pastimes, indistinguishable from other pleasurable pastimes” (Black, 1985: 8). Hence, for Black, “[l]ife will become a game, or rather many games” (Black, 1985: 11); work, in the traditional sense, would not exist. Black’s desire to transform one’s work into a kind of game, echoes A’s desire for play throughout *Livets Spil*, “the game of life” (SV II 31/EO I 47):

Borrow fifteen million; use it not to pay off our debts but for public entertainment. Let us celebrate the millennium with fun and games. Just as there currently are boxes everywhere for contributions of money, there should be bowls everywhere filled with money. Everything would be free […] for if money is always available, everything is free in a way (EO I 287).

And yet, to move to *Either/Or Volume II*: for Judge William a key part of the meaning of ethical life is that work is anything but a game. One *should* work for a living; for the ethicist *work is necessary* – a basic, and non-negotiable part of life. To attempt to refuse it *in lieu* of play is to engage with fantastical thinking, to remove oneself from actuality; Judge William considers working to be one of the key ways that the individual remains grounded in actuality, and commits themselves firmly to the ethical life.

In his second lengthy letter, Judge William gives ethical advice to the aesthete stating that “[i]t is every person’s duty to work for a living” (EO II 280). What does he mean by this? Why should it be the ethical individual’s duty to work? The Judge links one’s duty to work to “dismal necessity” (EO II 282), that is, a need to work in order to merely live.[[155]](#footnote-155) The term the Judge uses, *Næringssorger*, means literally *nutritional concerns*. He therefore considers the necessity of work to be necessary for the fulfilling of basic human needs – a concern he has largely avoided: for, as the Judge later claims, “I have never had cares about the necessities of life, for although up to a point I do have to work for a living, I nevertheless have always had my good income”, and therefore presumably been free from worries about the necessities of life (EO II 283). Despite its being required, he does also note the benefit of work: there are “educative and ennobling aspects of it [work]” (EO II 283). As Abraham H. Khan suggests “cares about the necessities of life”, and the struggle they produce whilst pertaining to one’s basic needs, are also linked by Judge William to “relating socio-politically in the society or community” (Khan, 2018:192). There is a universality to our basic needs, our *Næringssorger*, that for Judge William in one’s struggle against them creates some sense of togetherness.[[156]](#footnote-156) For Judge William, one engages with the *actuality* of the world in precisely this way; in the very way that the aesthete, A, warns against in *Either/Or Volume I*: marriage, official posts i.e. occupations, and friendship. Thus, the duty to work is tied to a certain *necessary aspect of ethical life.* For, the duty to work “expresses *the universally human* and in another sense expresses the universal also, for it expresses freedom” (EO II 283).[[157]](#footnote-157) The duty to work then expresses the universal – another expression for the ethical – and in doing so expresses humankind’s freedom.

What is the link between the duty to work expressing the ethical and one’s concerns about life’s necessities? And what it is about the duty to work that expresses freedom? For Judge William, it seems that work frees us from our dependence on nature. Initially this seems to take the form of very basic work, for instance, growing one’s own vegetables to eat; rotating one’s crops, as it were. At this stage one seems to remain bound to nature. It is only when work becomes more sophisticated, more specialised, that it frees one from nature. As Judge William states:

It is precisely by working that a person liberates himself; by working, he becomes the master over nature; by working, he shows that he is higher than nature (EO II 283).

When work is specialised, a person presumably becomes free from nature because they no longer need concern themselves with their basic needs, their *Næringssorger*.[[158]](#footnote-158) Instead, their specialisation, and crucially the specialisation of others within their community, means that they are liberated from nature. This in turn, as we will see, leads to a specific role or occupation for them within society, and of course the duties and responsibilities that accompany such a role. Following his Hegelian ethical outlook (cf. Stern, 2014: 189-203), the Judge suggests that it is the *necessity* present in the duty to work that gives the individual their *freedom*. Indeed, for Hegel, “[w]e gain a sense of freedom in the way we involve ourselves with others in society. Work is a mode of that involvement” (O’Connor, 2018: 61). This is in obvious contradiction to A’s view, wherein to commit oneself to work in “an official post” limits one’s freedom; the needs of others, and obligations we might have towards them, prevent us from following our own desires. However, for Judge William (and also Kierkegaard), A’s kind of freedom is illusory – it does not detach one from the actuality of one’s situation in life, and will ultimately lead one to despair. Ironically, the freedom that A seeks through diversity in “Rotation of Crops” only further cements him to a life bound by necessity; A has traded one form of crop rotation for another.

We have seen above the way in which a person’s struggles against the necessities of life, through work, give them some kind of freedom from nature; they rise above the natural world in some way and overcome it. One question then that may arise here is whether the freedom that the Judge has in mind arises from the *monetary* value of the work performed. However, this does not seem to be the case.

The value and meaning of one’s work from the ethical point of view is not necessarily one’s *money earning occupation*. On the contrary, the ethicist has the ability to realise that it is not even for money that one pursues work. That is not to say that money is an evil for the ethicist, but rather that oftentimes “those who must work lack the ethical vigour to acknowledge the meaning of working, lack the ethical conviction of its meaning” (EO II 281). These are the people who in their busyness mistake the meaning of work to be for the pursuit of money or some other worldly reward.[[159]](#footnote-159) In fact, Judge William’s sensibilities regarding work align closely with the view taken by Andrea Veltman in *Meaningful Work* (2016), wherein the intrinsic features of work are in many ways just as important if not more important than the extrinsic features, e.g. money. We saw in the previous chapter the way in which to pursue the good for the want of a reward, for instance money, is to remain double-minded in busyness; and to forgo one’s ethical and religious convictions. Similarly, here, to consider the meaning of one’s work to be for the acquisition of money is to defile the ethical notion to work as simply one’s mere duty. As Judge William poetically analogises: “It is not the seducers who do harm to marriage, but cowardly married men. So also here” (EO II 281). To pursue work for money distracts oneself from the real reason one ought to work: precisely because it is one’s duty. Thus, the duty to work for a living, like one’s duties in marriage, must for Judge William find its foundations in the ethical alone, rather than in some external ground, like for instance money. However, as we will see for “S. Kierkegaard”, this remains inadequate.

There is an interesting similarity here between the way that both A and Judge William view work: both view the meaning of work in terms of some other end than *money*. A views work as meaningful, or more accurately worthwhile, only when it is directed towards some aesthetic pursuit, such as the hard work of seduction – or, indeed when it is no longer work, but play. On the other hand, Judge William views work as meaningful only when it is used educationally as a way of cementing the individual within a certain kind of ethical life: that is, when the individual adopts their work as their calling. One however gets the impression that both A and Judge William are, in many ways, hypocrites. Both individuals seem to be somewhat removed from any actual monetary concern, and indeed any need to work for a living. A, as an idling aesthete, clearly has the time free from the need to work for a living. Thus, his comments about the ridiculousness of work can, like Judge William who admits to “never had cares about the necessities of life” (EO II 283), seem somewhat inapplicable to the common working man of nineteenth century Copenhagen. (Indeed, perhaps this is Kierkegaard’s point: that one will not find an answer to the question “What am I to do” in the aesthetic or ethical spheres, as presented by A and Judge William, respectively).

#### Calling

Having argued that it is one’s duty to work for a living, and following on from this “beautiful view of working” (EO II 291), Judge William asserts that “It is every human being’s duty to have a calling [*Kald*]” (EO II 291). In making this claim, Judge William is reiterating the Lutheran position that a person can serve God, and live an ethical life, through the everyday work they perform. In doing so, Judge William “makes significant use of the conventional Lutheran idea of calling” (Pattison, 2019: 32). According to Max Weber, Luther’s view of one’s vocation, or more appropriately calling (*Beruf*) was that “[t]he only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling” (Weber, 2000: 80). In other words, a person lives out their vocation through whatever God-given occupation, or *work*, they happen to hold. As George Pattison notes, whilst “Luther doesn’t absolutely rule out changing one’s state or vocation, […] this is an exception. We are to continue as we began” (Pattison, 2019: 17). For example, a gardener serves God through being a gardener; they do not need to forsake horticulture for monasticism. Weber continues: “The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life” (Weber, 2000: 85). Thus, it seems that for Luther – according to Weber – a person’s vocation is respected when they act within the limits of their occupation, their work. In other words, it appears that Luther interprets vocation as occupation – or rather, a person can live out their vocation, whilst remaining within their occupation. Thus, as Kierkegaard himself summarises in his *Journals*, for Luther, and also Judge William, “everyone remains in his occupation” (JP III 2541). Each person’s duty amounts to their (God-given) station in life despite the potential lack of earthly reward, such as wealth, and the sense of continuous struggle that comes with cares about the necessities of life (EO II 285). In other words, in one’s work, one finds one’s calling; in one’s occupation, one finds one’s vocation.

Judge William’s view has led some, such as Jeremy Walker, to suggest that “[t]he ethical position stated by Judge William […] can easily be described by the phrase ‘my station and its duties’” (Walker, 1982: 51) – a phrase from a well-known chapter title in F. H. Bradley’s, *Ethical Studies*.[[160]](#footnote-160) Let us explore Bradley’s position in “My Station and Its Duties”,[[161]](#footnote-161) as it is helpful in understanding the ways in which Judge William’s views on work and vocation relate to his wider concerns within the ethical sphere.

Bradley argues that man has “never been anything but social, and society never was made by individual men” (Bradley, 2012: 154). Mankind’s being, as it pertains communally, or universally, to others means that “he is not a mere ‘individual’” (Bradley, 2012: 153). Bradley continues:

To know what a man is […] you must not take him in isolation. He is one of a people, he was born in a family, he lives in a certain society, in a certain state. What he has to do depends on what his place is, what his function is, and that all comes from his station in the organism (Bradley, 2012: 157).

When considering Judge William’s view on work, one sees that what he encourages for the aesthete is that he *take up* and then *remain* in his “station” within the organism, within ethical life and the wider framework of a society, or community. That is, that the aesthete accepts his calling that God has given him. For Judge William, there is a “rational order of things, in which every human being, if he so wills, fills his place” (EO II 292). This is certainly a Hegelian influence; it is reminiscent of what Hegel describes as “the peaceful organisation and movement of the ethical world” (Hegel, *PS*, §463). Hence, Judge William “follows Hegel in stressing how life within *Sittlichkeit* will bring self-realisation to the individual, as he is *able to exist as a concrete particular within the social whole*” (Stern, 2014: 195).[[162]](#footnote-162) This idea can be found in Hegel’s political philosophy; as well as an answer to the worry that the modern “division of labour” creates a society of individuals who are so specified, and diverse, that society – as a unified *whole* – ceases to exist. This worry has been framed by Robert Stern in the phrase “differentiation leads to fragmentation” (Stern, 1989: 81). It is Hegel’s view – and perhaps unsurprisingly Judge William’s – that instead of the division of labour creating fragmentation, it can in fact be a positive for society, leading to “greater social *integration*” (Stern, 1989: 83). In fact, it is this differentiation that creates an individual who is more than merely abstract; such an individual *determines* themselves “as a distinct form of consciousness” (Stern, 1989: 85). Yet, at the same time, such an individual is *not separated* from the unified whole, but is instead unable to be separated, due to the need to “hang together as parts of an integrated socio-economic unity” (Stern, 1989: 85). This point is reiterated by Brian O’Connor who states that Hegel’s view of the usefulness of work “allows us both to serve the needs of others and to realise ourselves as complex and free communal beings” (O’Connor, 2018: 75). For Judge William, or the ethicist more broadly, “no man is an island” and the aesthete’s egotistical individualism and anti-work ethos separates him from the possibility of community; the aesthete occupies a place very much on the outskirts or edges of society.

In line with Judge William’s position there are many references to the aesthete – or, specifically The Seducer – as living out a ghostly, vampiric, other-worldly existence, lurking only in the shadows (of society), for example: “In these nocturnal hours, I walk around like a ghost; like a ghost I inhabit the place where her dwelling is” (EO I 352). Evidently, Kierkegaard intended this: in a draft of “The Seducer’s Diary” he wrote in the margin: “[T]here is this vampirishness about him [The Seducer]. Just as the shades in the underworld sucked the blood out of the real human beings and lived so long, thus did he” (SKP3: 136).[[163]](#footnote-163) Hence, the aesthete “dwells in *splendid and terrible isolation* in a phantom realm behind the real world” (Mackey, 1964: 50).[[164]](#footnote-164) Kierkegaard’s depiction of the aesthete as such a fantastical figure is an attempt to show the empty and meaningless type of individualistic life the aesthetic sphere occupies, and the complete failure of the selfhood that such an individual develops. Thus, where Judge William is concerned – in his attempt to get the aesthete to, in effect, join the society of the living – he would no doubt agree with Bradley that “[t]he mere individual is a delusion of theory; and the attempt to realise it in practice is the starvation and mutilation of human nature, with total sterility or the production of monstrosities” (Bradley, 2012: 158). This is perhaps why the Judge links the need to work to cares about the necessities of life, our *Næringssorger*; for Judge William, there is something inhuman about those who do not work, who idle on the edge of society and refuse to answer their calling, just as there is something equally inhuman about those who, like the ghost, have no need to eat.

Let us expand a little on Bradley’s essay and its relation to Judge William’s position on vocation. In “My Station and Its Duties”, Bradley asserts that:

The narrow external function of the man is not the whole man. He has a life which we cannot see with our eyes; and there is no duty so mean that it is not the realisation of this, and knowable as such. What counts is not the visible outer work so much as the spirit in which it is done. The breadth of my life is not measured by the multitude of my pursuits, nor the space I take up amongst other men; but by the fullness of the whole life which I know as mine. It is true that less now depends on each of us, as this or that man; it is not true that our individuality is therefore lessened, that therefore we have less in us (Bradley, 2012: 171).

What Bradley describes is the person in their station; for Bradley, the individual retains their individuality despite the fact that the significance of their life and work is part of a greater whole. For Bradley, and to an extent Judge William, the inner life (in contrast to the “visible outer work”) refers not to any inner passion, or motivation. It is not the inwardness of Kierkegaard, an inexpressible inner life, but rather the way in which the individual recognises the significance of their work in relation to the whole; the whole being the society, or community, in which the individual lives. For the aesthete, this partaking in the whole was to become a “tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic” (EO I 298); and yet, for both Judge William and Bradley, the aesthete’s concern is misguided. To become a cog in the machine seems to suggest that one is insignificant, replaceable, and the same as everyone else. However, the point that Judge William, and especially Bradley, are making, is that in participating within the whole, one becomes part of something greater: less a cog in a machine, and more a specific part of an *organism*. In this way one sees the specialised role one plays as significant, irreplaceable, and distinct. For instance, the eyes of an organism are particular components that are specialised for a certain role within the organism, and by extension, gain their significance precisely from their involvement with the organism. In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues – quoting Goethe – that in order to achieve great things the individual “must be able to limit himself […] however painful the process may be” (Hegel, PR §13). It is essentially this *limitation* that Bradley argues for here; that is *a limitation which delimits.*

However, as we will see, for Kierkegaard, there must be something more in the individual than the acceptance of their place in the whole – in which they recognise the importance of their work. As George Pattison has argued, the traditional Lutheran notion of calling espoused by Judge William is “unusual in Kierkegaard’s authorship”, and in many ways Judge William is “overly optimisti[c] that fulfilling the demands of one’s station or work is not just a matter of personal obedience but is also an eminent way in which to find personal fulfilment” (Pattison, 2019: 32). As we will see, for Kierkegaard, the individual needs the inner passion, or inwardness, of the God-relation to truly thrive as an individual. For Kierkegaard, then, to merely – perhaps unquestioningly – accept one’s place, one’s station, is not enough; and as we will see in some cases might be akin to failing to answer one’s calling. There is an extent to which Judge William recognises this, and Kierkegaard’s allusion to the religious in the form of the pastor’s letter at the end of *Either/Or Volume II* is perhaps testament to it. However, Judge William himself never seems to take the religious sufficiently seriously and retains the priority and dominance of the ethical. For Kierkegaard one consequence of this, as we will see, is that for the individual to commit themselves to their vocation might mean that they must reject their station and its duties.

#### Task

The final aspect that Judge William considers to be key to an ethical life, and to one’s vocation, is that what one can accomplish in life is one’s “task”. The ethicist writes: “What every human being accomplishes and can accomplish is that he can do *his* task (*Gjerning*) in life” (EO II 295/SV II 264). It is important to note the religious connotations of the term *Gjerning*: that is, that *Gjerning* is the Danish term for “works”, as in the work that the Christian is meant to commit themselves to in a life following Jesus Christ. Works signify one’s good deeds and doings. Further, then, the term ‘Gjerning’ also signifies a more common “deed” or “act” in Danish, though there has been some debate about how precisely Kierkegaard intends to use the term. For instance, in *Works of Love* – or *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* – Kierkegaard uses the same term. Elsebet Jegstrup (2001: 131fn28) has suggested that the root of this word is the verb *at gave*, to give, or *gift*. This is interesting for our present concern when we consider that the Danish for task can also be translated “*opgave*”; thus, perhaps Kierkegaard – through Judge William’s statement that what one can accomplish in life is one’s task – is highlighting that it is one’s God*-given task*. However, whilst this observation may be correct, the etymological derivation is not. Evidence from Niels Åge Nielsen (1966: 129), and reiterated by William McDonald (2003) rejects Jegstrup’s claim, and shows that *Gjerning* instead “derives from the Old Norse *gørning*”, i.e. “deed” (2003: 92fn1). In this case, what one accomplishes is still a *task*, though it loses the potential double-meaning of (God-given) gift and task. That said, there is no reason to assume that Kierkegaard does not intend one’s task (*Gjerning*) to be thematically related to one’s God-given task, it is just that in this instance, there is no etymological connection between the *giving* of a task, and the *task* itself. Kierkegaard elsewhere (e.g. *UDVS*) uses the term *Gjerning* to signal one’s occupation. Hence, the term *Gjerning*, used here by Judge William, is also – in my view – best rendered as *occupation*. In other words, the claim that the Judge is making is that a person can accomplish their occupation; and that it is their occupation alone that is to be accomplished. In doing so, one *works* in one’s *occupation* as one’s *calling*. This is what vocation means for Judge William.

Judge William continues that “[t]he phrase ‘to accomplish’” signifies a relation between my action and something else that lies outside me” (EO II 295). An individual’s accomplishments, for instance the accomplishment of their task – or the *doing* of their occupation – is not defined by the individual’s talents and capacities: “the most talented person can complete his task, and so can the humblest of men” (EO II 295). This correlates with the Hegelian structuring of society that Judge William endorses; one is specialised in a task which is beneficial for the smooth running of society, and the expansion of freedom that this entails. Furthermore, the completing of a person’s task is outside of their immediate control. Thus, the accomplishments of the individual’s task in life is something that transcends the individual and their own aims, and understanding of their own task: “What I accomplish accompanies my work as my good fortune; I certainly dare to rejoice in it but do not dare attribute it entirely to myself” (EO II 295). That said, the individual is able to affect the completing of their task in the negative sense, that is “in their power to prevent themselves from doing so” (EO II 295). As we will see in the next section, this is similar to the way in which Kierkegaard envisions self-distraction and deception – including meaningless busyness – as preventative *occupations* from engaging with one’s *vocation*.

What is this task? The task that one needs to accomplish in life varies from individual to individual: “The task can be very different, but this always is to be maintained, that every human being has his task, and thus all are reconciled in the expression that each of them is doing his task” (EO II 296). Further, unlike the aesthete who in discovering something that they excel in – say, seduction – pursues this activity with the “selfish” aim of perfecting it until he becomes bored by it and moves on to something else, the ethical individual through the accomplishing of, and striving towards their task aims higher than the mere “selfish definition of the talent” (EO II 296) espoused by the aesthete. Judge William moves on to assert that “[t]o accomplish” – that is, the relation between one’s action and the external, social and ethical world – “is identical with carrying out one’s task” (EO II 296). This places the Judge’s view of a task, or occupation, firmly within the ethical world; for identifying the accomplishing (of the task) with one’s task itself “implies an acknowledgement of [one’s] own insignificance and a respect for the significance of every other person” (EO II 295). It does not matter how well I do my duty; the important thing for the ethicist concerning one’s calling, is that I do it anyway.

#### Summary

For Judge William, then, the basic structure of his view on vocation is as follows. (1) Firstly, **work** arises as a necessity in our own struggle against nature; we work to fulfil our most basic needs. However, as societies evolve and advance, work increases in sophistication. In societies, and ethical life, where once we worked a multitude of roles to stay alive, we now find ourselves with a specific station, or occupation in life. In this way we free ourselves from nature’s necessities. Yet, as we will see, this is not satisfactory for Kierkegaard himself. Whilst we free ourselves from nature, we still struggle against our own nature. Consider the aesthete who – as we saw in Chapter 3 – in fleeing work and the basic struggles for necessity finds a new struggle in his search for diversity. Kierkegaard calls the aesthete’s method of avoiding boredom “crop rotation” – the struggle is the same, the aesthete has merely found new crops to rotate. (2) Then, for Judge William a **calling** arises because we are specialised in our work; we now have our place in society, and our specialised labour makes us part of a greater whole. For Judge William, there is some satisfaction in this for the individual when we find our place in the world. As we saw, Bradley argued similarly that this partaking in the whole does not lessen the individual, and if anything, it has the potential to impact the individual positively. However, as we saw, some commentators such as Pattison consider the Judge to be overly optimistic about the *value and fulfilment* the individual’s societal role can bring to the individual. (3) Finally, Judge William links the notion of calling to that of a “task”; that is the way that one’s individual calling to do something relates to oneself. One has no requirement for any special talent, and one’s task varies from individual to individual. From their task an individual gains a sense of personal fulfilment but at the same time a wider acknowledgement of their place within the social whole. In an ideal world perhaps Judge William (and Bradley) are correct; the individual may be satisfied in fulfilling their role in the social whole. However, for Kierkegaard, who foresaw the potential dangers of an alienated individual within the emerging consumer capitalist society, the Judge’s view is inadequate. In the Judge’s allusion to one’s vocation as a task we see the pull, and perhaps the necessity, of the religious – wherein this task is *given* to us by a higher power; wherein we are (in a very literal sense) *called*.

### “S. Kierkegaard”: From Doing to Being[[165]](#footnote-165)

In the previous chapter we observed how “S. Kierkegaard” was concerned with the single individual, whose purity of heart is to will one thing. We considered the way in which various “attitudinal modalities” prevented the individual from willing one thing. These were understood to be kinds of double-mindedness, wherein the individual willed the good for some other reason, such as (i) reward, (ii) fear of punishment, (iii) individual victory, and as (iv) one thing among many. The latter of these, and indeed, the most common form of double-mindedness, consisted in willing the good only to a certain degree, and instead dedicating one’s efforts to the pursuit of multiplicity. This was specifically linked, by Kierkegaard, to busyness. I argued that what Kierkegaard recommends to combat this busyness is a radical halt wherein the individual adopts a stance of restlessness and, in doing so, is able to redirect themselves towards willing one thing.

In “An Occasional Discourse”, Kierkegaard is equally concerned with the notion of vocation, and indeed “vocation”, or “calling” expressed by Kierkegaard as the Danish *Kald*, is one of the major themes of the work (Bertman, 1972: 306). As noted in the introduction to the present chapter, it is Kierkegaard’s intention in “An Occasional Discourse” to present an account of vocation that “explores the ways in which individuals deceive themselves into thinking they are in their calling” (Nelson, 2005: 85). Crucially, whilst the first two sections of “An Occasional Discourse” discussed in the previous chapter concerned the ideality, or theory, of purity of heart, the third and final section that I will discuss here, is “the concretisation of the ideality of purity of heart in the life of the individual” (Nelson, 2005: 94). In other words, in Kierkegaard’s discussion of vocation, he attempts to “put into practice”, as it were, the at times abstract discussion of purity of heart. Here, then, I will explore Kierkegaard’s account of vocation in the upbuilding discourse.

#### Occupation

“An Occasional Discourse” poses many questions to its reader. The “main question” the text asks is: “Are you living in such a way that you are conscious of being a single individual?” (UDVS 137). As Nelson argues, this question “can hardly be overestimated” (2005: 95). For indeed, it is this question that Kierkegaard considers to be the “one thing needful” (UDVS 137), that is: the one thing required by the individual in order to will one thing. This main question then invites a series of further questions to the reader, about what it means to be a single individual – the crux of the Kierkegaardian project – aptly summarised by Clare Carlisle as: “how to be a human being in the world” (Carlisle, 2019: xiii). The first question asks:

What is your occupation [*Gjerning*] in life? (UDVS 137 / SV VIII 228).

Remember that for Judge William everyone *should* have an occupation, or calling – and this, is the individual’s task in life; as noted, the term the Judge uses is *Gjerning*. Here again, Kierkegaard uses the same term *Gjerning*. Yet, this time Kierkegaard is not, like Judge William, concerned with *what* the individual’s occupation is in terms of the “educative and ennobling” (EO II 283) official post that they take up within *Sittlichkeit*; though this may in some cases be one’s occupation. No, for Kierkegaard in “An Occasional Discourse”, the concern is with *how* the individual *occupies their time*. The individual’s occupation for Kierkegaard, then, is the way the individual occupies their time – rather than merely their formal occupation. As Nelson argues, the “assumption implicit in this question is not that everyone *ought* to have an occupation” *à la* Judge William, but rather “that everyone *has* an occupation” (Nelson, 2005: 95).[[166]](#footnote-166) Everyone occupies their time with something: the aesthete occupies their time with their busy search for the diverse and interesting, whilst the ethicist occupies their time with their station’s duties. Under the Judge’s view, only the latter could be considered one’s occupation; yet for Kierkegaard in “An Occasional Discourse”, both fall under the heading, occupation: both pursuits occupy the individuals’ time. Yet, crucially, both occupations are not necessarily vocations.

This is significant not only because it broadens the Kierkegaardian conception of occupation, in contrast to vocation, to include matters that one would not ordinarily think of as suited to an occupation, for instance The Seducer’s seduction; but also importantly because it *links occupation intimately with* *busyness*. One of the crucial characteristics of busyness for Kierkegaard, as we have seen, is that it is fundamentally a waste of one’s time (see UDVS 137/ WL 23/ LD 280-1). Hence, it should come as no surprise that there are for Kierkegaard many ways in which one’s occupation can amount to no more than a waste of one’s time. As we will see, for Kierkegaard if one’s occupation is not one’s vocation, or at the very least in support of one’s vocation, then it is a waste of one’s time. Essentially, this implies that the tasks that amount to an occupation could – if not actively in support of one’s vocation – be mere busyness; precisely a waste of one’s time.

The question raised then is whether the activities with which “one occupies their time [are] commensurate with willing the good in truth” (Nelson, 2005: 95), that is, commensurate with *willing one thing*, instead of willing multiplicity, and falling into busyness. In order to answer this, Kierkegaard moves on to the further question:

In the course of your occupation [*Gjerning*], what is your frame of mind, how do you perform your work [*Gjerning*]? (UDVS 139 / SV VIII 229).

Here, Kierkegaard is not discussing work in the same sense that Judge William does above. For instance, it is not the performance of one’s official post that concerns Kierkegaard, that is, it is not an issue regarding whether or not a person is particularly good at their job, or fulfils their duties appropriately. Instead, the question could be read as: “during what occupies your time, what is your frame of mind, how do you perform what occupies you?”. Thus, this shifts the focus of the question from being interpreted as regarding, say, one’s performance at work to a more penetrating question about *how* one engages with whatever occupies one’s time. To put it another way, Kierkegaard’s question about how the individual performs their occupation goes beyond Judge William’s narrow conception of occupation as a necessary societal obligation, and moves the concept to a deeply personal question regarding the way that the individual occupies theirtime in all of their endeavours, and most crucially, their vocation – which is of course the *telos* of all one’s actions. Furthermore, when one considers, as mentioned above, that it is *busyness* that wastes one’s time, it should come as no surprise that busyness finds itself in stark confrontation with vocation.

#### Vocation

Introducing the concept of vocation in relation to one’s occupation, Kierkegaard presents a straightforward either/or:

Are you convinced that your occupation [*Gjerning*] is your calling [*Kald*] so that you do not reinterpret it according to the results and think that it is not still your calling [*Kald*] if the results are unfavourable and your efforts do not succeed? […] Or, have you allowed yourself to be deceived into regarding something as your calling [*Kald*] because the results were favourable, because it was an immediate success, perhaps even an extraordinary success? (UDVS 139 / SV VIII 229).

Hence, for Kierkegaard, the individual (1) *either* believes that they are in their calling, *despite* the unfavourable results of their occupation; consider a chef who is not very good at cooking, yet in spite of this believes that it is what they are supposed to be doing, (2) *or* the individual believes that they are in their calling *because* of the favourable results of their occupation; consider a footballer who consistently scores goals for their team. Kierkegaard argues against the *favourable* result as an indication of whether or not one’s occupation *is* one’s calling, and at the same time affirms that one’s *unfavourable* results also cannot prove that one *is* *not* in one’s calling: “an unfavourable result can no more refute the believer’s conviction that he is in his calling than a propitious result can summarily demonstrate that one is in one’s calling” (UDVS 139). In other words, one’s vocation cannot be determined, nor refuted, by the outcome of one’s occupation. So, how does an individual know when they are in their calling, and not just wasting their time with busyness, if for Kierkegaard the *results* are an unsatisfactory criterion?

In his study on Kierkegaard and vocation, Nelson suggests that whilst it is not clear – at this point in the upbuilding discourse, at least – exactly how the individual knows whether they are in their calling or not, it is obvious how the “the fact of having a vocation functions”, that is: “as the justification of a given occupation” (Nelson, 2005: 96). In other words, to continue in one’s occupation for Kierkegaard one must justify it as one’s vocation; for, if it is not one’s vocation, then one should not be doing it. To put it another way, *if* an individual is not following their vocation, *then* they are necessarily deceived. Recall Kierkegaard’s question about the state of the individual’s mind during their occupation. If they are double-minded – that is, consumed by busyness – then they are not in a position to answer their calling, and commit themselves to their vocation. This raises concerns not so much about *what* it is that one should be doing but rather, as I alluded to above, about *how* one’s occupation – as vocation – relates to *oneself*, and one’s wider concern with one’s own selfhood. For instance, Robert Merrihew Adams argues that for Kierkegaard, vocation is more closely related to selfhood than it is to what exactly one *does* in life. He states: “Kierkegaard sees vocation first and foremost as a vocation to be a certain kind of person – and, in the closest connection with that, to pursue certain projects which, in his view, are partially constitutive of selfhood” (Adams, 1987: 454). Thus, for Kierkegaard, a kind of striving attitude is a necessary feature of one’s vocation.

Indeed, in the upbuilding discourse, Kierkegaard emphasises the role of striving for the individual’s vocation. In discussing the distinction between the means and the end, Kierkegaard argues that to the “temporal and earthly passion”, i.e. the individual who busily occupies himself with many things, “the end is unconditionally more important than the means” (UDVS 142). That is, for the earthly individual, i.e. the busy person, it does not matter how they achieve their goal, or fulfil their vocation, as long as they achieve it in the end. A similar sentiment is expressed in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, another of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses, wherein he writes “with incidental work, which is in the external, it is essential that the work be finished” (TDIO 96). Yet, this is to the busy person’s “torment, which at its highest presumably might make a person insomniac and then mad: that he does not have time under his control, that he always can come too late, even if it were only half an hour” (UDVS 142). In other words, the busy person’s work will never be done if they are always focused on the end, for in the temporal world, the end never comes, there is always more to be accomplished; as Kierkegaard states in *Works of Love*: “the busy people sow and harvest and again sow and harvest (busyness harvests over and over again)” (WL 247). This has the, rather ironic, implication that for the busy person “it is not wisdom that saves [him] from becoming mad but sluggishness” (UDVS 142). Here, Kierkegaard interjects that it is the eternal “which is like a rest, like ‘the cold snow in the time of harvest’” (UDVS 142) that creates an equality between the means and the end, and makes the individual’s striving, i.e. the means, “unconditionally just as important as the end” (UDVS 142). Whilst this view might “seem shocking and procrastinating” to the “earthly and secular passion” (UDVS 142), Kierkegaard asks his reader whether “as you do your work” (UDVS 142) are the means equally important as the end? In other words, is the individual’s striving towards – and their development of selfhood – as important, as the end goal itself; as Kierkegaard asserts in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, “the essential work is not defined essentially by time and the external” but rather by “[…] the choosing of work that does not depend on whether one is granted a lifetime to complete it well or only a brief time to have begun it well” (TDIO 96). What matters is the *process*, not the end goal: for unlike the busy person “the person who truly wills the good […] does not [necessarily] see even the smallest fruit of his labours” (WL 247).

We saw in the previous chapter the ways in which an individual deceives themselves from willing the good: notably through wanting reward, avoiding punishment, desiring victory for themselves, and through committing to projects only to a certain degree. The latter of these deceptions was our focus, for it was in this way that the individual avoids willing the good, through their subsummation in busyness. Hence, it should be no surprise, as Adams claims, that “one gives oneself a vocation by choosing a project and committing oneself to it” (Adams, 1987: 456). Busyness, as the engagement in multiplicity, the focus on the ends alone, and the half-baked commitment “to a certain degree”, is precisely the antithesis to vocation. For Kierkegaard, when one occupies one’s time with multiplicity, one can only ever commit to one’s projects to a certain degree and in doing so fails to find the focus, or indeed passionate commitment necessary to one’s given vocation; one fails to answer the call of vocation.

And yet, it is worse than that – because for Kierkegaard the self is intricately linked to one’s vocation, and so if a person fails in their vocation, and instead occupies their time with busyness, they also ultimately fail to develop a self.

#### The Task of Selfhood

In one of his many letters to one of his many relatives, Kierkegaard writes about busyness, and warns his young second cousin, Hans Peter Christian, that he has nothing to lose by being unable to partake in the busyness of the age. Kierkegaard describes the “busy, busier, busiest haste of busy-ness” as an activity concerned only with being “busy with wasting life and losing oneself” (LD 280-1), directly connecting society’s inclination towards busyness with a detrimental effect on the development and cultivation of the self. Instead, he recommends to his cousin that a life “lived in inwardness, [has] just as much meaning and worth as that of any other human being in the loving eyes of an all-wise Governance” (LD 280-1). What is crucial it seems, is not so much what one *does* – in this case be occupied by busyness – but rather what one *is*. Let us explore this idea further.

In Adams’ paper on vocation, he introduces the idea of “situational determinacy”. That is, that there are some cases in which one’s vocation might be situationally determined, and there are some cases in which it is not. Interestingly, this distinction maps rather neatly onto the diverging ways that Kierkegaard and Judge William view vocation, and it is therefore helpful for considering the way Kierkegaard specifically views vocation in relation to selfhood.

For Judge William, we have seen that one’s vocation is *situationally determined*: “that something is morally my task or your task or some other individual’s task” (Adams, 1987: 451). For Judge William one’s vocation is determined by one’s specific station and its subsequent duties in life. As we have seen this might first consist in the very nature of the human condition, and then later, in whatever specified role one occupies in society. For Kierkegaard, however, one’s vocation is *not situationally determined*. Instead, Adams notes, “[i]f I have a vocation, [for Kierkegaard] then that must be something that involves a divine command that adds to the stock of ethical principles, so to speak, something that is *irreducibly about me as an individual*” (Adams, 1987: 450).[[167]](#footnote-167) Thus, for Kierkegaard, *one’s vocation says more about the individual, than it does about what the individual does*, forever leaving open the possibility that the individual is not determined by their situation. This is part of why Kierkegaard’s advice to his young cousin is so enlightening; Kierkegaard’s cousin was physically disabled, and thus, according to Kierkegaard, was unable to partake in the busyness of the age (LD 280-1). Yet, for Kierkegaard this is not important, precisely because one’s vocation – intimately connected to the meaningfulness of one’s life and where one finds one’s purpose (see Puchniak, 2016: 145) – is not situationally determined. As Adams explains:

If my vocation is connected […] with my selfhood, it is not attached solely or even primarily to “my station and its duties.” One should not see one’s vocation as simply arising from the circumstances in which one happens to be born, or from the gainful employment one has undertaken, or from one’s parents’ (or other people’s) expectation (Adams, 1987: 455).

Consider how in Kierkegaard’s own internal debates about what he was to do in life, the prospect of becoming a pastor was unsatisfactory not because of what it would make Kierkegaard *do*, but rather because it would make Kierkegaard, in his own words “something other than I am” (KJN NB 107); that is, Kierkegaard would *become* someone he did not believe it his vocation *to be.* As Pattison states: “Being called by God and being true to oneself seem, however painfully, to blend into one” (2019: 39).

At this point, Kierkegaard’s conception of vocation seems to align fairly closely to modern sensibilities about how a person chooses what it is they want to do in life. We are – largely – no longer born into certain stations, or roles, and instead choose our own direction in life, and in doing so affirm something about ourselves, and who we want to be.[[168]](#footnote-168) Certainly, Kierkegaard’s own age, which he called “an age of reflection” was one “in which identity was not determined by the place assigned by birth in a fixed social order but achieved through individual creative effort and individual decisions” (Pattison, 2019: 37). Yet, this interpretation of Kierkegaard’s concept of vocation risks making the concept somewhat arbitrary. If my vocation is merely what I choose to do, as a way to develop myself or become myself, then it risks becoming, as Nelson states “a readily available *ad hoc* rationalisation for any given matter of conduct” (Nelson, 2005: 100). “It is my vocation because I say so” seems to be a rather weak criterion for justifying one’s vocation, and is ethically suspect; one could justify all manner of horrors in this way. Indeed, Kierkegaard explores this issue in *The Book on Adler,* wherein he worries about the “vacillating” individual who might wish to “serve two masters”, i.e. both (1) “what the times demand”, through (2) the guise of serving God (BOA 24-5). This weakness might lend credence to Judge William’s rather more strict criteria for what one’s vocation *should* be: i.e. the commitment to one’s station within society, for it avoids the risk of an *ad hoc* justification for one’s vocation. Thus, Nelson suggests that one way to avoid this issue entirely is to emphasise the necessary condition of Kierkegaard’s concept of vocation that it “must consist in drawing individuals toward a way of being that is […] repulsive” (Nelson, 2005: 100-1). Hence, there are two further facets of Kierkegaard’s concept of vocation worth highlighting in order to mitigate this apparent shortfall: (1) that it is not only a call to be oneself but also a call to *suffering*, and (2) that when deciding on a vocation one accepts an element of *risk*.

(1) **Suffering.** The first criterion, of suffering, is one way that we might avoid seeing Kierkegaard’s concept of vocation as an *ad hoc* rationalisation or justification of one’s actions. Suffering is a theme repeatedly discussed in “An Occasional Discourse”, and in continuing his line of questioning, Kierkegaard states: “And now a question concerning the *one who is suffering*” (UDVS 145). What is the question? The question asks whether the individual, in suffering, still wills the good in truth. Crucially, Kierkegaard suggests that suffering is an essential part of willing one thing in truth: “You know, if you will only one thing so that you alone will be free from the suffering, then you do not will one thing in truth” (UDVS 146). In other words, if someone pursues a task that does not cause them suffering in some way, then for Kierkegaard it seems, it cannot be their calling.[[169]](#footnote-169) One’s calling, or vocation, requires suffering. As Nelson emphasises, “[h]uman beings do not require a ‘calling’ to pursue reward, flee punishment, or act selfishly, or commit to a certain degree” (2005: 101); no, a calling is that for which the individual suffers. And yet, that is also not to suggest that because one suffers, they must be in their calling; suffering alone is *not sufficient*. In fact, earlier in the text Kierkegaard distinguishes between *suffering* and *acting*, and warns against a factitious display of suffering for some external endeavour. Instead, the person who truly suffers is acting in an *eternal* sense, whist the *external* display of suffering is merely an act. Indeed, for Kierkegaard the person who suffers and whom from the point of view of others suffers for seemingly no reason and “seems to be wasting his time […] must bear the severe judgment of arrogance and busyness and obtuseness” (UDVS 80). This point is echoed in Kierkegaard’s *Journals*, where he writes:

Humanly speaking, there is something pleasant about having secure employment, comfort; there is something agreeable about working for a living. – And then there are only two classes of people who come together in the opposite kind of life. Wrecked subjects, fallen persons – and those who seriously and truly live for an idea. Ah, and in the eyes of the world, it’s far too easy to confuse the two (KJN NB11: 20).

For precisely the one who suffers (for his vocation) is ridiculed by others, who “cannot understand him” (UDVS 80). And yet, ironically it is suffering itself – and as we have seen the commitment to a vocation or calling (now verified by one’s suffering for it) – that is the antidote to busyness: *“there is no remedy more beneficial against the pernicious sickness of busyness than to consider properly the hard fate of those who suffer essentially*” (UDVS 104). Those who suffer *essentially*, of whom suffering is a necessary feature of their being, are of course those individuals who have found their calling.

Later in the discourse, Kierkegaard discusses the *need for suffering* – as part of the courage it takes to commit to one’s calling. The issue he deals with is whether or not the individual wills – in willing the good in truth – to suffer. The individual who in his striving for his calling must “exert himself as strenuously as any dutiful worker, expose himself to many sufferings, choose the laborious path of a higher calling” is, as we have seen, regarded by others as “either as stupid or as crazy” (UDVS 117). But this suffering for Kierkegaard, rather than following “where pleasure beckons” is precisely courage: “does not showing courage [*Mod]* require instead that there be resistance [*Modstand*]” (UDVS 118). Courage to commit and stay committed to one’s “higher calling” is for Kierkegaard to freely will suffering. Thus, we return to the question above, i.e. *the question concerning the one who is suffering*, which according to Nelson, is: “Is your suffering such that it can lead you to forsake your ‘calling’ – or is your suffering not rather that in which it becomes most painfully clear that you are in your calling?” (Nelson, 2005: 100).

Indeed, for Kierkegaard it is the latter, wherein “suffering becomes […] a necessary condition for being justifiably convinced that one is in one’s calling” (Nelson, 2005: 100). Anything else that does not require that one suffers in some way, Nelson suggests, is “naught but the manifestation of that marvellous capacity for clever evasion endemic to the human spirit” (UDVS 101). Certainly, busyness as we have seen is one such evasion from one’s calling, wherein:

The busy ones, who neither labour nor are burdened but are only busy, presumably think that they themselves have escaped if they themselves have avoided suffering in life; therefore they do not wish to be disturbed by hearing about or thinking about terrible things. They have indeed escaped, they have also escaped having a view of life and have escaped into meaninglessness (UDVS 106-7).

Remember that for Kierkegaard, one’s calling, or vocation “connotes meaning with regard to a person’s very life” and the “need to dedicate one’s life to some duty of purpose” (Puchniak, 2016: 145). The busy people, in evading the suffering necessary to their calling, have fallen into a life of meaninglessness; without a life view, without a calling, and without purpose. And yet conversely, to commit to one’s calling – and avoid busyness – is, as the necessary suffering would suggest, to accept an element of necessary permanent risk. A person can never be sure that the call they have answered, and the life view they express, is the right one; and, a person can never be sure that their suffering is therefore not in vain.

(2) **Risk.** One’s vocation always contains a necessary element of risk. As Nancy V. Standley states, “the man with a vocation finds himself in a state of permanent risk” (Standley, 1971: 2). This is because, for Kierkegaard “[t]here is no ready method or line of reasoning that can help him [choose a vocation]. He bases his actions on something, both within himself, and without, that may remain a mystery to him” (1971: 2). Alluding to Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and the notion of *objective uncertainty*, Denis de Rougemont calls this element of risk in choosing a vocation, an “objective uncertainty […] insofar as the object of the conviction one entertains is not demonstrable, insofar as the ‘stake’ of the vocation can still be challenged or even denied, and may, after all, turn out to be purely imaginary” (de Rougemont, 1955, cited in: Standley, 1971: 2). Hence, the risk endemic to one’s choice of vocation means that one’s vocation always remains, potentially, the wrong choice; and the individual cannot know with certainty – at any point along the course of their commitment to their vocation – whether the choice they have made is the right one.[[170]](#footnote-170) All they have is faith that they are in their calling.

In “An Occasional Discourse”, in a discussion of sagacity, i.e. evasion, Kierkegaard states that the double-minded individual, that is the individual *occupied with busyness*, and therefore too busy to answer the call of their vocation, “do[es] not have the strength to risk everything” (UDVS 84). For Kierkegaard, if a person is to adopt faith, and commit to a calling, then they must risk everything – they must risk the possibility that they are wrong. In *Postscript*, writing as Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard states: “Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty” (CUP 204). In other words, in my choosing of a vocation, the objective uncertainty (in this case my choice of vocation) is appropriated by myself through faith; faith being the synthesis of passion, subjectivity, risk, and commitment: “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person. […] But the definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith” (CUP 203-4). If I have this (faith), then I can commit to a vocation.

So, what does it mean then to commit to a vocation for Kierkegaard? I think in this instance it is helpful to turn to another one of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses, and specifically “At A Graveside” published in 1845. In this text, Kierkegaard reflects – and urges his reader to reflect – earnestly on death. This reflection on our immanent death, and the shortage of time (*dyrtid*) that we have, allows the individual to focus earnestly on their goals and tasks – and importantly, about how they conduct the process rather than whether they achieve the outcome. As Gordon Marino states: “In Kierkegaard’s writings, time is often presented as the enemy, and earnest reflection can help us to dispel the illusion that we have days and weeks to waste, that we can put off getting serious about life. […] Kierkegaard believes that anyone who properly understands that observation will eschew both recklessness and frivolousness” (Marino, 2011: 154). I think this is a fruitful way to think about how pursuing a vocation functions for Kierkegaard. Towards the end of “An Occasional Discourse”, Kierkegaard alludes to the notion of vocation, and contrasts it with busyness, stating:

You are not asked to withdraw from life, from an honourable occupation [*Gjerning*], from a happy domestic life – on the contrary, that awareness [of being a single individual, with responsibility before God, with faith] will support and transfigure and illuminate your conduct in the relationships of life (UDVS 137 / SV VIII 228).

You will find more and more time for your duties and your tasks [*Opgaver*], while concern for your eternal responsibility will keep you from being busy [*travl*] and from busily [*travlt*] taking part in everything possible – an activity that can best be called a waste of time (UDVS 137 / SV VIII 228).

For Kierkegaard, one’s commitment to a vocation is a way that one avoids becoming busy; it is a kind of hyper-focus on one’s life’s task. One commits to some single task with passionate inwardness, though always with risk, and not without suffering. Through faith, a person commits to their vocation, and in this way avoids wasting their time in busyness.

### Anti-Climacus: “Come Here, All Who Travail and Are Burdened”

Unlike both Judge William, and S. Kierkegaard, Anti-Climacus moves the concept of vocation in a firmly religious – explicitly Christian – direction; for, in both *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus attempts to return to the original notion of vocation, as *calling*; that is, the call of Christ to “Come here, all you who travail and are burdened” (*Matthew* 11:28-30).[[171]](#footnote-171) If one sees Judge William as emphasising the *importance of the social role* in one’s calling, and S. Kierkegaard as emphasising the *importance of choice and its inherent risk* in one’s vocation, then Anti-Climacus goes one step further, and emphasises the *necessarily religious element* to the notion of calling. In other words, if the focus for Judge William and S. Kierkegaard is on the one *called*, then for Anti-Climacus the focus is on the One *calling*. As Elizabeth Li highlights, Kierkegaard wrote both *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity* under “the pseudonym of Anti-Climacus […] to express the strictness and demands of Christianity that Kierkegaard himself did not feel he lived up to” (Li, 2018: 106). And whilst, Anti-Climacus “strongly emphasises following Christ as the proper calling of all Christians”, he is aware that “the task itself reveals human beings’ inability to fulfil this task and directs them towards their need for grace” (Li, 2018: 112). Thus, unlike both Judge William and S. Kierkegaard, the emphasis is not on the *works* of the individual called, but rather on the saving *grace* of the one calling. That is not to say that the work loses its importance, but rather that the emphasis is shifted in relation to one’s vocation onto the one doing the calling: Jesus Christ. In order to consider the way that Anti-Climacus conceptualises the notion of vocation, I will explore how this concept presents itself firstly in *The Sickness Unto Death*, and finally in *Practice in Christianity*.

#### Calling in *The Sickness Unto Death*

Vocation, or calling (*Kald*) is directly mentioned a mere seven times in *The Sickness Unto Death*, on just one page of a work of some one-hundred pages. Despite this, it is a concept that greatly concerns the pseudonymous author. In the brief, yet direct, mention of “calling”, Anti-Climacus speaks of the way that a “call” has been denigrated:

In a little country, scarcely three poets are born in any one generation, but there are plenty of clergymen, many more than can obtain appointments. A poet is said to have a call [*Kald*], but in the opinion of most people (consequently of most Christians) passing an examination is sufficient qualification to become a pastor. And yet a true pastor is even more rare than a true poet; indeed, the word “call” [*Kald*] originally belonged to the religious life. But in Christendom there is still a remnant of the notion that being a poet is something and that there is something to its being a call [*Kald*]. However, in the eyes of most people (consequently of most Christians) being a pastor has been deserted by every elevating conception; it is, *in puris naturalibus* [without circumlocution], a way of making a living, devoid of the slightest mystery. “Call” [*Kald*] signifies an official appointment; the expression “to receive a call” [*at faae et* *Kald*] is used, but “to have a call” [*at have et Kald*] – well, that is used, too, about someone who has a call [*Kald*] to give away (SUD 102).

A vocation or “calling”, the Christian author suggests, has become – at least in the eyes of Denmark’s inhabitants – something that signifies only a way of “making a living” (SUD 102).[[172]](#footnote-172) In his analysis of Kierkegaard’s concept of vocation, Nelson argues that Anti-Climacus is concerned with “the cleavage of sense endemic to the concept of vocation” (Nelson, 2005: 105). Put in less cumbersome terms, Anti-Climacus is suggesting in the above that the meaning of vocation has been secularised, and that its original meaning – that of a religious calling – has been lost. As Nelson argues, for Anti-Climacus the notion of calling has come to be used in a merely secular way, in which having or receiving a call “amounts to nothing more than passing some ‘examination’ or other – as, e.g. a vocational aptitude test” (Nelson, 2005: 104). Furthermore, in the eyes of Denmark’s inhabitants – those of whom make up what Anti-Climacus pejoratively refers to as *Christendom* – a poet can be said to have a calling, even though a pastor – whom traditionally would have been the one considered to have a calling – cannot.[[173]](#footnote-173) And yet, it seems that Anti-Climacus goes one step further in insinuating that a pastor with a calling is even rarer than a poet with a calling in the age in which he is writing; it is, one might argue, an indication of the fundamentally aesthetic character of the age. For, it is possible that what Anti-Climacus is asserting here is that in the “present age”, one would consider a poet to have a call, more so than a pastor – despite the original use of the term “call” as heralding a call to ecclesiastical appointment.

Let us take a step back for a moment and remind ourselves of Anti-Climacus’s – or more appropriately, Kierkegaard’s – aims in *The Sickness Unto Death*. For Anti-Climacus’s discussion of “calling” takes place a fair way into the text, and there is much leading up to it; crucially, Anti-Climacus’s brief discussion of a “call” does not appear out of nowhere, and is arrived at after a thorough consideration of the despair caused by a refusal to be oneself. Thus, in order to understand why it is that Anti-Climacus is concerned with the loss of meaning undergone by the concept of “calling”, it is necessary to situate his concerns within the wider framework of his project in *The Sickness Unto Death*. For as noted above, despite the brevity with which Anti-Climacus employs the term calling, it is a concept that concerns the author greatly. Despite the lack of direct reference to calling in the text, there are signs throughout that one of *The Sickness Unto Death*’s main concerns is the very notion of “calling”.

Consider the way that Kierkegaard (as discussed in Section 2 above) shifted the concept of vocation from a concern with the *what* of one’s occupation, to the *how* of one’s occupation. In other words, there was a shift in focus from *what* one occupies one’s time with, to *how* one’s occupation (i.e. occupying one’s time) relates to oneself. It should come as no surprise then, that the project that Anti-Climacus concerns himself with in *The Sickness Unto Death* is an examination of the self – and in many ways, with *how the self occupies itself*. Crucially, Anti-Climacus works his way through several varieties of despair. One of these, “Despair in Weakness” or “Despair Not to Will to Be Oneself” is necessary to consider for its links to both busyness and vocation, or calling. Though Anti-Climacus does not mention it directly, one way that “Despair in Weakness”, along with several other varieties of despair, might be interpreted, is as a rejection or refusal to commit to one’s calling.

So, what is “Despair in Weakness”? “Despair in Weakness” characterises a variety of despair wherein one wills *not* to be oneself; this is in two ways, firstly in despair over *the*, or *something,* *earthly*, and secondly in despair *of* *the eternal*, or *despair over oneself*; the second could also be defined as despair over despair itself (insofar as it is the self that despairs).

**(1) Earthly Despair.** Anti-Climacus characterises earthly despair as “pure immediacy or immediacy containing a quantitative reflection” (SUD 50). In other words, there is no real understanding of what, or why, one is in despair; one is in despair – one knows one is in despair (though it is not yet genuine despair for Anti-Climacus, for there is no loss of the eternal (see SUD 51)) – but cannot pin-point the exact cause. In this kind of despair, such an individual considers that the cause of his despair “must be something outside of himself” – hence *earthly* – such that were it resolved, the individual would no longer be in despair; or so he believes (SUD 48). In another sense, such an individual tries – albeit unconsciously – to “keep himself in the dark about his state through diversions and in other ways, for example through work and busyness [*Arbejde og Travlhed*] as diversionary means, yet in such a way that he does not entirely realise why he is doing it” (SUD 48). In this variety of despair, nothing comes from within the individual; instead, the despair is a “suffering, a succumbing to the pressure of external factors” (SUD 51); it is never an internal act. We can see how in this case, at least on the face of it, this kind of despair could be viewed as a rejection of one’s calling, insofar as such an individual refuses to confront themselves, and instead chooses to remain in despair, or distract themselves in busyness, or work, etc. albeit unknowingly.

It seems that the individual of whom Anti-Climacus is speaking is someone like the aesthete, A, from *Either/Or Volume I*. What reason do we have to think this? Crucially, this individual’s self is “bound up in immediacy with the other in desiring, craving, enjoying, etc. […] Its dialectic is: the pleasant and the unpleasant; its concepts are: good luck, bad luck, fate” (SUD 51). Further, such an individual “claims he is in despair, he regards himself as dead, as a shadow of himself” (SUD 52). Hence, it would make sense that such an individual – because of their evasion from themselves, and their despairing attitude – might be viewed in the light of the aesthete’s evasion of his calling (see Section 1).

If for Kierkegaard in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* one’s calling is intimately bound to one’s selfhood, wherein a rejection of one’s calling is a rejection of the self, then it should come as no surprise that the rejection of selfhood by the individual in *The Sickness Unto Death’s* “Despair in Weakness” might be viewed as a rejection of calling. An individual who remains in “Despair in Weakness” fails to become a self; Anti-Climacus goes to great lengths to emphasise this point:

In Christendom he is also a Christian, goes to church every Sunday, listens to and understands the pastor, indeed they have a mutual understanding; he dies, the pastor ushers him into eternity for ten rix-dollars – but a self he was not, and a self he did not become (SUD 52).

Anti-Climacus continues:

This form of despair is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be aself. Or lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self. Immediacy actually has no self, it does not know itself; thus it cannot recognise itself and therefore generally ends in fantasy (SUD 52-3).

Yet the individual who despairs in this way is convinced that they can become someone else, a task Anti-Climacus calls “ludicrous” (SUD 53). Such an individual considers they can change (their self) just “as easily as one changes clothes” (SUD 53). This individual – “the man of immediacy” – according to Anti-Climacus “identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities” (SUD 53). Interestingly, this is not the first time that Kierkegaard has used the analogy of changing one’s clothes in relation to selfhood. For instance, we saw in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard uses a similar metaphor for “disclos[ing]” oneself (UDVS 19-20) – though in this instance the intention is not to rid oneself of one’s self in exchange for another, but instead to reject busyness and double-mindedness in order to dedicate oneself to willing one thing. As Kierkegaard states: “It is indeed like changing one’s clothes to divest oneself of multiplicity in order to make up one’s mind about one thing, to interrupt the pace of busy activity in order to put on the repose of contemplation in unity with oneself” (UDVS 20). Nonetheless, as we have seen, such a task – of willing one thing – is not so different from answering one’s calling, and consequently the task of selfhood. In this case one wears not a multitude of clothes, switching between them at a whim – as per the aesthete’s fancy – but rather, one wears only the “simple festive dress that is the condition of admittance” (UDVS 19) to gain unity within one’s self – and presumably, free oneself from despair.

At some point in this despairing self’s process, “*some reflection*” (SUD 54) is gained, and the individual gains a greater consciousness about himself and the nature of his despair. The capacity for reflection that such an individual has gained creates the realisation in them that their despair is not always caused by an externality; rather, the despair itself can be “brought on by one’s capacity for reflection” (SUD 54). In doing so, the individual realises that they are “essentially different” from their externalities, and their environment (SUD 54); they realise that their environment and their influence upon it is not the entirety of their self. However, as Anti-Climacus points out, this is realised “only to a certain degree [*til en vis Grad*]” (SUD 54/SV XI 167), and the individual – whose self is not perfect – easily succumbs to double-mindedness, distraction, and diversion, and falls back into despair. This time however, because he has a capacity for reflection he has separated himself from externalities to a “certain degree”. In doing so, “he has a dim idea that there may even be something eternal in the self” (SUD 55), but because of his weakness he is unable to attain it. Thus, the individual falls back into despair, specifically “not to will to be himself” (SUD 55), though this time, he also does not wish to be someone else, either.

Anti-Climacus offers a metaphor for such an individual:

His relation to the self is like the relation a person might have to his place of residence […], which becomes an abomination because of smoke fumes or something else, whatever it might be. So he leaves it, but he does not move away, he does not set up a new residence; he continues to regard the old one as his address, he assumes that the problem will disappear. So also with the person in despair. *As long as the difficulty lasts, he does not dare, as the saying so trenchantly declares, “to come to himself”* […] he was a self up to a point and he went no further than that (SUD 55).[[174]](#footnote-174)

As Nelson has suggested, if the end goal for Anti-Climacus is to re-affirm the Christian notion of calling, so as to answer the call of Christ, then it might be argued that the individual’s failure to answer the call to come to oneself could be seen as a failure in the first step of answering one’s religious calling, and instead remaining in self-deception. This seems possible both when we recall a unified self as a pre-requisite for willing the good,[[175]](#footnote-175) and also when we consider that Anti-Climacus’s next comments on this individual concern the way that such an individual gives the illusion that they are a self, to the point where they no longer have to reflect on it at all.

In rejecting himself, the despairing individual “seeks another remedy” (SUD 55). He rejects inwardness and commits himself fully to externality: “He appropriates what he in his language calls his self, that is, *whatever capacities, talents, etc.* he may have; all these he appropriates but in an outward-bound direction, toward life” (SUD 56). And thus, “[l]ittle by little, he manages to forget it [his despair]” (SUD 56).[[176]](#footnote-176) What Anti-Climacus – or Kierkegaard – describes here is the pseudo-Christian individual of nineteenth century Denmark. One could see the character of the individual described here by Anti-Climacus as the aesthete, but also that of the ethical judge, Judge William. For instance, Anti-Climacus continues:

[This individual] has been happily married for several years […] is a dynamic and enterprising man, a father and a citizen, perhaps even an important man; at home in his own house the servants call him “He Himself”; downtown he is among those addressed with “His Honour”; his conduct is based on respect of persons or on the way others regard one, and others *judge according to one’s social position*. In Christendom he is a Christian […], one of the cultured Christians (SUD 56).[[177]](#footnote-177)

Indeed, as suggested above, Judge William has a problematic relationship with the religious sphere, fundamentally treating it as fully captured within ethical life. As Stephen Northrup Dunning states, Judge William “domesticates [the religious], cuts it down from an infinite and inward movement to one that is finite and almost external” (Dunning, 1985: 85). And here, again, we see the same “cutting down” and externalisation of the notion of selfhood. For as Anti-Climacus remarks, this happily married individual – despite external appearances – still “has no self” (SUD 56).[[178]](#footnote-178) In many ways what Kierkegaard is describing here – whether the aesthete or the ethicist – is someone who is busy *in the world*; someone whose priorities lie in the temporal and earthly.

Anti-Climacus calls this form of despair the “most common” (SUD 57), and aims his criticism of it to the crowd, and the majority; those who “go with the flow”, never reflecting too deeply on their selves or their despair, and remain “reassured by the pastors of their salvation” (SUD 57). This is possibly also a criticism aimed at an individual like Judge William who, for all his merits, remains an individual whose life is lived very much in the world. But, more significantly, it is also a criticism aimed at the bourgeoise of Copenhagen; the same public that is subject to the charge of a kind of thoughtlessness by Kierkegaard in *Two Ages* (see Chapter 2). Crucially, in this form of despair – a despair over the earthly – the individual easily returns to a life of immediacy, fulfilled by externalities and illusions. Thus, the individual never goes too deeply into their despair, and instead – what Anti-Climacus calls “immediacy with a quantitative reflection” (SUD 57) – hides it within themselves, and pursue distraction, believing that despair is, for instance, merely a feature of youth that they will soon outgrow.

To clarify, the first form of “Despair in Weakness”, as despair over the earthly, is explained by Anti-Climacus as a despair about both the *totality* of the earthly, and about *particular* earthly things. This despair is framed as a “despair over the earthly and over something earthly” (SUD 60). In some cases, however, according to Anti-Climacus, one’s despair can take on a deeper form.

**(2) Despair of the Eternal and Despair Over Oneself.** Despair of the eternal and despair over oneself is the second way that Anti-Climacus characterises “Despair in Weakness”. To be sure, the individual is still unaware of the object of their despair in this sense, and still considers that they are in despair over the earthly (SUD 61). For Anti-Climacus suggests that the individual, in attributing great worth to something earthly, for example books, “makes something earthly into the whole world” (SUD 61) – thereby, giving the earthly such a degree of value that it takes on the guise of the eternal. Indeed, we could view this in the light of the occupation/vocation distinction discussed thus far. The individual (in their despair) mistakes a mere occupation for their vocation; perhaps they attribute absolute value to their role as a husband or father, and in doing so mistake something earthly for the eternal. Indeed, this is how “earthly busyness” (WL 71) is characterised by Kierkegaard, elsewhere. For the eternal is precisely the antithesis of “worldly busyness” (WL 98), wherein “[t]he one who *occupies* himself only with the eternal […] if this were possible, is not busy” (WL 98).[[179]](#footnote-179) Crucially for Anti-Climacus, it is this misplacement of value that transforms the individual’s despair *in* weakness, to despair *over* his weakness (SUD 61). This is a “significant step forward” (SUD 61) for the individual, because it is a step closer to the realisation that their despair is a result of a mis-relation, or absent relation with God, and by extension, with their true calling. The previous form(s) of despair saw the individual’s consciousness, or understanding, end with the understanding that they were in despair, even if they were not sure why; here, the individual despairs not over what they consider to be the cause of their despair, say something earthly, but rather over their own weakness and inability to overcome such despair: hence why Anti-Climacus claims it is only a “relative difference” (SUD 61). The individual “understands that it is weakness to make the earthly so important”, but instead of rejecting despair and pursuing faith, such an individual “entrenches himself in despair and despairs over his weakness” (SUD 61). Hence, one can view this kind of “Despair in Weakness” as a deeper despair over one’s despair itself.

Similarly, in despairing over their weakness, the individual also despairs *over themselves*. Anti-Climacus sets out the “progression” (SUD 62) of this stage of despair. Firstly, the individual becomes conscious of their self, through the aid of the eternal. In other words, they recognise that there is something eternal about themselves. This makes sense when we consider that for Anti-Climacus, the self is spirit, and spirit is a relation between several polarities, one of them being the temporal and the eternal. Hence, with reference to the dichotomies that Anti-Climacus sets out at the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*, what is realised here is the existence of a tension within the individual between the temporal and eternal (SUD 13). Thus, the individual realises that they have placed too much importance on the earthly and the temporal, and in doing so lost the eternal; and, by extension themselves. This is the first step. The second step in the progression of this despair is a greater realisation, or consciousness, of the loss of the eternal as a cause of this despair. This leads to an increase in the intensity of the despair, due to it being rooted “indirectly-directly” (SUD 62) in the self, rather than from any external source. (It is still distinct from “Despair in Defiance” which Anti-Climacus moves onto next, which “comes directly from the self” (SUD 62), and which sees the individual will to be themselves *despite* their despair, a task which leads to an even more intensive form of despair). And whilst this is a step in the right direction towards the acknowledgement of one’s despair, and the possibility of salvation, here the self still “does not want to acknowledge itself after having been so weak” (SUD 62), and thus, such a despair is a rejection of their selfhood.

At this point, Anti-Climacus introduces the notion of “inclosing reserve [*Indeslutethed*]” (SUD 63), which is an attempt to conceptualise the way that an individual paradoxically wills not to be a self, but at the same time, has some notion of selfhood, and love of the self.[[180]](#footnote-180) The individual in inclosing reserve in some way watches itself, from “a carefully closed door” and in doing so “watch[es] itself, preoccupied with or filling up time with not willing to be itself and yet being self enough to love itself” (SUD 63). Indeed, this concept demonstrates how the individual isolates themselves from others, pursues distractions, and in doing so, is unable to answer their calling. There are three questions that need answering, here: (i) What is inclosing reserve? (ii) How does it relate to our theme of busyness? (iii) And why is it significant for Anti-Climacus’s concept of vocation/calling?

(i) Inclosing reserve is perhaps better translated as “inward closing”, or “inward shutting”. It is “the very opposite of immediacy” and has contempt for it (SUD 63). At his core, the individual in inclosing reserve has shut themselves off from others (and God). They long for solitude – considering it a necessity – and despises *the crowd*: those “[u]tterly superficial nonpersons and group-people” who “need the soothing lullaby of social life in order to be able to eat, drink, sleep, fall in love, etc.” (SUD 64). The individual in inclosing reserve shuts themselves off entirely to others, and neglects all discussion of their self with others: “the dominant characteristic of inclosing reserve” (Suzuki, 2012: 4). Suzuki defines inclosing reserve as “the effect of negating the self-relation” (2012: 4); that is, severing one’s relation with God, and with others. In other words, if despair arises as an imbalance between the polarities of the individual (freedom-necessity, temporal-eternal, infinite-finite), it is deepened by inclosing reserve, wherein an individual refuses to go any further than to consider the self’s relation to the eternal; and even this is largely suppressed: “The man of inclosing reserve acknowledges spirit in the self, but out of weakness goes no further; he resigns himself to an inexplicable solitude” (O’Leary, 2005: 41). To put it in Kierkegaard’s own metaphor, such an individual is at a crossroads, and goes the wrong way.

(ii) How does inclosing reserve relate to busyness? The individual in the despair of inclosing reserve appears as any other human being. As Anti-Climacus states: “he looks every bit ‘a real man’. He is a university graduate, husband, father, even an exceptionally competent public officeholder […] And Christian? – Well, yes, he is that too, but prefers not to talk about it” (SUD 63-64). Hence, the individual whom Anti-Climacus describes is on the outside no different to the majority of “Christians” who inhabit nineteenth-century Copenhagen. This individual does not share his inward despair with anyone, and if allowed to fester will either become more intensive as a higher form of despair (i.e. “Despair in Defiance”), or it will eventually “break through and destroy the outer trappings in which such a person has been living out his life as if in an incognito” (SUD 65). For in this way – quite paradoxically – inwardness which shuts itself off from the world completely, i.e. “inclosing reserve” will “lead to the strange result of making belief disappear and Christianity more external than ever” (Jolivet, 1950: 173). It is in this way that busyness makes an appearance for the individual in the despair of inclosing reserve. Hence, the individual “will hurl himself into life, perhaps into the diversion of great enterprises; he will become a restless spirit whose life certainly leaves its mark, a restless spirit who wants to forget […] Or he will seek oblivion in sensuality” (SUD 65-66). Hence, at this point in Anti-Climacus’s diagnosis of despair, the individual will either move on to a higher form of despair, or remain trapped within a life of aestheticism and busyness. Busyness, here, is a distraction from attaining a higher form of consciousness of one’s despair, and thus, prevents one from answering the call to selfhood.

(iii) Of course, it follows from this that in remaining in inclosing reserve the individual is unable to answer their calling. The individual is driven towards distraction and hence loses themselves. As Anti-Climacus states, he fails to “come to himself” (SUD 55), and in doing so – absent of a self – severs the self-relation between himself and Christ, of whom is the one issuing the call to “*Come here*”. Thus, such an individual – like busy Martha in *Luke 10:40-42* –is unable to hear the call of Christ at all.

With these preliminaries in mind, let us turn to Anti-Climacus’s discussion of “calling”, specifically his focus on the phrase “Come here, all you who travail and are burdened” (*Matthew* 11:28-30) in the sequel of *The Sickness Unto Death*: Kierkegaard’s *Practice in Christianity*.

#### Calling in *Practice in Christianity*

*Practice in Christianity* is the second work published under the pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” and makes up the beginning of Kierkegaard’s attack on Christendom; according to Walter Lowrie, the text acts as “an olive branch, an invitation for the [Danish] church to make […] a formal admission that the Christianity it exemplified was not true Christianity but a compromise with the world” (Lowrie, 1957: xxiv). *Practice* is, as one would expect, related to Anti-Climacus’s prequel, *The Sickness Unto Death*; and, suitably its content follows on from the themes explored in *Sickness*: “In the first half of [*Sickness*] the various aspects of despair in itself are analysed and described. The second half of the volume is an analysis of despair as sin and of the despairing self before God. *Practice* constitutes the third part of the sequence, the healing of the sin-conscious self and the indicative ethics gratefully expressive of the redemptive gift” (Hong, 1991: xiii). Significant for the present study, whilst we saw that *Sickness* – though not exclusively – was in many ways concerned with the notion of calling, *Practice* also shows engagement with this concept.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus considers the failure of the Danish population, i.e. “the crowd”, to appreciate the religious origin of the term calling, and at the individual level, the failure of the self to answer the call to become oneself, so that instead it remains in despair; here, in *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus “further elaborate[s] o[n] the spiritual sickness with which the prequel was concerned” (Nelson, 2005: 106). In *Practice*, Anti-Climacus presents an account of calling in which the focus is on the one whom gives the call: *Christ*. The work is separated into three parts, with “No. I” containing the main focus on “calling”, and this will be our focus for the remainder of this chapter.

##### The Call of Christ

“No. I” of *Practice,* focuses on *Mathew 11:28*, and is suitably titled: “Come here all who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest: For Awakening and Inward Deepening” (PC 5). Whilst the text begins with an “Invocation” on the contemporaneity of Christ with the individual as “the condition of faith” (TC 9), it is the consideration of Christ’s call to “Come here” that is of importance for our present concern. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the importance of the term “Invocation” used by Kierkegaard here. Kierkegaard often begins his religious writings (as well as some of the aesthetic writings) with a “Prayer”; indeed, the original term Kierkegaard chose for the “Invocation” which opens *Practice* was “Prayer” (PC 9fn6/PC 315). However, at some point Kierkegaard changed this to “Invocation”: *Paakaldelse* (PC 9/SV XII 1). In English, that “in*vocation*” contains the word “vocation” is interesting, though there is no etymological connection between “invocation” and “vocation”. However, in Danish the connection between the “Invocation” and the theme of a “call” or “vocation” that is to follow in *Practice* is more obvious. *Paa****kald****else* describes a summoning, or – more literally – a calling (up)on. So, whilst the theme of “No. I” of *Practice* focuses on Christ’s call to “Come here”, it begins with Anti-Climacus calling upon Christ, and specifically, Christ as a contemporary – and, as we will see this duality of *being called*, and *calling upon* is significant for Anti-Climacus’s also.

What follows is “The Invitation” (*Indbydelsen*), wherein Anti-Climacus meditates on the meaning of Christ’s command to “Come here…”, and presents three interpretations of this command. (1) The first interpretation, “I. [Untitled]”, focuses on what is *distinctive* about Christ’s call; (2) The second interpretation, “II. Come here, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (PC 16) focuses on who the call is for, i.e. everyone; (3) The final interpretation, “III. Come here to me, all who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (PC 20) focuses on what one might term the persistence of the call, and the way in which silence is crucial for the individual to hear the call.

(1) **Distinctiveness.** Anti-Climacus begins with a consideration of what is distinctive about Christ’s call to “Come here”. Ordinarily, Anti-Climacus maintains, the individual must themselves seek out the one who offers help. Consider the case of someone who is sick. If someone is unwell, and in need of medical assistance, then they themselves must seek it out, for example by *calling* for the doctor. Furthermore, often the one who offers help, for instance the doctor, charges some fee for this help; it is therefore, Anti-Climacus asserts, often difficult for the person who needs help – in whatever way – to find it (PC 11-12). However, with Christ, it is Christ Himself who seeks out those in need of help, Christ is “the one who goes around and, calling [*kaldende*], almost pleading, says: Come here” (PC 12). Significantly, Christ comes “on his own initiative, uncalled [*ukaldet*] – for he is indeed the one who calls to them; he offers help – and such help!” (PC 12). Thus, whilst in *Sickness* it was the individual’s calling to become themselves that was of concern, in *Practice*, when one is receptive to such a calling one is able to hear Christ’s call, to “Come here”; and thereby answer one’s true religious *calling*: that is, to become a follower of Christ, a Christian.

Anti-Climacus goes on to compare Jesus Christ’s call to “Come here” to one of Kierkegaard’s other highly esteemed historical figures: Socrates.[[181]](#footnote-181) For, like Christ, Socrates does not charge for his service, and in many ways helps others; however, he does not – like Christ – call people to him. For Christ, Anti-Climacus maintains, in helping *everyone* (PC 12-13) is distinct from others who claim to help – like Socrates – in that he *invites* others to come to him; he *invites everyone* to him, to “Come here”. For Anti-Climacus what it means to “be laboured and burdened” is precisely to capture within that claim, *everyone* – it is a general description of all those who live a merely human life. The rest that Christ promises in his proclamation is not to be found in some thing, or some place, but rather precisely in following and remaining with Christ: “The helper is the help” (PC 15), and hence distinct from other forms of help, like for example the doctor, where in that case it is the medicine that is the help, and the doctor the helper; for Anti-Climacus, *Christ is both the doctor and the medicine*.

(2) **For Everyone.** Following on from this interpretation, Anti-Climacus continues with the theme that it is *everyone* who is captured in the claim “Come here” – the call to “Come here” is for everyone. He states: “What an enormous variety, what almost limitless differences among the invited guests” (PC 16). Christ’s call “blasts away all distinctions in order to gather everybody together” (PC 17). From, “the unhappy one” (PC 16) – i.e. the aesthete – to the most ethical of individuals, Christ’s call includes everyone. In this interpretation – as Kierkegaard often does – Anti-Climacus makes significant use of “the crossroad” as the place in which one hears Christ’s call; he states:

In this way the invitation goes out, and wherever there is a crossroad, *it stands still and calls*. Ah, just as the soldier’s bugle call turns to all four corners of the world, so the invitation sounds whenever there is a crossroad, and not with an uncertain sound – for who, then, would come! – but with the trustworthiness of eternity (PC 16).[[182]](#footnote-182)

What is this crossroads a metaphor for? Kierkegaard frequently uses the metaphor of a crossroads in his writings. For instance, we saw in the previous chapter that in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* Kierkegaard refers to the crossroads as an analogy for the double-minded, or busy, person. For instance, the individual, who stands at the crossroads between the path of willing the good for its own sake, and for the sake of reward, believes he can do both at once, and in doing so – in his busyness, i.e. his pursuit of multiplicity – he wills the good only to a certain degree. Because such a journey is impossible (one cannot walk both roads at once), the individual does not advance forward, he remains on the spot “pondering and deliberating” and “remains standing there: a symbol of double-mindedness” (UDVS 41). Indeed, Kierkegaard’s treatment of the crossroads in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* gives us a good indication of Anti-Climacus’s own position.

For Anti-Climacus, the crossroads is the point “where temporal and earthly suffering placed its cross, and calls” (PC 16). It is the point of temporal and earthly suffering, wherein one may choose the path forward. Does one remain in pursuit of the earthly, and will the good only to a certain degree?; or, does one commit oneself to a religious life, and become a follower of Christ, wherein the eternal reigns supreme? To do neither (or attempt to do both) is to remain at the crossroads in double-mindedness, and of course to choose the earthly is to remain laboured and burdened: “those who labour to work themselves out of the power of sin, labour to resist evil, to overcome their weakness, but only manage to be burdened” (PC 61). Furthermore, to remain after one has heard the call is to move further away from the source of the call; to move further away from Christ:

“*Come here!*” Oh, do not stand still and hesitate [*betænk Dig*] – no, consider [*betænk*], consider that each moment you stand still after having heard the invitation you will hear its call [*Kald*] more faintly and thus distance yourself even if you remain on the spot. – “*Come here!*” However tired and weary you are of the labour, or of the long, long, and yet up until now futile going for help and rescue, even if it seems as if you could not succeed in taking one more step, could not keep on one moment longer without collapsing – oh, just one step more and here is rest! – “*Come here!*” Alas, but if there is someone so wretched that he cannot come, oh, a sigh is enough; that you sigh for him is also to come here (PC 22/ SV XII 17-18).

Thus, one must move towards the call, towards Christ in *imitation* where “imitation of Christ is not ethical but is a religious discipleship” (Arbaugh, 1968: 327). Furthermore, Arbaugh writes: “Christian life is not good citizenship but a responsiveness to Christ who comes with transcendent claims and absolute requirements” (Arbaugh, 1968: 327). To follow Christ is not – it seems – an attractive proposal – nor is it in pretence to make one’s occupation one’s vocation.[[183]](#footnote-183) For, Christ’s call to “‘come unto me […]’ does not entail being snug in the arms of Jesus, but rather is a call to follow in the footsteps of him who carried a cross” (Dewey, 1967: 403-4fn47). Thus, the crossroads metaphor is apt; for this decision made (at the crossroads) must also be carried by the individual in perpetuity against whatever difficulties and struggles one faces as a result of this decision; whether that is a life of labour and burden, or alternatively ridicule, or mockery from becoming a follower of Christ: “to push oneself to the front in order to be whipped publicly – how sublime, how Christian, how stupid!” (PC 45).[[184]](#footnote-184) And thus, this presents the individual with an apparent dilemma. The dilemma is expressed by Nelson in the following:

On the one hand, there is Christ’s call to “come here” – i.e., somewhere other than the spot in which one was in when the call was received. On the other hand, there is the doctrine of earthly vocation, according to which remaining in one’s secular station – i.e., the station one was in when the call was received – is sanctioned by the divine (Nelson, 2005: 106-107).

So, what should one do? Well, one thing that Nelson considers essential – issuing from Christ’s call to “come here” – is to acknowledge that “Christ’s call is to something other than any secular station in which one might find oneself” (Nelson, 2005: 107). Hence, for Anti-Climacus to answer Christ’s call means to go beyond one’s mere occupation as suitable service to Christ, and to commit to some *other* vocation. So, what might that be?

(3) **Silence.** Turning to the final interpretation issued by Anti-Climacus in “The Invitation” might give us some indication. In this, albeit shorter, interpretation, Anti-Climacus alludes to the importance of silence, for being able to hear Christ’s call, but also to the way in which to follow Christ need not be to put on an intense display of devotion. Indeed, this is a familiar theme in Kierkegaard’s writings; and we have seen throughout this thesis how Kierkegaard will juxtapose busyness with the need for silence in order to pursue a religious life, or more generally, the *appearance* of religious work and devotion with *actual* religious work and devotion (cf. *Two Ages*). Here again, Anti-Climacus alludes to those whom in idle chatter, “whose quick tongues run facilely with stories of their suffering neither labour nor are burdened” (PC 21), for precisely one does “not need to wear an external and visible distinguishing mark […] if only you inwardly labour and are burdened” (PC 22). And, as we will see, it is “in quiet inwardness before God” (PC 67) that one is truly able to answer the call of what it means to be a *Christ*ian.

##### The Halt After the Call

Anti-Climacus begins the next section with a lengthy discussion of Jesus Christ’s place, or rather, lack of place in history; he is concerned with sacred history, rather than “profane history, world history” (PC 25). His argument is that Christ has no place in world history, because he is “unhistorical” (PC 63). In other words, the Christ that Anti-Climacus is concerned with – *the one issuing the call* – is “the same today and yesterday, the same as he was eighteen hundred years ago, the Jesus Christ who abased himself and took the form of a servant” (PC 24). The Danish Christianity – or *Christendom* – of the nineteenth century has, for Anti-Climacus, turned Christ’s life into knowledge: “all the vitality and energy was distilled out of Christianity; the paradox was slackened, one became a Christian without noticing it and without detecting the highest possibility of offense” (PC 35). This is the “calamity of Christendom” (PC 35), that Christ was turned into a historical figure, rather than one’s eternal contemporary. Anti-Climacus’s aim then, is to “[re]-introduce Christianity into Christendom” (PC 36), through a consideration of Christ – as a contemporary – who issues the call to “Come here”.

The call instigates a *halt* (*Standsningen*). But what is this halt, or to put it into Anti-Climacus’s own words: “But before what is one to halt?” (PC 23). One halts before “that which at the same moment infinitely changes everything” (PC 23), wherein one is *offended*. Crucially, this halt – as the possibility of offense – disrupts one’s everyday busyness, drawing one into a relationship with Christ, as contemporary. As Anti-Climacus maintains:

Come here *now* all you who labour and are burdened!

There is no reason, is there, to hurry [*hast*]; there is a little pause [*Standsning*] that could be used appropriately for going around by another street. And, supposing you are a contemporary, if you disinclined to sneak around by another street or in Christendom are disinclined to sneak into being a Christian, then there is a prodigious halt, the halt that is the condition for faith to be able to come into existence: you are halted by the possibility of offense (PC 39).[[185]](#footnote-185)

The halt is thus the moment of decision wherein one – after having been offended by Christ – decides whether to answer the call. Consider Kierkegaard’s definition of the halt in the previous chapter: “Halting is not indolent resting; halting is also movement. It is the heart’s inward movement, it is self-deepening in inwardness” (UDVS 153). Recall, that the subtitle of this section in *Practice* is “For Awakening and Inward Deepening”.

##### What is the Call Calling One to Do?

So, what is the call, a call towards? What does Anti-Climacus’s interpretation of Christ’s call mean for the individual who hears it? It seems that the call of Christ – to *come here* – is a call to follow in his footsteps; and to demonstrate *compassion* in one’s everyday life, not merely “during a quiet Sunday hour” but “in the middle of the daily bustle [*Travlhed*] of weekday life” (PC 59). Consider that the crossroads is placed at the site of “temporal and earthly suffering” (PC 16), and it is here that one hears, and strives to answer the call; in light of Anti-Climacus’s comments on compassion, it might be argued that the call is not a call at all, but rather the cry of the suffering neighbour (Nelson, 2005: 107-8). For, “it is this cry alone that can initiate an individual into that modality of existence that may truly be called a “calling”. Everything else is evasion” (Nelson, 2005: 108).

However, Anti-Climacus acknowledges that we are only human; and hence ultimately, does not think it is possible for human beings to answer this call all the time: for “*human* compassion is always merely to a certain degree” (PC 59). Indeed, this is one reason why individuals are – in Kierkegaard’s view – guilty of double-mindedness. Amongst their worldly busyness they will the good only to a certain degree (cf. UDVS), and thus answer the call only to a certain degree. For example, “[s]ausage peddlers will consider that in being compassionate it is descending too far down to go to paupers in the poorhouse and express equality with them” (PC 59). For, “*divine* compassion” is to “make oneself quite *literally one with the most wretched*” (PC 59), which is something that the merely human cannot do. Anti-Climacus continues:

For people are willing enough to practice compassion and self-denial, willing enough to seek after wisdom etc., but they want to determine the criterion themselves, that it shall be to *a certain degree*. They do not wish to do away with all these glorious virtues; on the contrary, they want – at a cheap price – to have as comfortably as possible the appearance of and the reputation for practicing them (PC 60).

And hence we return to the issue of making one’s occupation one’s vocation; giving the appearance that one is living as a Christian, but one is really – in one’s multifarious busyness – only a Christian to a certain degree. So, what does it mean if the call to compassion is too much to bear? What can one do? Anti-Climacus suggests that:

It means that each individual in quiet inwardness before God is to humble himself under what it means in the strictest sense to be a Christian, is to confess honestly before God where he is so that he still might worthily *accept the grace that is offered* to every imperfect person – that is, to everyone. And then nothing further; then, as for the rest, let him do his work [*Arbeide*] and rejoice in it, love his wife and rejoice in her, joyfully bringing up his children, love his fellow beings, rejoice in life (PC 67 / SV XII 65).[[186]](#footnote-186)

In other words, as Elizabeth Li has argued, “the task itself reveals human beings’ inability to fulfil this task and directs them towards their need for grace” (Li, 2018: 112). One needs God’s grace in order to answer the call; and thus, this reveals another meaning of the term calling: If the call is difficult, if not impossible, then it is necessary that “[d]ialectically conceived, this modality of existence is also a ‘calling’ insofar as it is consistently calling upon God[s grace] to help” (Nelson, 2005: 108fn51). Thus, Christ’s proclamation to “Come here”, is both to attend to one’s calling, but also recognise that one calls on Christ also for help in this task.

### Summary

In this penultimate chapter, I have examined possible responses to the problems posed by busyness, by considering the concept of vocation (in contrast with occupation) in the pseudonyms of Judge William, “S. Kierkegaard”, and Anti-Climacus. In doing so, I aimed to show one way in which we might consider the religious sphere as offering a way to overcome busyness. Ultimately, one’s vocation was presented – by the various pseudonyms – as “the one thing needful”, in contrast to the multifarious division and distraction of busyness. Ultimately, one’s vocation, for Kierkegaard at least, was precisely the task of Christian discipleship: to become a follower of Christ. In the final chapter, which comes next, I will consider alternatives to *what* exactly this “one thing needful”, this vocation, must be, and crucially, whether one’s vocation necessarily needs to be religious in order to overcome the Kierkegaardian problemata of busyness.

# “The One Thing Needful”: Beyond Busyness

## 

The previous chapter ended with Kierkegaard’s conception of vocation as offering a possible response to the problem posed by “busyness”. Vocation, understood in terms of a calling towards some higher purpose other than one’s mere occupation, or station, seemed to present a way to avoid becoming consumed by “busyness”. For Kierkegaard, this calling was, ultimately, to become a follower of Christ. Yet, this notion of calling invites further reflection on whether or not one’s vocation, or calling, needs to be religious in origin; or, to put it another way: *whether it* *is only through the religious that one can overcome busyness*?

This final concluding chapter seeks to address this concern, and in doing so, also aims to demonstrate to what extent Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness might have significance today, in our – increasingly secular – present age; in the final section of this chapter I will consider Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness in relation to several contemporary thinkers who present a similar account of what we might term “busyness”, and offer secular solutions.

### The Concept of Busyness

Before addressing the questions above, I will briefly summarise the way that Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness has been defined, thus far.

In Chapter 1, I examined the way in which busyness was situated within Kierkegaard’s authorship. I considered Kierkegaard’s concerns with his own age, such as the increasing busyness of the city – specifically Kierkegaard’s home city of Copenhagen – in contrast to the quietude and rest found outside the city, in the “other places” – such as, the neighbouring district of Christianshavn, the church, the countryside, and the graveyard. It was also in this chapter that I demonstrated Kierkegaard’s concern with the spectacular, or diversionary impulses of his age; I argued that Kierkegaard views busyness as an aesthetic category, and that the busy individual is precisely busy in engaging with such aesthetic trivialities. In examining Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness from a topographical perspective, I argued that the busy city of Copenhagen became symbolic of modernity; and that the problems posed by busyness, for Kierkegaard, extended beyond the confines of Copenhagen’s medieval walls.

In Chapter 2, I examined Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness in a more abstract way, considering his concerns with busyness in his most socio-political work: *Two Ages*. Similar themes from the previous chapter were carried over into this chapter – though, here seen as a general malaise of modernity, rather than limited to Kierkegaard’s own milieu. I argued that Kierkegaard views busyness as a “pseudo-action”, indicative of a society of disinterested and apathetic people. Busyness in *Two Ages* was defined by Kierkegaard as a “chimerical exertion” (TA 69), an engagement – or rather, *dis*-engagement – with multiple trivialities in order to distract, divert, and pacify its practitioners. I argued that busyness occupied a similar conceptual position to the kind of reflection of which Kierkegaard is so critical in *Two Ages*; and, like reflection, was concerned with *image*, or *appearance*, over and above actuality. Further, it was this kind of busyness that Kierkegaard would later accuse Danish State Christianity.

In Chapter 3, I focused on the concept of busyness as conceptualised and critiqued by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, A – the seemingly idle aesthete of *Either/Or Volume I*. In this chapter I demonstrated that busyness is fundamentally a category of the aesthetic, and that to *be busy* is to occupy the aesthetic sphere of existence. I argued against the standard interpretation of the aesthete as a mere idler, and demonstrated that the aesthete’s idleness is akin to a kind of busyness, as defined by Kierkegaard.[[187]](#footnote-187) I demonstrated that in attempting to avoid boredom, the aesthete ironically becomes busy – an activity that the aesthete himself considers boring! I also examined busyness’s relationship to various other concepts within Kierkegaard’s authorship, notably: anxiety, the comic, and contingency. It was argued that to engage in busyness was to engage in detached, aimless, and accidental trivialities, at the expense of a meaningful commitment to some specific task, or duty. It was also in this chapter that I argued that busyness – whilst in appearance diametrically opposed to idleness – was in fact considered by Kierkegaard to be a similar kind of inertia or stasis.

In Chapter 4 I examined busyness from the Christian perspective, not only in the writings of Kierkegaard, but also with reference to busyness in *The Bible*, and in the work of Richard Baxter and Blaise Pascal. In this chapter it was argued that the Christian conception of busyness shares close conceptual and historical links to idleness; and, that it was criticised by Christianity from this perspective. Furthermore, I demonstrated that for the Christian, Kierkegaard included, to remain engaged with busyness was to prioritise the worldly, the temporal, and the trivial, in place of God and the eternal.

In Chapter 5 I turned my focus to Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness in his religious discourses. I focused on Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness in *Upbuilding Discourses* *in Various Spirits*, wherein double-mindedness was seen to be a *necessary* feature of busyness. We saw that to be busy, for Kierkegaard, was to be a *fractured self*, committing to one’s projects only to “a certain degree”. This was contrasted to “willing one thing”, namely God’s will, i.e., the Good. In this chapter, too, I also began an examination of Kierkegaard’s response to the problem of busyness; Kierkegaard posited the act of confession as a necessary preliminary in overcoming busyness. This act of confession was defined by Kierkegaard as a *halting*: a very literal cessation of motion. However, it was also important that for Kierkegaard this halting was also indicative of an *inward* *movement*, and thus the notion of *restlessness* in opposition to busyness was introduced. Restlessness, I claimed – whilst perhaps appearing on the surface to be very much like busyness – is instead a focused way of being, in commitment to some specific task.

In Chapter 6 I considered what this kind of task might look like, through an examination of the Kierkegaardian concept of vocation. I examined vocation through the pseudonyms Judge William, “S. Kierkegaard”, and Anti-Climacus. I argued that the idea of a vocation or calling stands in stark opposition to busyness. In this way, in answering and committing to one’s calling, one avoids busyness.

As this summary of my discussion shows, in his concept of busyness Kierkegaard ties together several interrelated concepts. At its most fundamental, busyness is category of the **aesthetic**: if one is busy, one inhabits the aesthetic sphere and engages in an “activity” akin to **idleness**. In this way busyness does include **work**, but it is not limited to it – it is more like an idle, aimless, form of work.[[188]](#footnote-188) For Kierkegaard, to be busy is to be concerned with **multiplicity**. In being concerned with multiplicity one seeks **distraction**, **diversion**, and **spectacle**, which causes the busy individual to be consumed by **double-mindedness**; thus, one cannot commit to one’s task, or calling, in life, whilst being busy. Further, one’s very self becomes fractured, or fragmented. Conversely then, to be concerned with one thing, for instance God, means that one is – by definition – “not busy” (WL 98). Relatedly, Kierkegaard further correlates busyness to a certain kind of **procrastinatory action**. This is expressed through the apathetic and disinterested public whom – in their desire for distraction – never arrive at any meaningful form of action. Thus, in their **pseudo-action**, such individuals give the appearance of activity, but it is not genuine – it is only mere busyness, a “chimerical exertion” which achieves nothing meaningful (TA 69). This busyness on a societal level demonstrates, for Kierkegaard, a kind of societal **stagnation**, or **inertia**; wherein, it seems as if activities of importance are accomplished, but it is merely an illusion: *it is busyness*. Kierkegaard attests to this busyness in various areas of life: in the Church, specifically Danish State Christianity – or Christendom; in academia and scholarship; in philosophy, specifically Hegelian systematising, which like busyness “goes further and further” (FT 5/UDVS 67); in politics; in the business world, and in society more generally. In contrast to busyness, Kierkegaard posits an activity that on the face of it seems identical: **restlessness**. However, for Kierkegaard, restlessness is instead a meaningful commitment to some single task; which, for Kierkegaard, is expressed through one’s **calling** to become a genuine Christian individual.

### The Flight from Busyness

So, given what we understand about Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, the question remains: *is “the religious” necessary to overcome busyness?* There are at least two ways to understand this question. The first invites an obvious answer, which is to consider (1) whether, *for Kierkegaard* himself, the religious is necessary in order to overcome busyness. The second is more complex, and which is to consider (2) whether the religious is necessary *at all* for overcoming busyness, as defined by Kierkegaard’s writings. The two questions are subtly different: the answer to the first must be satisfactory from the viewpoint of Kierkegaard, or the Kierkegaardian individual; the answer to the second must be satisfactory from a wider point of view, in that it is asking whether given Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of busyness there is another satisfactory “escape”, other than the religious? Let us begin with the first question.

Is the religious necessary to overcome busyness, for Kierkegaard? In short, yes.

Kierkegaard makes it clear throughout his writings that a commitment to a religious life is the only satisfactory response to busyness, otherwise the individual risks living a meaningless and empty life occupying the aesthetic sphere of existence – wasting their time in a nihilistic, busy idleness. We saw in Chapter 3 that the aesthete’s attempt to escape boredom and pursue “the interesting” led to a kind of busyness, wherein nothing of purpose or permanence was gained. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, the aesthete’s attempt to escape boredom, which led him to busyness – “the most boring of all” (EO I 288) – demonstrates the cyclical trap of busyness. This cyclical trap of busyness is indicative of a wider concern in Kierkegaard’s authorship. That is, *that whatever activity one engages with to try to respond to, and avoid busyness, risks – by the very nature of busyness – becoming a mere extension of one’s busyness.* This is certainly the case for the aesthete, and whilst the ethicist makes a move in the right direction in avoiding busyness, I would argue that for Kierkegaard it remains an ever-present possibility that the ethicist might return to a kind of aesthetic busyness without the grounding of the religious. This may be through the lack of a sufficiently absolute “ground” on which to tend one’s metaphorical crops and thus the misrelation to one’s adopted principles (cf. *Two Ages*), roles and, occupations.[[189]](#footnote-189) It is worth expanding on the ethicist’s relationship to busyness more here, in contrast to the aesthete’s.

In Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages, or spheres, it is clear that the aesthete is guilty of what Kierkegaard defines as “busyness”. Busyness, for Kierkegaard, is defined as a fundamentally aesthetic category. When an individual is “busy” they engage in an activity akin to idleness, they seek multiplicity to distract and divert, engaging with projects only to “a certain degree” (UDVS 64), their actions are illusory or pseudo to some extent, they are overly reflective and procrastinate, and whilst they might appear to be moving with a frenetic haste and urgency, from an existential point of view, their movement is merely an external display – a “chimerical exertion” (TA 69): inwardly they remain inert.[[190]](#footnote-190) Further, their busyness causes them to become double-minded, and this splitting of attention (first in the object of their attention and then in themselves) creates an individual who lacks any unified self – busyness creates an individual who is “divided and scattered” (WL 98). To overcome busyness, then, Kierkegaard asserts the religious sphere as its solution;[[191]](#footnote-191) a unification of the tensions within one’s self, and a restless commitment to one’s vocation or calling is what it takes to overcome busyness. So, the question arises: what of the ethicist? They have not yet reached the religious sphere of existence, so have they escaped busyness, or do they remain “busy” in some way? In other words: is the ethicist busy?

The answer to this question depends largely on: *what* is it the ethicist *does*, and *how* they *relate* to what it is that they do? Further, it also depends on what sort of “ethics” we are considering. In Kierkegaard’s oeuvre there is a distinction between a “secular ethics”, and a “Christian ethics”. For the purposes of the question under consideration – Is the ethicist “busy”? – we are concerned primarily with the former: a secular ethics. Indeed, as Phillip L. Quinn notes, this secular ethics is the *customary ethics of Kierkegaard’s present age*, it is the *ethic that is teleologically suspended* by Abraham, and it is also the “*ethical sphere” of existence* personified by Judge William in *Either/Or Volume II* (Quinn, 2008: 349). This secular ethics is characteristically Hegelian.[[192]](#footnote-192) Hence, the ethical individual, or ethicist, for Kierkegaard, is ethical in a significantly Hegelian way. Indeed, as we shall see below, it is this kind of ethical individual for whom busyness remains a problem.

#### Is the Ethicist busy?

Consider the difference between the aesthetic and the religious individual in response to this question, above – is the ethicist busy? The aesthete seeks the interesting – and in doing so (as delineated in the theory of “Crop Rotation” (EO I 285)) seeks multiplicity. Further, the aesthete relates to *what* they do only *relatively*, if at all: they do not consider anything within the multiplicity with which they engage to have absolute value, and instead, only choose one thing over the other to the degree to which it interests them, *in momento*. Conversely, the religious individual – for instance the Knight of Faith – recognises that it is God alone who has absolute value, and thus, their relationship to everything else is relative; in their religious faith they stand – absurdly – higher than the universal. For Kierkegaard, the religious individual understands that their “eternal responsibility before God is the *one thing* needful” (UDVS 137),[[193]](#footnote-193) in order that they “will one thing” (UDVS 7), *viz*. God’s will, or the Good. In doing so, they avoid engaging with multiplicity, and thus their

concern for [their] eternal responsibility will keep [them] from being busy and from busily taking part in everything possible – an activity that can best be called a waste of time (UDVS 137).

The religious individual avoids busyness through a recognition of their *one* absolute commitment to God. So, the question remains, if the ethicist, as described thus far, is yet to reach the heights of the religious sphere, are they still able to avoid busyness?

A clue can be found in the description of the spheres themselves. If one were to consider each of the spheres of existence through the lens of Kierkegaard’s critique of busyness, one finds that the aesthetic sphere is defined by *multifariousness*, or *multiplicity*; the ethical sphere defined by *dichotomy* (the either/or and the choice one must make, and remake); and the religious sphere defined by *oneness*, or perhaps more appropriately, *singularity*, i.e. the faithful commitment by the singular individual to God:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Aesthetic | Ethical | Religious |
| Multiplicity | Dichotomy | Singularity |

It is true that in the ethical sphere, the ethical individual rises above the various immediate desires and passing inclinations of the aesthete. Avoiding the dangers of boredom and nihilism the ethicist has something to live for, whether that be the duty and satisfaction of their occupation, the love and commitment of their relationship and family, or the participation and community of some organisation or institution – ideally, all of the above. Thus, the ethicist has no need to develop a response to the boredom that the aesthete attempts to evade; they do not need a theory of “Crop Rotation” (*Vexel-Driften*), literally, “impulse-exchange” (SV II 253), for they have moved beyond drifting continuously between multiple transitory, temporary desires, and are able to commit to their projects long term. As Alison Assiter states, through the responsibility of *choice* the ethicist “can challenge their personal traits and can identify in a full manner with projects” (Assiter, 2009: 66). In this way, they certainly avoid the type of busyness that derives from the aesthete’s response to boredom, that is, the busyness defined in terms of an engagement with *multiplicity*.

However, for Kierkegaard there are other ways to be busy (namely, illusory or pseudo action, indulgent reflection, an external display of action i*n lieu* of genuine action, and double-mindedness) – and whilst the ethicist avoids the aimless busy idleness of the aesthete, it is possible that they might engage with busyness in some other, more complex, way. A clue may be found in Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages*, and the discussion of “principles”. In doing so, we distinguish between the ethical, as Kierkegaard would like it to be, and the social – that is, a corrupted passionless form of ethics that dominates the present age.

Consider the way that Kierkegaard defines busyness in *Two Ages*, wherein busyness is defined as an illusory, or pseudo-action: a “chimerical exertion” (TA 69). The individuals under critique in *Two Ages* are not necessarily aesthetes; rather, Kierkegaard is critical of those individuals whom – without the passion of the religious sphere – flock together into crowds, groups, associations, organisations, etc. forming an amorphous public.[[194]](#footnote-194) It is possible that many of these “individuals”, would consider themselves to occupy the (secular) ethical sphere of life. It is indeed possible to consider an ethical individual, who – as is often necessary – forgoes some degree of individual responsibility when part of the crowd, or public. However, in *Two Ages* these “individuals”, protected by the anonymity of the crowd, remain only semi-committed to action – they remain ensnared by the “web of reflection” (TA 69), and on an individual level *perform* only pseudo-action: they are, by Kierkegaard’s definition, *busy*. As Kierkegaard writes, these are not merely aesthetically minded individuals, but rather members of the general *public*, many of whom consider themselves to be decent, ethical, individuals:

The single individual (however well-intentioned many of them are, however much energy they might have if they could ever come to use it) has not fomented enough passion in himself to tear himself out of the web of reflection (TA 69).

The busyness of these, supposedly ethical, well-intentioned individuals manifests itself in pseudo-action, and procrastination. “[T]he force of inertia” (TA 69) that Kierkegaard feels defines his age creates the illusion of activity, and an “age of anticipation” (TA 71) wherein it seems like “something” is happening, or has happened, but in reality is merely an illusion of movement. Further, the plurality – or *multiplicity* – one finds in the crowd, prevents the individual from becoming an individual before God; again, they forgo individual responsibility becoming hidden within the crowd.

And yet, this for Kierkegaard is not what the ethical sphere should be. Rather, this kind of busyness displayed by the public is better defined in terms of the category of the *social*. The process whereby individuals become subsumed by the whole – in institutions, organisations, etc. – is the process of *levelling*. Hence it is not the “ethical individual” who is busy *per se*, but rather a corruption of the “ethical individual”, defined as the “social individual” who might be called busy. Hence, Kierkegaard considers the category of the social (in the present age) to be busy, not the ethical, as such. The ethical is rather one way that Kierkegaard highlights and draws attention to the issue of the social, but it is importantly not its solution; the religious is the remedy to the busyness present in the social sphere.

So, with busyness, which is a feature of the social in the present age, the ethical sphere can provide the critique, but itself cannot be the answer to establish a new social order – or a prevention of busyness – rather, the religious is needed (notably through the *halting* of confession) in order to truly escape busyness.

This is because for Kierkegaard the “ethical sphere is only a transition sphere” (SLW 476). In other words, one should not remain in the ethical sphere, but rather, *move through it*, on the way to the religious. The individuals that Kierkegaard critiques in *Two Ages*, due to the process of levelling and the subsummation into the whole, fail to acquire enough passion to remove themselves from a bastardised vision of the ethical, and in doing so, fail to move into the religious sphere; they are instead “running on the spot”, so to speak. The true mark of ethical life is the *responsibility of choice*; the social, as its inversion, negates the mark of the ethical, and in doing so leads the individual to follow “the crowd”, “the public”, and have “others” decide for them. It is in this way that the ethicist might become busy.

#### What Kind of Religiousness is Necessary?

If one is to absolutely avoid busyness, then, for Kierkegaard it must be through the religious. But a further question emerges out of this answer: what kind of religiousness is necessary to overcome busyness? In order to explore this idea and reiterate the claims made by Kierkegaard against busyness, it is prudent to consider two interrelated distinctions within Kierkegaard’s authorship. (1) In asserting the response to busyness as simply “the religious”, it is necessary to examine what sort of religiosity is required; for, within Kierkegaard’s writings he makes a distinction between what he terms “Religiousness A” and “Religiousness B”. Briefly, the former indicates a lesser type of religious practice, compared to the latter, which is religious practice expressed in its highest form as paradoxical, and crucially *Christian*. (2) Following on from this, it is necessary to consider the distinction within the Kierkegaardian religious schematic between *absolute* and *relative* values. For if there is to be any escape from busyness, then it is necessarily in the individual relating themselves to an absolute value – but what precisely must that absolute value be?

The question we are exploring first then is what kind of religiousness is needed to respond to busyness? Is it only Christianity, or might other forms of religion be suited to escaping busyness?The question that naturally follows on from this will focus on where one places value in one’s attempt to escape busyness. In other words, does avoiding busyness require that one place absolute value in something; and must that something be religious?

**(1) Religiousness A and Religiousness B.** For Kierkegaard, the distinction between “Religiousness A” and “Religiousness B” is not a distinction between “two species of one genus but at a species in relation to its genus” (Westphal, 1996: 175). In other words, “Religiousness B” presupposes “Religiousness A” and is a more sophisticated form. “Religiousness A”, for Kierkegaard, “is not the specifically Christian religiousness” (CUP 555), rather it is “precisely the quality of most of the religions in the world” (Lowrie, 1938: 323). Hence, whilst it is a religiousness, it is “not paradoxically dialectical” in the same way as Kierkegaard views Christianity as being (CUP 556). In contrast, Christianity, or “Religiousness B” *is* “paradoxical religiousness” (CUP 556). Kierkegaard uses the distinction between paganism (A) and Christianity (B) to exemplify the difference between the two kinds of religiousness; and further, adds that “Religiousness A” “can be the religiousness of everyone who is not decisively Christian, whether baptised or not” (CUP 557). In other words, included in Kierkegaard’s definition of “Religiousness A” are his Danish contemporaries who consider themselves Christian, but who do not fully accept the “the paradoxical and the absurd”, instead dressing up the contradictions of Christianity “in aesthetic gibberish” (CUP 557). In this way, “Religiousness A” is defined as a religion of *immanence* – one maintains an earthly (though not necessarily material) version of God; hence, paganism as a paradigm example: “Religiousness A” “retains the idealist assumption that the eternal truth is humanly accessible” (Hannay, 2005). For the pagan, for example, the gods live in the mountains, or in the clouds – they are human-like, and crucially *knowable* in some way. In contrast, “Religiousness B” is a religion of *transcendence*, wherein God is not of this world, and whose ways are unknowable; however, crucially for Christianity *by virtue of the absurd* God is also present in time and of the world through the Incarnation. Of course, contained within this is Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel (and speculative philosophy more generally),[[195]](#footnote-195) who attempts to explain away the “dialectical difficulty […] in the medium of abstraction, which ignores existence” (CUP 556). In distinguishing Christianity from a non-paradoxical religiousness (A), it is Kierkegaard’s intention to “make it difficult to become a Christian […] qualitatively and essentially difficult for every human being, because, viewed essentially, it is equally difficult for every human being to relinquish his understanding and his thinking and to concentrate his soul on the absurd” (CUP 557). Hence, it might be suggested that according to Kierkegaard the absurd, or the paradox, or the incomprehensible, is the crucial difference between “Religiousness A” and “Religiousness B” and the defining characteristic of Christian faith. Understood in this way, “Religiousness B” is “the intensification of [Religiousness] A” (Westphal, 1996: 175).

So, which kind of religiousness is a suitable response to busyness? Under Kierkegaard’s definition, it would appear that only true Christian religiousness, i.e. “Religiousness B”, would be an appropriate response to busyness. Let us consider why by way of an example: One could imagine a scenario, wherein an individual is committed to one thing or other; perhaps they are a pagan committed to the god of the sea; they pray passionately to the god of the sea, they focus their activities around the god of the sea, and in everything they do, they will that which appeases the god of the sea. However, despite seemingly appearing to will “one thing”, i.e. that which appeases the god of the sea, they are by Kierkegaard’s definition, still potentially busy. Why? Because unless that “one thing” is the Good, i.e. the will of the Christian God, then they *do not will one thing*, and are thus double-minded in busyness. As Kierkegaard writes in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*:

The person who wills one thing that is not the good is actually not willing one thing; it is an illusion, a semblance, a deception, a self-deception that he wills only one thing – because in his innermost being he is, he must be, double-minded (UDVS 25).

Thus, in this vein, it seems unlikely that “Religiousness A” would be unable to provide the individual with the means to escape busyness. It is not a necessary condition of “Religiousness A” to be committed to the Christian God – as “Religiousness A” is “not the specifically Christian religiousness” (CUP 555), and thus, if the individual is not committed to the Christian God, then for Kierkegaard, they necessarily do not will one thing. Consider, also that Kierkegaard identifies “Religiousness A” with paganism, a religion of *many* gods, rather than the *one* God of Christianity; might this suggest that within “Religiousness A” there remains the danger of busyness?

**(2) Absolute and Relative Values.** A useful distinction to bring in here, to further articulate this point is Kierkegaard’s distinction between *absolute* and *relative* value. For Kierkegaard, something has absolute value when it gives our lives meaning and significance, and it should – all being well – reside in our relationship to God. To give an example, the Knight of Faith, Kierkegaard’s paradigm exemplar of the faithful individual, “stands in an absolute relation to the absolute” (FT 56). In other words, they attribute absolute value to their God relation, and recognise the relative value of their other pursuits. For Kierkegaard, “where absolute value resides [is] in our relation to God, as it is getting this right that gives meaning and significance to our lives, and so should be seen as our ultimate purpose” (Stern & Watts, 2019: 431). Hence, relative values for Kierkegaard, whilst meaningful to the individual, should not take precedence over the absolute. The danger, for the Christian individual, is that they confuse the relationship between absolute and relative values, and relate absolutely to what is relative, and relatively to what is absolute. One way to think about busyness, as a fundamentally aesthetic category, is that is demonstrates a *misrelation* to what the individual ought to value. Let us explore this idea further through an example.

Let us consider a Christian individual who works as a gardener. One way that this individual might be viewed as “busy” in the Kierkegaardian sense, is if they consider their work as a gardener, their relationships with other gardener colleagues, and their fascination and interest in plants and gardening, as being of absolute value to themselves and giving their life ultimate meaning; in assigning absolute value to the multiplicity of these pursuits, the gardener could be seen as “busy”, and in doing so, ignoring their commitment to God. Now, whilst Kierkegaard does not want to deny to the gardener that their work is valuable, and their relationships and interests of importance, Kierkegaard would want the gardener to recognise that these pursuits are of only relative value, crucially in relation to the absolute value inherent in the gardener’s relationship to God. As Stern and Watts suggest: “the aim is not to *replace* our relations to what has relative value to only what has absolute value, as this would be to withdraw too far from many perfectly worthwhile goals and relationships; rather, the aim is to keep both in play ‘at the same time’ and to maximise our relation to both types of value” (Stern & Watts, 2019: 429). Thus, as Johannes Climacus writes in the *Postscript*:

The task is to practice the absolute relation to the absolute *telos* in such a way that the individual strives to reach his maximum: to relate himself simultaneously to his absolute *telos* and to the relative at the same time – not by mediating them but by relating himself absolutely to his absolute *telos* and relatively to the relative (CUP 407).

Consider again Kierkegaard’s exemplar of faith. The Knight of Faith might in many ways seem absurd. On his way home he looks forward to a hot meal cooked for him by his wife, though there is in all possibility the chances that this meal does not exist. And yet, he looks forward to it anyway, and does not despair when it does not materialise (FT 39-40). One reason for this, perhaps, is that the Knight of Faith recognises the relative value of the hot meal, and thus relates to it only relatively. The question is whether anything else (other than God) can take the role of an absolute value in order that the individual escape busyness; for Kierkegaard it seems, the answer is no. For if the absolute is not God, then it seems that it could only be chosen arbitrarily: why should our gardener choose gardening, over say cooking, or literature, as absolutely valuable to oneself, and indicative of their life’s meaning. Kierkegaard would argue that such an individual is necessarily double-minded, and merely busy.

### From “Bullshit Jobs” to “Meaningful Work”: Possible Contemporary Responses to Kierkegaard’s Concept of Busyness

Perhaps it is possible to answer the question “Is the religious necessary to overcome ‘busyness,’ as defined by Kierkegaard?” by inviting suggestions from more recent thinkers, who also engage with similar concepts. In this way perhaps it is possible to imagine a kind of vocation, or calling, that is not necessarily religious, but that overcomes busyness – as defined by Kierkegaard – regardless.

To start, we need a definition of “calling”, or “vocation” that – much to Anti-Climacus’s dismay – tears it from its religious origins. Douglas T. Hall and Dawn. E. Chandler define a calling as “a sense of purpose, that this is the work one was meant to do […] not necessarily […] connected to a set of religious beliefs” (2005: 155). Indeed, this is not so different from how Kierkegaard himself understands the basic tenets of a “vocation” or “calling”. The Danish term – *kald* – employed by Kierkegaard denotes this very sense of meaning and purpose within one’s life (see, previous chapter; Puchniak, 2016: 145). And indeed, Kierkegaard also links one’s vocation or calling to one’s self, in the sense that it is an activity that one is meant to do.[[196]](#footnote-196) As we have seen, the difference is that ultimately Kierkegaard resorts to a religious understanding of calling, in order to overcome the perils of busyness. However, this secular definition is suitable for our purposes.

Let us consider then, someone who is engaged in a way of being that Kierkegaard would define as “busyness”: the question we want to answer is, *how do they escape their busyness* *without the religious*? From the definition arrived at above this “busy” individual concerns themselves with trivialities, multiplicity, is distracted and apathetic, and does not achieve anything of real meaning or purpose. They are also, like the aesthete, likely to be in despair – though it is possible they have not realised this yet. It is helpful here to engage here with the work of David Graeber, Theodor W. Adorno, and Andrea Veltman (2016) and their respective conceptions of the “bullshit job” (2019), “pseudo-action” (1998), and “meaningless work”. All of these concepts are similar to Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, yet are presented as much more explicitly connected to our contemporary age, and the capitalist economy.

#### Bullshit Jobs

Graeber’s position is inherently anti-capitalist; his point of departure is a reflection on Keynesian economic theory, and in particular, J. M. Keynes’ prediction that by the end of the twentieth century, technology would have advanced sufficiently to the point where the average worker would work no more than fifteen hours per week. What instead happened, Graeber notes, is that despite the advance in technology – and the capacity to automate many jobs and reduce working hours – “technology has been marshalled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more” (Graeber 2019: xv). Graeber’s concern is not with technology, as such, but rather the creation of what he terms “bullshit jobs”. These are jobs that are “effectively pointless” (Graeber 2019: xv). They lack meaning and purpose, and do not achieve anything other than the perpetuation of their own existence. Graeber states:

a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case (Graeber 2019: 9-10).

We might suggest, then, that in Graeber’s definition of a “bullshit job” he makes three major claims. (1) A bullshit job is pointless, unnecessary, and meaningless (we’ll call this *the* *pointlessness claim*); (2) the worker who works this bullshit job knows that this is the case, but must attempt to disguise this (we’ll call this *the* *awareness claim*); (3) the widespread proliferation[[197]](#footnote-197) of bullshit jobs is not an economic necessity but a moral/political choice (Graeber 2019: xvi), constituting what Graeber refers to as “psychological violence”, on the working populace (we’ll call this *the moral claim*). Briefly, Graeber differentiates “bullshit jobs” from “shit jobs”, that is, jobs that are merely unpleasant or unenjoyable. Indeed, many “bullshit jobs” can be “shit jobs” – but, not all “shit jobs” are “bullshit jobs” (see: Graeber 2019: 14-16). Thus, any unpleasant, but necessary jobs – such as sewer maintenance – would, ironically, not qualify as either a “shit job”, nor a “bullshit job.”

It does not take much to note a connection between Graeber’s description of a “bullshit job” and Kierkegaard’s definition of “busyness”. As with busyness, there is an emphasis on the activity one is engaged in as constituting a meaningless, or purposeless, endeavour. It is, *prima facie*, work-for-work’s-sake, and like busyness wholly unnecessary – a waste of time. However, unlike Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, Graeber inserts a socio-political context. In both the *awareness claim* and *moral claim*, for whatever reason, the worker feels they must disguise their knowledge of the pointless nature of their work, and yet because of this awareness, there is psychological violence against them: because they know what they do is pointless, and yet continue to do it; there is a negative effect upon their very self – if what they *do* is pointless and without purpose, then it follows that *they* are pointless and without purpose, also. Despite its socioeconomic and political implications, the latter two claims are not so dissimilar from Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, wherein to engage in busyness – a purposeless and trivial activity – is to damage the very nature of one’s *self*. As we have seen, to be busy is to fragment/fracture the self (WL 98), and ultimately lose oneself in despair. Graeber’s “bullshit job” holder seems to be aware of the pointless nature of their occupation, unlike the despairing individual from Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus writings, who – albeit in varying degrees of unawareness – is to some extent unaware of their busyness, and subsequent despair. That said, one could compare the worker of a “bullshit job” to the aesthete in *Either/Or Volume I* who is seemingly aware of the pointlessness of busyness. Indeed, I already noted in Chapter 6, A has an “anti-work” attitude where it is clear that A sees *all* work as pointless. Indeed, in the “busyness aphorism” (see Chapter 3) A focuses on busyness itself as a meaningless and ridiculous activity.

If we accept that there is some overlap between Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, and Graeber’s notion of a “bullshit job”, then the questions become: (1) how does Graeber suggest we avoid “bullshit jobs”?; and (2) could his response apply to Kierkegaardian busyness also?

In order to escape from the authoritarianism of “bullshit jobs”, Graeber posits Universal Basic Income (UBI) as one possible form of resistance. UBI, Graeber claims, would give workers the freedom to quit their “bullshit jobs” in order to pursue more meaningful activities. Whilst some people, on quitting their “bullshit job”, will find more socially important work, such as “installing solar panels” or “discovering the cure for cancer” (Graeber, 2019: 281), many people will not; instead, Graeber predicts, many people will choose less socially important work, such as “restoring antique furniture”, or “translating Mayan hieroglyphics” (Ibid.). For Graeber, however, this does not matter; what is important is that individuals are now *free* to pursue whatever endeavours they like, with the aim of detaching “work from livelihood” (Ibid.).

However, this means that while there are some aspects of Graeber’s response that might be appealing to Kierkegaard, notably the freedom to pursue what one is genuinely passionate about, it seems that Graeber’s position is insufficient to overcome the problems posed by Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness; for, it seems that what one chooses to engage with could be chosen with complete arbitrariness, with no measure to determine *what* is worth pursuing. In other words, one risks ending up like the aesthete, whereby if one is overwhelmed by the multiplicity of all possible endeavours. One would, under this assumption, simply remain busy.

#### Pseudo-Action

Similarly, it is fruitful to also consider the concept of pseudo-action in the work of Theodor W. Adorno. For again, like Graeber’s concept of the “bullshit job”, Adorno’s concept of pseudo-action allows us to consider ways in which Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness might have further application in our contemporary age. There are several noteworthy similarities between Adorno’s concept of a pseudo-action, and Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness. However, much more explicitly than Kierkegaard, Adorno links the notion of a “pseudo-action” to the socioeconomic and political realm.[[198]](#footnote-198) For Adorno argues that in a capitalist society, action becomes “pseudo-activity”. Whilst Adorno primarily has *political* action in mind, it is no stretch to consider ways in which pseudo-activities may also be pervasive within the world of work and occupation. For Adorno, a pseudo-activity is an action that:

overdoes and aggravates itself for the sake of its own *publicity*, without admitting to itself to what extent it serves as a substitute satisfaction [for real activity], elevating itself to an end in itself (Adorno 1998: 291).

Adorno emphasises the socioeconomic and political element to the notion of pseudo-activity. He suggests that the pseudo-activity is a result of “the administered world[’s] tendency to strangle all spontaneity or at least channel it into pseudo-activities” (Adorno 1998: 292). What Adorno has in mind here seems to be a critique of a capitalist society, that transforms – or subsumes – all attempts at genuine action into spectacle or illusion; that is, into part of the economic system itself. The way this pseudo-activity might manifest politically might be, for example, through an anti-capitalist political group who sell t-shirts to raise funds; their protest becomes, in part, subsumed into the system. Similarly, pseudo-activity might manifest within one’s work – in a kind of “work-for-work’s-sake”. In this way, and crucially for Adorno, the concept of the pseudo-activity’s only aim is to *sustain itself*, and as an (unintended) consequence the economic system it exists in. Hence, Adorno’s concept of a pseudo-action is best compared to Kierkegaard’s discussion of action and busyness in *Two Ages*, wherein action is described by Kierkegaard as a “chimerical exertion” (TA 69), chimerical in both senses of the word: as formed of various – incongruous and not necessarily related – parts, and also as illusory, or impossible. As Kierkegaard writes: “nothing happens but still there is instant publicity” (TA 70). For Kierkegaard, those who engage in this kind of pseudo-action, or busyness, are concerned more with the appearance of activity than with the genuineness of the activity itself.

As its solution, Adorno posits the act of thinking as a way to overcome the stasis of the pseudo-activity. He asserts that “the uncompromisingly critical thinker” is what is required to overcome the meaningless theatre of pseudo-action (Adorno, 1998: 292). Yet, this kind of thinking is precisely what Kierkegaard would dismiss as pseudo-activity – for Kierkegaard, to attempt an *act* of *thinking* would be busyness! For instance, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, writing as Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard states:

If there is to be a distinction at all between thinking and acting, this can be maintained only by assigning possibility, disinterestedness, and objectivity to thinking, and action to subjectivity (CUP 339).

In other words, Johannes Climacus here reiterates Kierkegaard’s view in *Two Ages*: action is passionate, of subjectivity, and fundamentally interested, whilst thinking is, in this instance, apathetic, of objectivity, and dis-interested. If for Kierkegaard, genuine action is seen in contrast with busyness, then thinking – in this case a crucially overly-reflective kind indicative of Kierkegaard’s present age – is seen as precisely a kind of busyness. For Kierkegaard, contra Adorno, thinking alone cannot overcome busyness/pseudo-action.

#### Meaningful Work

Andrea Veltman’s book *Meaningful Work* (2016) aims to respond to the issue of work in our contemporary age, and the ways in which work has lost meaning, or worse, become oppressive. Meaningful work, for Veltman, is linked explicitly to human flourishing, and thus one crucial distinction within the text is between eudemonistically meaningful work, and eudemonistically meaningless work; in other words, between work which allows us to flourish and work that does not. Veltman defines meaningful work as that “which develops or exercises agency, skills, or capabilities and generally engenders a sense of fulfilment” in contrast to meaningless work “which may serve useful purposes but provides little to no opportunity for self-development or self-expression” (Veltman, 2016: 20). Work can become meaningless for several reasons: for instance, “a futile outcome when work amounts to nothing, a disconnect from personal goals or values, or a failure to engage with an individual’s talents” (Veltman, 2016: 85). In this way work becomes dehumanising and objectifying: individuals “serve *as* implements parts, or objects” (Ibid.).

Whilst Veltman’s definition of meaningless work contains only small parallels to Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness, namely that meaningless work is futile, and amounts to nothing (worthwhile), I think it is fruitful to consider her response, namely meaningful work, in light of Kierkegaard’s concerns regarding busyness. The questions become: does the secular concept of meaningful work go any way to overcoming the problems of busyness?

I think we must conclude that the answer is no. Veltman’s account of meaningful work is pluralistic, in that there is no *one way* that work can be meaningful to an individual, and thus no *one way* that one can overcome the trappings of meaningless work. Veltman even refers to her account of meaningful work as “an ode to the *multiplicity* of ways in which work can be meaningful” (Veltman, 2016: 141).[[199]](#footnote-199) The criteria for what could make work meaningful for Veltman is thus inherently individualistic; and whilst this appeals to our modern sensibilities, for Kierkegaard it is an entirely unsatisfactory conclusion. Kierkegaard’s frustration with busyness is precisely that it encourages an engagement with multiplicity, to the detriment of the individual. If Kierkegaard could respond to Veltman’s definition of meaningful work, he would likely conclude that what she proposes is simply more busyness, more ways to distract oneself from what is truly meaningful; and at its worse, a definition of work that might find a home in the aesthetic sphere, wherein meaning (if it exists at all) is based on individualistic desires, skills, and talents.

### Summary

So, is a religious notion of calling necessary if one is to escape busyness? (1) In answering this question we have discovered that if we take Kierkegaard’s definition of busyness, and pit it against Kierkegaard’s definition of calling, then it is obvious that the religious is both *necessary* and *sufficient* for overcoming busyness, as this is essentially the argument that one finds in Kierkegaard’s authorship: to escape busyness, one must go through the religious in the commitment to one’s calling (because one’s calling is fundamentally a religious one). (2) However, if we take Kierkegaard’s definition of busyness, and pit it against a non-Kierkegaardian – or modern – definition of calling (for instance, found in Hall & Chandler (2005), as a “sense of purpose”), then it seems that the religious is *not necessary*, but could in theory be *sufficient* as a means of escaping busyness: whilst a religious calling could be sufficient, one could perhaps find other meaningful activities – as one’s calling – that avoids busyness without necessarily relying on Kierkegaard’s fundamentally religious definition of calling. Yet, in the end this remains unsatisfactory for the Kierkegaardian, as it turns out that these “activities” can always be defined as mere busyness, in terms of pseudo- or distracted action.

In summary, then, if we are to accept Kierkegaard’s argument against busyness, then it appears that *for* *Kierkegaard*, one requires the religious as necessary in order to overcome and avoid busyness. Further, if we are to accept Kierkegaard’s definition of calling, then it would seem that the only way that one can “escape” busyness, is through the religious – i.e. through a commitment to one’s fundamentally religious calling. Otherwise, whatever activity one takes up can be framed – by the Kierkegaardian individual – under the rubric of busyness for various reasons, such as seeking distraction, or aesthetic pursuits, etc. For instance, mindfulness – as argued above – could quite easily be defined as busyness by Kierkegaard; one is replacing the religious with something lesser. All of the above theories (by Graeber, Adorno, and Veltman) suffer from this issue. *Without the absolute value that God provides the individual, it seems that for Kierkegaard, busyness is unavoidable.*

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1. It should be noted though, that Heidegger’s comments on busy-ness profit from the enormous influence of Kierkegaard. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The closest Stewart’s multiple tomes on conceptual analysis come to examining “busyness” is in an entry on “spiritlessness” (*Aandløshed*), where the author suggests that “spiritlessness” is the umbrella term for a number of concepts, including “‘busyness’, ‘double-mindedness’, ‘despair’, ‘worldliness’, and the like” (Rossatti, 2015: 83). Whilst I do not dispute the author’s findings, I would argue that “busyness” is important enough to be deserving of its own analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is not to suggest that scholars ignore the concept of busyness entirely; rather, rarely is busyness afforded lasting attention. That said, there are a few notable exceptions in the literature worthy of mention that specifically make note of the importance of “busyness” in Kierkegaard’s authorship. In Gordon Marino’s *The Quotable Kierkegaard* – an edited collection of Kierkegaard’s most poetic and important writings – there is a section explicitly titled “Busyness” (2013: 136-137) which includes some of Kierkegaard’s better-known comments on the concept. In Ronald F. Marshall’s *Kierkegaard for the Church: Essays and Sermon’s* “busyness” is discussed in relation to Kierkegaard’s religious writings, specifically a prayer in *Practice in Christianity*, and the notion of busyness as “conceited laboriousness” (PC 157). Marshall notes that busyness is a distraction from a life committed to faith; Kierkegaardian busyness for Marshall causes us to view our work as the defining feature of our lives (2013: 208). Further, in the “Introduction” to Charles E. Moore’s *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, busyness is defined as the “drift[ing] along” of people, who seem to be living engaged and fulfilling lives but who live without passion, following “the law of least resistance” (1999: xxix). There are of course other instances where scholars have also touched upon Kierkegaard’s comments on busyness, in relation to his other better-known concepts. Many of these will be drawn upon throughout the thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See: Aho & Evans, 2018; Goldhill, 2016; Maden 2020; Popova, 2014; Riggs, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also Tudvad (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Martin Zerlang suggests that there is something distinctively “urban” about philosophy originating from Copenhagen, and that it begins with Kierkegaard (1999b: 242). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The generally accepted view is that Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard believed that his whole family was cursed, because of a moment of transgression he had had as a child whilst tending to sheep on the Jutland heath. As Kierkegaard writes in his *Journals*: “How dreadful the thought of that man who once, as a small boy tending sheep on the Jutland heath, in much suffering, starving and exhausted, stood up on a hill and cursed God – and that man was unable to forget it when he was 82 years old” (KJN JJ:416). The story goes that Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard believed that because of his curse against God, and his moment of doubt, he was condemned to live his life whilst everything he had was taken away; he believed that he would live to see all of his children die. Despite his worldly riches, this religious melancholy and sense of foreboding hung over the Kierkegaard family household throughout Kierkegaard’s childhood, with the children believing it too. Indeed, the curse nearly materialised: when Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard died in 1838, five of his seven children (as well as his first and second wives) had died. In many ways for Søren Kierkegaard, his father’s death marked the lifting of this curse, and initiated a moment of change in Kierkegaard himself: from aimless dandy-esque student to a committed religious writer. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Well over one million pounds in today’s money. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See: Alverez (2011), Koteska (2016), Aroosi (2019), Stark (1950), Bukdahl (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There is also the possibility that Kierkegaard *is* critical of his father’s business, but for whatever reason – social, etc. – achieves this only indirectly, hence, the semantic linking of “those men of business” with “busyness”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ivor Southwood (2011) provides the paradoxical phrase “non-stop inertia” in his book of the same name: *Non-Stop Inertia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also CUP 373 / SV VII 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Hongs translate “gjorde det at sysle med Fortolkningen” as “busy with interpretations.” The Danish “gjorde” can have many different meanings. At its most basic it means “to do [something]”. In this context, Kierkegaard means to highlight the illusory nature of the activity the scholars engage in, and so I feel that the Hong’s translation as “busy with interpretations” works. The scholars are “doing interpretations”, but that they are “busy” with them in the Kierkegaardian sense stresses the illusory or empty nature of their activity; precisely the meaning Kierkegaard means to convey. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See: Stewart (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For example, some of the criticisms of Hegel and academia in *Fear and Trembling* are couched in the language of business, alluding to the connection with busyness, worldliness, and institutionalisation. Furthermore, in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard describes the Hegelians as going further than faith. He emphasises this notion of “going further” (*gaaer videre*), a movement which when looked at more closely seems impossible. Just where do these Hegelians think they are going Kierkegaard asks. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* Kierkegaard links this notion of going further (in Hegelianism) with busyness: “busyness – in which one continually goes further and further” (*Travlheden, hvori man bestandigt gaaer videre og videre*) (UDVS 67 / SV VIII 169). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a work that does consider Kierkegaard’s relationship to nearly every street and place in Copenhagen, see: Tudvad (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It is worth noting that when Tivoli was first proposed, the two main reasons given for its purpose were (1) aesthetic, that it would be a place of entertainment (and distraction), and (2) economic, that it would provide the city of Copenhagen a source of business and manufacturing. What is more interesting, however, is that when Tivoli was built, unlike Copenhagen and the rest of Denmark, it was permitted “freedom of trade”. As Martin Zerling writes: “Tivoli became an experiment in market economy” (Zerlang, 1999a: 88). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Denmark’s population in 1800, excluding Norwegian and German territories, was “about one million.” Of this population 75-85% lived in rural communities, with Copenhagen being Denmark’s only sizeable city (Kirmmse, 2013: 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, Kierkegaard was not alone in his criticisms of Tivoli as representing a desire for distraction: *The Corsair*, a satirical journal that would later attack Kierkegaard, considered Tivoli to be a “distraction from the more urgent political tasks of the day” (Pattison, 1999: 22), and “liberal politicians criticised Tivoli for diverting people’s attention away from politics” (Zerlang, 1999a: 87). Interestingly, when the founder of Tivoli, Georg Carstensen, proposed Tivoli to King Christian VIII, one of his arguments for its creation would be that it would act as a distraction from political matters; if people are having fun, they will not be concerned with politics (Zerlang, 1999a: 81). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Kierkegaard also presents similar debates in *Postscript*, about Copenhagen’s *Dyrehaven* – or Deer Park. (See: CUP 495). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. It was not until 2007 that Bryggebroen (The Quay Bridge) opened, and 2016 that Inderhavnsbroen (The Inner Harbour Bridge) opened. In 2019 Lille Langebro (The Little Long Bridge) opened besides Langebro. All of these twenty-first century bridges cater only to pedestrians and bicycles, so that Langebro and Knippelsbro remain the only two bridges open to traffic, across the main harbour of Copenhagen. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, in *Either/Or* it is because Knippelsbro bridge is raised that A laughs at the busy businessman. As Thulstrup notes, regarding Kierkegaard’s remarks on Knippelsbro in *Either/Or*: “[w]e are immediately placed in the midst of the city, in a situation well-known to every Copenhagener. That the bridges are raised to permit through traffic in the harbour is still a valid excuse for late arrivals: ‘The bridge was up!’” (Thulstrup, 1986: 127). In *Either/Or* it is the raising of the bridge that arrests the businessman’s busyness. Interestingly, Knippelsbro sits right besides what during Kierkegaard’s time was Copenhagen’s stock exchange. This is likely why A refers to this bridge, in particular, in relation to busyness. Copenhagen’s stock exchange would have been a bustling centre for the city’s commerce. This is another instance of where Kierkegaard connects busyness with business thematically in his writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See: “Diapsalmata” in *Either/Or*. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Consider this in relation to Kierkegaard’s countryside journey, where he arrives at his declaration that (subjective) truth is nothing more than to live for an idea; not something to be delineated to by others. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In *Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s Analysis of Existence and Its Relation to the Proclamation*, K. E. Løgstrup also identifies this tension in Kierkegaard’s writings between a life of solitude and silence, and a “life in the crowd”. The “life in the crowd” of which Kierkegaard is so critical is, as Robert Stern has argued “a kind of ‘busyness’, whereby we disperse ourselves into a plurality of activities which occupy us, and make decisions on the basis of the views of others, while in an anxious manner constantly comparing ourselves to them […] The consequence is a life in illusion and mindlessness or spiritual emptiness (*Geistolosigkeit*)” (Stern, 2020: xviii-xix). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This is also not to suggest that the meaning of one’s existence comes from the busyness of the city, rather than the quietude that one finds in the church; it is rather that the church ought not to become an escape, any more than the city’s busyness should become a source of meaning (cf. Steiner’s claim, above). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. To be sure, Pattison in his analysis of the city and spectacle is aware of this: the literal escape from the busy streets into the church is always doomed to fail as the church itself becomes part of the spectacle of nineteenth-century Copenhagen. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This is why I feel Steiner is misguided in her assertion that it is the silence of Christianshavn that gives the busyness of the city its meaning. Rather, it is precisely the *silence* of Christianshavn that offers the possibility for the individual to develop a relationship with God. It is then conceivably possible that the individual finds meaning in the everyday busyness (contra, for example the aesthete, A), however, the meaning does not come from the busyness itself: it comes from God. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See: Tudvad (2005) and (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This is, I would argue, largely through the tension between pietism and state Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Rudd (2019). Rudd notes that in the *Gilleleje Journal* Kierkegaard is both appreciative and attentive to the natural beauty of the countryside and its surrounding landscape, but does not commit fully to romanticism. Instead, the romantic notion of “God-in-Nature” is transformed into a “theophany”, wherein we see nature as “expressive of God”, a way in which God communicates with us (152-153). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. It is worth noting, that despite provoking this imagery, and despite the suggestion that it is in nature that one connects with God, *Kierkegaard does not romanticise nature*, and the natural world. As Pattison has noted, Kierkegaard “distinguished sharply between the poetic eulogising of nature and the Christian attitude” (Pattison, 1999: 128). Nature is rather used metaphorically to demonstrate faith and unquestioning obedience to God. In nature there is an immediacy which is absent in the ever-increasing complexity, rationality, and distracting busyness of the city. For an interesting discussion of Kierkegaard and nature, see: Rudd (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See also Garff, 2005: 50-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. In Clare Carlisle’s recent biography of Kierkegaard, she suggests that the question that Kierkegaard is fundamentally concerned with throughout his authorship is *how to be a human being in the world* (Carlisle, 2019). It is clear from the passage above that its answer cannot derive from life in the crowd. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. It might be argued that this “leisure” pursuit is also a kind of busyness. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This is not to suggest that Marino endorses Kierkegaard’s comments on death. Conversely, Marino considers that at times, Kierkegaard’s “At a Graveside” “seems inhuman” (2011: 158). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. This line of reasoning is poetically expressed in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). Faced with his own mortality and impending death, the novella’s protagonist, Ivan Ilyich, seeks to understand what it means to live an authentic life; something that he has clearly neglected. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. It is possible that this reflection on busyness and death is a reference to both Seneca and Pascal. Kierkegaard owned Seneca’s *On the Shortness of Life*, and was of course aware of Pascal’s discussions on busyness as distraction from one’s mortality. As Pascal states in his *Pensées*: “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things […] to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy […] in short by what is called diversion” (Pascal, 1966: 66-8). We will explore Pascal’s thoughts on “busyness” in Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. For an illuminating discussion of the way in which “the present age” is both an age of “reflection” – argued by Kierkegaard, most notably in *Two Ages* – but also “despair” – argued by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*, and by Kierkegaard elsewhere – see: Carlisle (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. In this chapter I refer to three separate editions of Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages.* The first is the translation by Hong & Hong referenced as TA. The second is the translation by Dru, published under the title *The Present Age*, and referenced as PA. Finally, I also refer to the original Danish version of *Two Ages*, published as *En Literair Anmeldelse*, and referenced as SV VIII following the common convention in Kierkegaard scholarship. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. In fact, when Kierkegaard published *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, it appeared as *En Literair Anmeldelse*, i.e. *A Literary Review*, emphasising that it was a review, rather than an original work. It is largely through the translations of *Two Ages* that its title has given primacy to the “two ages” aspect, and neglected the review aspect. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See: Hong & Hong, 2009: viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. For instance: “for as public figures authors have to put up with a great deal, including the imputation of a relation to people who by having something printed are also authors” (COR 46). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. This is a modified example of Roberts’. Roberts uses the example of an automobile enthusiast. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. For a witty discussion of the application of Kierkegaard’s critique of the “present age” to our own present age, see: Kaufmann (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. It should be noted that the cited passage from Kierkegaard’s *Journals* was written in 1847, during the middle of *The Corsair* Affair, and thus after the publication of *Two Ages: A Literary Review*. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. There is some debate about this. For instance, Roberts suggests that Kierkegaard’s use of the term reflection has “roughly” three different meanings (1984: 92). I think it is likely there is a fourth meaning of the term, with the fifth definition perhaps being a summation of the previous four. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. I use “sphere” to designate aesthetic, ethical, and religious worldviews, rather than “stage” as I feel it better captures the dynamism and fluidity Kierkegaard intends these worldviews to possess. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. This is one instance where using examples that do not mention the religious are not ideal. For Kierkegaard, nothing compares to the passion the religious sphere entails, and so for Kierkegaard the gardener would not be able to sustain this *interest* in growing broad beans, and would eventually lose passion, and return to reflection. In terms of “busyness”, I will in the final chapter consider ways that Kierkegaard’s response to the problem of busyness might be secularised. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. It should be noted that what is missing here also, is “not merely […] a lack of energy” but also the power to “submit to the necessity in one’s life, what may be called one’s limitations” (SUD 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. The busy person fails to see themselves reflected truly in the mirror of possibility, suggesting that the truly busy person, for Kierkegaard, lacks even the possibility for reflection. This puts them in an even worse position than the overly reflective individuals of the present age (see: UDVS). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. In fact, many would consider themselves as higher; as religiously orientated individuals. Part of Kierkegaard’s project is to show that this is merely an illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Søltoft (1999) draws upon a similar distinction between genuine ethics, and a corrupt kind of secular ethics, encapsulated by the term “the social.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. In Kierkegaard’s usual ironic way, it is interesting to note the way in which *Two Ages: A Literary Review* is both a reflection (*Reflexion*) on and a reflection (*Reflex*) of the novel, *Two Ages*. Kierkegaard states that his review is merely “imitating the novel, subordinate to it, and in its service” (TA 76). This would suggest then that the reflection is always inferior to the original after which it is fashioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Several popular “edutainment” media websites have discussed Kierkegaard’s notion of busyness. In fact, somewhat ironically it is here Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness has received the most attention. However, it must be stressed that these articles all treat Kierkegaard’s discussion of busyness in *Either/Or,* as Kierkegaard’s own view of busyness,which is not indicative of Kierkegaard’s *wider* understanding of busyness. See, for example: Aho & Evans (2018); Goldhill (2016); Popova (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. For a detailed study of the comic in Kierkegaard’s authorship see: Williams (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. As we saw in the previous chapter, this motif is repeated in Kierkegaard’s critique of the *unthinking*-*reflection* of the mass public in *Two Ages*. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. As we will see in Chapter 6, this is in contrast to Judge William’s view of work: that one reason for work is precisely to sustain the conditions necessary for life. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Though of course, as we saw in Chapter 1, Kierkegaard would dispute this, and argue that the *idea* of death, at least, can help to bring meaning to one’s life, and help one avoid busyness. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. It would make sense to call A’s nihilism *existential*, in the sense that it denies or “negates the meaning of life” (Crosby, 1988: 31). Indeed, A refers to life’s meaning often in the “Diapsalmata”, for example: “How empty and meaningless life is…” (EO I 29). However, A’s nihilism also seems to be absolute, in the sense that it encompasses all of his – moral, philosophical, epistemological, etc. – reflections on life. (See, for example, EO I 24; 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Though we should remember that Victor Eremita places the “Diapsalmata” in a semi-random order (EO I 8). However, we should also remember that Søren Kierkegaard, as author, places the “Diapsalmata” in a very specific order! [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Consider how the historical Socrates would literally interrupt peoples’ busyness in the Athenian marketplace. In considering himself a gadfly, Socrates sees it his divine duty to arouse the citizens of Athens out of their distracted lives. See: Plato, *Apology*; specifically: “Indeed, men of Athens, I am far from making a defence now on my behalf, as might be thought but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god’s gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not so easily find another like me. I was attached to this city by the god – though it seems a ridiculous thing to say – as upon a great and noble horse which is somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfil some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company” (30e-31a). Socrates as a gadfly (*bremse*) represents a literal disruption to the everyday lives of the Athenian citizens. However, *prima facie* this might suggest the opposite of A’s comments on the fly disrupting one’s busyness. For A, the fly represents a “stopping” of the person’s busy haste; whereas for Socrates, his gadfly-like nature was to “arouse” the Athenian citizens from their slumber. Yet, the comparison between Socrates and the fly in A’s aphorism holds: busyness for Kierkegaard will eventually be defined in terms of a stagnation. Thus, perhaps a Socratic gadfly is necessary to disrupt, or stop (*bremse*), this stagnation. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. This highlights an interesting distinction between Kierkegaard and the pseudonym A, and therefore an interesting distinction between A’s *aesthetic* critique of busyness, and Kierkegaard’s *own* critique of busyness. On the one hand, Søren Kierkegaard – as “author” of the “Diapsalmata” – is likely aware of the Socratic motif at work here, the way in which a *Socratic* disruption is needed to halt someone’s busyness; an idea we will see expressed in Kierkegaard’s religious writings, where the notion of a confession, defined by Kierkegaard as halting interrupts a busy person’s busyness. On the other hand, as “author” of the “Diapsalmata”, A finds the *mere* disruption of the busy person’s busyness comic, purely because it is “accidental”, and “interesting” and regardless of the thematic significance of Socrates. Elsewhere, in a letter sent in 1848, Kierkegaard will suggest that what is needed to disrupt the busyness of the age, is Socrates: “Oh, that there might be such a gadfly in the confused struggle of our times who with Socratic *ataraxie* [peace of mind] would directly oppose the ‘whither’ of modern haste [*Tidens Travlhed*]” (LD 263). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Rossatti argues for two different conceptions of “vortex” in Kierkegaard’s writings: one *subjective*; one *objective*. The first, developed in Kierkegaard’s first authorship – specifically the aesthetic writings – uses the image of the vortex as a metaphor for the “tribulations of existence” (2015: 222), specifically relating to subjectivity and inwardness. The concept then develops in Kierkegaard’s second authorship as one concerned with socio-political matters, and is objective in the sense that it concerns one’s relationship with the world. See Rossatti (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. As we will see, Kierkegaard’s response to busyness will involve an active “taking up” of this contingency (or faith) of which the busy person avoids. As the young man of *Repetition* writes in response to an acceptance and avowal of this contingency: “Three cheers for the dance in the vortex of the infinite […] three cheers for the cresting waves that *fling me above the stars*” (R 222). My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. A similar view, that sees idleness as a moral good is taken up by Bertrand Russell in his witty essay “In Praise of Idleness” (1932). However, Russell’s notion of idleness is less extreme than A’s. Indeed, Russell views some work as necessary; “four hours a day” is all that is required. For Russell, idleness means that “there will be happiness and joy in life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia”. Unlike A, Russell considers the possibility that this *limited idleness* will leave people with enough energy to engage in *productive* leisure activities, to use “leisure intelligently”, rather than succumbing to boredom, and engaging in amusements that are “passive and vapid”. Only transitioning from working all day to being idle all day will produce boredom; a limited amount of both work and idleness is needed for a happy society. See: Russell (2009). For a more recent account that argues in praise of idleness, and is more closely aligned with A’s view, see: O’Connor (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. For an account of the “demonic” (*det Dæmoniske*) in Kierkegaard’s writings see: McDonald (2016). McDonald states: “The demonic inverts the truth, loves its sickness and fears the remedy. What it celebrates as freedom is unfreedom (for example, flight from boredom); what it desires in love is self-love; what it constructs as a self is despairing discontinuity; what it pursues as communication is indirect communication” (151). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. See McDonald (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. They are therefore characterised as a variety of despair later in *The Sickness Unto Death*. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. See *Repetition*: “He alone is truly happy who is not deluded into thinking that the repetition should be something new, for then one grows weary of it” (R 132). And, “Who could want to be susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly *diverts* the soul anew” (R 133). My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. This is reversed in *Two Ages*, where the public gains in extensity what they lose in intensity (TA 97-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Again, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, this will be defined as a variety of despair for the person who lives too much in the categories of imagination (SUD 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. It seems clearer here that boredom relates closely to the busyness of the age; the various commitments A recommends avoiding could be seen as ways to be busy: one avoids becoming “just a plain John Anyman, a tiny cog in the machine of the body politic” (EO I 298). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. For a “survey” of the different ways of reading “The Seducer’s Diary” see: Dewey (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. See Dewey (1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Though, to a certain extent it does not matter whether A *is* Johannes, or not. Rather, what is important is whether Johannes employs A’s method of intensive crop rotation, which I argue he does. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Indeed, Eremita stresses that the “seducer” is alluded to in A’s “Silhouettes” (EO I 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. This is significant as it is indeed a “halt” that Kierkegaard recommends to prevent busyness in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. A similar point is made by McCarthy, who states: “Aesthete A has more than mere dim knowledge of his condition, but he is far from perfect clarity. In fact he seems to be engaging in a stratagem of distracting himself from his self-knowledge through various kinds of mental busyness, whether it be aesthetic essays or self-observation” (McCarthy, 2008: 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. The reference is to Hegel’s *The Science of Logic* (1812). The spurious infinity is not a true infinity, but is “only repetitive monotony, the one and the same tedious *alternation* of this finite and infinite”(Hegel, 2010: 108-114). See also, Kierkegaard *Repetition*. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. See Dewey (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. See: Hough (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Indeed, there are so many self-help books written from the Christian perspective today – some from reputable sources, others less so – that it is fruitless to list them. A cursory online search reveals countless of these books for sale. Busyness certainly remains a pre-occupation of the Christian *zeitgeist*. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. The Greek is περὶ πολλὴν, literally “concern” about “many things”. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Of course, the Sabbath day being a day of rest is also the most holy-day of the week for the Christian, mirroring the seventh day of creation on which God rested: “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made” (*Genesis* 2:2-3). Indeed, it is this day which in itself is a day of rest that *also* prepares the Christian for the week ahead of toil and struggle. Thus, whilst one “rests” on the Sabbath, one is by no means “idle”. As Diarmaid MacCulloch writes: “the seventh day was more than a withdrawal: it continued in some sense the work of creation” (MacCulloch, 2014: 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Seneca gives an apt description of these “busybodies”, whom are “busy about nothing” (2005: 20) in *On the Shortness of Life*: “We must cut down on all this dashing about that a great many people indulge in, as they throng around houses and theatres and fora: they intrude into other people’s affairs, always giving the impression of being busy […] Their roaming is idle and pointless, like ants crawling over bushes, which purposelessly make their way right up to the topmost branch and then all the way down again. Many people live a life like these creatures, and you could not unjustly call it busy idleness” (Seneca, 2005: 96). (Interestingly, Seneca’s life and conception of “busybodies” corresponds almost exactly to the time in which scholars believe *Thessalonians* to have been written. Seneca lived 4 BC - 65 AD, whilst *Thessalonians* is believed to have been written somewhere within 51 AD - 115 AD, with many considering it to have been written between 51 AD – 52 AD). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. One influential study is the two volume work: Patrick (1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. French: *Divertissement.* [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Further, Baxter – much more explicitly than Kierkegaard – also links several of these themes to wealth and “and its acquisition” (Weber, 2000: 156). Weber’s text contains an important discussion of Baxter and wealth. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. In “At a Graveside” (1845), Kierkegaard implores his reader to consider their own mortality, earnestly. He seeks to create an awareness of the scarcity of time in the individual, such that they put their limited time to better use, rather than procrastinate in busyness and idleness. For more on the way that Kierkegaard’s writing relates to these themes, and specifically procrastination, see: Marino (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. A particular favourite from this passage: “If my Books be thrown together on a heap, I may spend half the day in looking for them when I should use them: but if they be set in order and I know their places, it spares me that time. So is it in the right Timing of our duties” (§.40. Direct.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Baxter’s thoughts here are similar to Kierkegaard’s own criticisms of Christendom in his later writings: that is, that most people are too busy with their own preoccupations and worldly concerns to give Christianity the time and seriousness of attention that it requires. For Kierkegaard, most people – the established Church especially – only “play at Christianity” (M 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. One notable omission is Saint Augustine, whose *Confessions* contain several remarks critical of busyness, again in relation to idleness, or sloth. For instance, Augustine considers that idleness is merely false rest: “Yea, sloth would fain be at rest; but what stable rest besides the Lord?” (See: Augustine: 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. The previously well-known title of the work – *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* – comes from the early English translation by Douglas E. Steere (1938). Whilst the title was technically incorrect, R. L Perkins has noted its “stroke of genius” in that it directs the readers’ attention “as moral agents” to St. James’s categorical imperative (James 4:8). Further, Perkins notes that Kierkegaard’s title is much more ambiguous and does not give us this directive; conversely, Kierkegaard’s title in fact complicates matters with the vagueness of both the term “various” and “occasional”. To be sure, the notions of both “various” and “occasional” in fact distract the reader from the aim of the text; that is the *continual* task of willing *one* thing. (See: Perkins (2005). However, according to the Hongs, one can also understand “occasional” as denoting an *occasion*, rather than “occurring now and then” (Hong & Hong, 2009: ix). [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Like of much of Kierkegaard’s authorship, he seeks to engage with the reader indirectly. Whilst “An Occasional Discourse” is not as indirect as Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings, the rejection of any authorial authority in the “Preface” indicates that Kierkegaard’s message in the discourse is not his own, but rather, he is merely the messenger delivering the message indirectly. For more on the indirect way in which Kierkegaard’s message is put forward in “An Occasional Discourse” see: Dambgaard (2019). For a more general account of Kierkegaard’s indirect method of communication, which engages with debates in literary theory, see: Poole (1993); and also for the argument that Kierkegaard is a proto-postmodernist in his use of indirect communication, see: Westphal (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Indeed, as we will see in the following chapter, this is very much the way that the ethical life sphere, expressed by Judge William in *Either/Or II*, understands repentance. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. This may seem somewhat counterintuitive. For, surely the individual could confess some part of their sinfulness – some single sin – without disclosing themselves entirely? As we will see, however, for Kierkegaard the individual – to confess – must ultimately *identify themselves with sin*. For Kierkegaard, what is important about the act of confession, which in Section 4 we will see defined as a “halt”, is that “[i]n a moment of being hauled up and out of the busyness of the everyday, a person *is* her or his sin” (Hough, 2005: 47). For this realisation to happen, the self must first be unified. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. One could argue in this case that, in confessing, God “finds out” that the individual themselves has recognised that they are sinful. So, it could be said that whilst God does not find out about the individual’s transgressions (as being omniscient He already knows everything the individual has done), He does find out that the individual themselves now recognises their sins. However, the rebuttal is that God – as omniscient – also knows this too, which seems to be the view that Kierkegaard holds. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Elsewhere, in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (1845), and specifically “On the Occasion of a Confession”, Kierkegaard discusses the way in which the “noisy doings” of the world attempt to make this kind of escape difficult, if not impossible. The world “attempts to get rid of stillness in order to have […] a nature-echo from the crowd” (TDIO 11). In this sense, Kierkegaard places the escape to the country as just another inauthentic escape from busyness; akin to an escape into the crowd, wherein “an echo of public opinion that mockingly overtakes you as if you were going down this road of stillness into the desert of illusion” (TDIO 39). I will discuss stillness in more detail in Section 4 where confession signifies a kind of halting. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Changed “halt” to “confession” for context. For Hough, as we will see, they are interchangeable. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. There is some similarity here between the stubborn embracing of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*. In both instances, both individuals are as far from God and the good as possible. See SUD 67-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. It could be that Kierkegaard – in using the term *mangfoldige*/manifold – takes inspiration from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, wherein Kant defines space and time as containing “a manifold (*Mannigfaltige*) of pure *a priori* intuition” (CPR A 77 / B 102). For Kant, the intuition is *pure*, because it is given *a priori*. Prior to “synthesis and conceptual organisation, a manifold of intuitions would be an undifferentiated unit, a seamless, buzzing confusion” (Brook & Wuerth, 2020). It could be that Kierkegaard uses the term *mangfoldige* to describe busyness, in order to capture its chaotic, and hectic nature. This Kantian influence is reinforced when Kierkegaard describes the multifariousness (*mangfoldige*) of the double-minded individual as “[m]otley-coloured, […] ever-new confusion” (UDVS 65); and elsewhere as “chaotic consciousness” (KJN NB30 40) which could easily be a description of the manifold of intuition of Kant’s *Critique*; the chaotic nature of busyness creates something akin to the Kantian manifold. It is certainly Kierkegaard’s intention that one considers the mind of the *multi*-*minded* busy individual to be one of chaos and disorder, where one is unable to focus on specific units, or tasks, thus they remain *undifferentiated*. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. *Gyldendals Røde Ordbøger.* It could also relate to the many, as in the crowd. Busyness is certainly a category of the crowd. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Kierkegaard’s playful allusion to Ecclesiastes is telling, and it is worth noting. The thought that there is “continually something new under the sun” is an ironic inversion of Solomon’s claim that “there is nothing new under the sun”. Which, to be sure, is not the first reference to Ecclesiastes in this text. An earlier reference can be found in the opening pages, where Kierkegaard recalls Solomon’s wisdom that “everything has its time” (UDVS 8). In referencing Ecclesiastes Kierkegaard points towards another feature of busyness: *that is that it is meaningless*. As Kierkegaard writes in “An Occasional Discourse”:

     The busy ones, who neither labour nor are burdened but are only busy, presumably think that they themselves have escaped if they themselves have avoided suffering in life; therefore they do not wish to be disturbed by hearing about or thinking about terrible things. *They have indeed escaped, they have also escaped having a view of life and have escaped into meaninglessness.* (UDVS 106-7. My emphasis).

     In comparison, in Ecclesiastes, Solomon describes life without God as tiring, and weary – even despite its multifariousness:

     All things are full of weariness;  
     a man cannot utter it;  
     the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
     nor the ear filled with hearing  
     (Ecclesiastes 1:4-11).

     Despite the appearance of multifariousness and diversity, without God, this variety is ultimately meaningless. Whilst one can always find something new to do or to see, one’s actions are merely a form of diversion – a distraction even from Solomon’s insights. In many ways, the concept of busyness for Kierkegaard may be said to have its roots in Ecclesiastes. I will consider further the notion that busyness is meaningless in the next chapter of this thesis: ““What I Am to Do”: Work, Occupation, and Vocation”. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. This would place Kierkegaard’s depiction of busyness in line with previous thinkers, such as Seneca, Blaise Pascal, and Richard Baxter. See Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. There exists an entire literature on “interruption science”, that is the way in which interruptions affect human performance. Some of this literature suggests that interruptions, such as phone calls, can take on average twenty-five minutes to recover from. Yet these interruptions, like the phone call, occur on average every eleven minutes; thus, “we’re never caught up with our lives” (Iyer, 2014: 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. However, as we will see, for Kierkegaard, self-deception is a possibility in all cases of distraction in that self-deception is at least “encouraged” in all cases (Martin, 2005: 57). [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. For a psychological account see: Urgo (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. For an account of the psychology of self-distraction see Chapter 4, of: Wegner (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Interestingly, this is not the case for the aesthetic worldview. For the aesthete one can only witness stillness, whether that is the stillness of the night, or the stillness of the countryside. Consider *Either/Or Volume I,* wherein the aesthete can not *be still*: “It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion” (EO I 285). [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. It should be noted that this attention on ourselves should include the awareness of the God-relation, if it is to avoid becoming solipsistic. One might contrast this religious response to busyness to a kind of secular mindfulness – which for Kierkegaard would precisely be solipsistic. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Kierkegaard makes a similar point in his *Journals*, where he writes that “stopping” is necessary in order to become “Attentive to Christianity and to Become a Christian”. Kierkegaard writes: “Most people live from cradle to grave ceaselessly and unstopped in the medium of ceaselessness (temporality, the merely quantified, etc.). […] In actual life, the natural human being fears death no more than he fears stopping. […] To the person whose element is ‘to a certain degree’, [i.e. the busy person] the limitlessness, the infinite, the stationary character of the eternal in the stopping is just like dying” (KJN NB 18: 4). Stopping, or finding the capacity to halt, is thus a necessary step to break away from one’s busyness and engage on the path to becoming a Christian; however, as Kierkegaard makes clear, most people only ever realise this halt when faced with death. (See also, “At a Graveside” TDIO 69-102). [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. The notion of the “halt” has also personal significance for Kierkegaard, and the trajectory of his authorship – this also helps to shed light on the way in which the “halt” plays a transitionary role in the progression from the aesthetic, and ethical, to the religious. As Kierkegaard began his second authorship, he considered the pseudonym Anti-Climacus to be the turning point: “So I turn off the tap; that means the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, a halt” (JP VI 6450). According to the Hongs, the halt “refers to a qualitative shift in the authorship and to the halt he was brought to under the critique of the writings” (Hong & Hong, 1983: xx). Furthermore, Kierkegaard considered this halt to be the transitionary point between the lower, or aesthetic pseudonyms, and the higher, or religious pseudonyms. For further discussion see: Hong & Hong (1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. It is significant that the Danish for halting, *standsede*, contains within it much more emphasis on movement than the Danish for stillness, *stilhed*. With *stilhed*, the connotations are of calmness, silence; and appropriately the calm that proceeds the storm (*Gyldendals Røde Ordbøger*; 1979: 422). For halting, *standsede*, there is an emphasis on movement, on activity. One might argue that in halting there is *action*, whilst – at least semantically – stillness is *passive*. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. It might be worth considering what exactly can cause such a halt? Whether such a halt is externally or internally caused? One might consider this need to halt busyness in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic. It certainly qualifies as an external halt, and a disruption to the ordinary (TDIO 36), it is certainly anxiogenic, and one wonders whether such an external halt might spur an internal halt, or alternatively whether that external halting would be for Kierkegaard some sort of inauthentic halt, and just another way for the individual to distract themselves. I would argue that Kierkegaard’s definition of the halt fits the latter, though it is not conclusive. Whilst Kierkegaard does allude to an external halt in his *Letters*, in the figure of Socrates – “Oh, that there might be such a gadfly in the confused struggle of our times who with Socratic *ataraxie* [peace of mind] would directly oppose the “whither” of modern haste [*Tidens Travlhed*]” (LD 263) – the real halt is internal. Remember, that whilst the figure of Socrates might represent an external halt, Socrates himself is merely the midwife whom assists in the birth of the internal halt, which is the fundamental halt for Kierkegaard. Consider also that the storm metaphor emphasises the sailor’s inwardness, despite the storm raging externally. But it is precisely the storm that creates the conditions for the halt. In a similar way the Covid-19 pandemic could be interpretated as an external halt, and perhaps the cause of an inner halt in an individual. The current literature suggests both that many individuals are revaluating the busy pace of their lives in light of the pandemic, and also that many are simply seeking distraction and attempting to keep moving, to keep busy in spite of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. See SUD (14-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. There are various logistical reasons also as to why Kierkegaard felt he could not become a pastor. If he were to take up an established position within the Church, for example, then he would no longer be able to speak “without authority” as his pseudonymous and named writings set out to do. George Pattison outlines several *key factors* that prevented Kierkegaard following this path, namely, the “sheer scale” of his authorship up to that point, its possible ramifications – such as whether Kierkegaard himself could ever appropriate his own writings into his own life (as a potential pastor) – and crucially his confrontation with *The Corsair*. See Pattison (2019), specifically, Chapter 1: “A Crisis of Vocation” (13-40). For more on the reasons why Kierkegaard did not become a country pastor, see Carlisle (2019), specifically, Chapter 13: “At Odds with the World” (205-218). [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. It is of course debatable as to whether “S. Kierkegaard” is to be considered one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. For more on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Denmark, and its relation to Kierkegaard see: Kirmmse, B. (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. For example, Graeber argued that the majority of jobs performed by the majority are “bullshit”, meaningless, and a waste of time. See: Graeber, D. (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. The Judge’s view seems to be found again in the view of Bertrand Russell, who argues that even the dullest work is preferable to idleness. Cf. Russell, 2006: 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. I do not think it accidental that A, in “Rotation of Crops” has a rather mixed up and unusual view of agriculture (i.e. changing the soil rather than the crops); A’s fantastical thinking leads him to ignore his *Næringssorger.* One should also note the irony that Judge William, whilst appearing to be a well-to-do ethical individual, also ignores his *Næringssorger*, due to his wealth. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. In the philosophy of Hannah Arendt this view is seemingly reiterated: work provides a sense of permanence that “produces durable artifacts or constructs the artifice of the world, representing a break from ever-recurring natural cycles of life and decay that envelop other animals” (Veltman, 2016: 10). This is in contrast to mere “labour”, that retains its dependency on natural forces. As Arendt writes: “Labour is the activity which corresponds to the biological processes of the human being, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are *bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labour*. The human condition of labour is life itself” (Arendt, 1998: 7). My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. This is possibly an influence of Cicero, who in his *De Officiis* suggested that “whoever gives his labour for money sells himself and puts himself in the rank of the slaves” (cf. Cicero, 1913). To work, for Judge William, is necessary; but to realise that money is not the reason to work, is to be free from it in some way. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. It is no surprise that it is possible to link F. H. Bradley to Judge William; both are students of Hegel. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. I am aware that the views expressed in in the chapter “My Station and Its Duties” are not Bradley’s final position in the book as a whole. Indeed, Bradley himself discouraged the “cherry-picking” of this chapter alone as representative of his own position. It is however a helpful resource for understanding, more concretely, Judge William’s stance on work. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. For more on Kierkegaard, and The Seducer as vampiric, see: Wellington Smith, T. (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. The reader should note that when I refer to “S. Kierkegaard” I refer specifically to the author of the upbuilding discourses, in this case, “An Occasional Discourse”; rather than to “Kierkegaard himself” – that is, the author of all the works, eponymous and pseudonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. The transition to a capitalist rather than a feudalist society places Kierkegaard closer to modern sensibilities about how one chooses one’s station in life. The impact on this transition should not be underestimated, for as Elrod remarks, Denmark was “exceeded only by England in its commitment to the principles of democratic and economic liberalism” (Elrod, 1981: 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. One could also read this as suggesting that to (will to) avoid suffering means one does not will one thing because one also wills to avoid suffering. However, I would suggest that the outcome is the same; in order to will one thing, one must necessarily not will to avoid suffering, and thus remain in suffering. Thanks to Megan Blomfield for pointing out this alternative interpretation of this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. We saw in the “Gilleleje Journal” entry (in Chapter 1, and then reiterated above) that during his early life Kierkegaard reflected upon his life’s task; and specifically, what it was that God was calling upon him to *do*. Indeed, this line of introspective self-questioning about his own calling was continued by Kierkegaard throughout his life. George Pattison remarks that Kierkegaard “lived through an exceptionally intense crisis of vocation” (Pattison, 2019: 32). Later, in *The Point of View,* published in 1859 after his death, but written sometime after *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard reflects on his life and authorship and specifically his task or vocation; in this work, Kierkegaard treats his life’s task as analogous to that of Socrates. Kierkegaard felt that it was his task to awaken the people of nineteenth century Copenhagen from their superficial Christianity – or Christendom – that they lived and bring them, *maieutically* to a greater understanding of Christianity, and of faith; and of course, contained within that was the ultimate task, or calling, to become a Christian, and realise oneself before God. Within this task, then, one adopts the inherently risky stance of *faith*. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. One should note the linguistic and semantic connection between “travail” and “*travl*”. Indeed, the word *travl* arrived in Denmark from the French *travail*. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. The term used by Anti-Climacus is “*levevei*” – a clear play on words by Kierkegaard – which has been rendered by the Hongs as “making a living”, but also might be translated as “way of life.” To make a living might signify an occupation, whilst a way of life, signifies a vocation, or calling. One should also note the implicit critique of Judge William’s position here. For Anti-Climacus, a calling must be more than one’s mere occupation, i.e. as a way to sustain one’s life – a clear reference to the Judge’s focus on one’s *Næringssorger*. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Though, as we have seen, and as the Hongs summarise: in *UDVS* “Kierkegaard […] protests the reduction of the call or vocation to occupation or career and the particular form of this reduction in the specialised use of ‘call’ for an ecclesiastical appointment” (Hong & Hong, 2009: 180-1fn48). [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. See Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. If we consider this in terms of the distinction discussed so far, between occupation and vocation, then we might also view Judge William’s domestication of the religious sphere extending to his emphasis on the importance of occupation, over and above a religious calling. For Judge William, everyone remains in their station, and in doing so, reduces the – in Anti-Climacus’s eyes – infinite movement of a calling or vocation to a mere finite and external display of social station, or occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. The reference here seems to be to Martin Luther, and the notion of *incurvatus in se*, i.e. being *curved inward on oneself.* [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Though it should be noted, of course, that Anti-Climacus is *not* concerned with the historical Jesus Christ, but rather, the Jesus Christ as a contemporary (cf. PC 23-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Indeed, this was Kierkegaard’s criticism of the Bishop of Copenhagen, J. P. Mynster. Kierkegaard considered that Mynster had “gone astray as to identify Christianity with the established order and to reduce his vocation to the exercise of public office” (Jolivet, 1950: 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. One should note the parallels to Kierkegaard’s own consideration of his life task (cf. KJN AA: 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. There is a significant connection here too with busyness. For, if the call of Christ to “Come here…” is a call that offers one the hope of salvation, from not only sin, but also from their suffering toil then it might be argued that it is a call to reject one’s busyness, which one must do if one is to answer their vocation; hence, those who “***travail*** and are burdened”, is reference to the kind of fruitless busyness that Kierkegaard feels encompasses much of the modern world. This is supported by the section following “The Invitation” in *Practice in Christianity*: “The Halt” (*Standsningen*). In this section, Anti-Climacus opens with the command, “Halt now!”, aimed at the “vast crowd of people who labour and are burdened”, whom in hearing the invitation reject it, and instead of answering the call “shudder and recoil until they storm ahead and trample down” (PC 23). It is no coincidence that the Danish word for busyness, *travlt*, has its roots in the French *travail* – indeed, Kierkegaard captures the weariness associated with busyness, as do others in the Christian tradition (cf. Chapter 4 and 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. This point is also alluded to by Karl Aho and C. Stephen Evans (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. As we will see below, this is quite similar to the argument put forward in Graeber (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. This misrelation is what Hannah Arendt would later term “banality”, in that it expresses a kind of thoughtlessness of action: the person just does whatever it is that society demands of them, they simply “go with the flow”. Indeed, Martin Heidegger – a connecting thread between Kierkegaard and Arendt – would describe man’s “flight from thinking” (Heidegger, 1966: 45), as desire to remain within the “everyday”, or to “simply ‘go with the flow’” (Flynn, 2006: 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Thus, like so many of Kierkegaard’s concepts, busyness is *inverted*. Thus, what appears on the surface as busyness – for instance, the aesthete’s attempts to avoid boredom in multiplicity, or the Seducer’s busy chasing of Cordelia – in fact represent an existential inertia, or stagnation. In contrast, the response to busyness in fact involves *movement*, that is, an existential – and crucially *inward* – movement through the repentance of the ethical sphere and into the religious. Kierkegaard defines this movement as the ironically inverted *halting of confession*, and a recognition of one’s eternal responsibility before God. I discuss this “movement” in Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. It is of course worth noting that elements of the “religious” exist in both the aesthetic, and ethical spheres. However, not fully realised, they are seemingly inefficient to remove the individual from busyness. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. There is much debate about how much of Kierkegaard’s secular ethics are Hegelian/Kantian, however such a debate is tangential for our present concerns. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Recall Robert C. Robert’s description of the “web of reflection” discussed in Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. As Johannes Climacus writes: “speculative thought must not call itself Christian” (CUP 561). [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Though it should be noted, as Adams writes, that Kierkegaard is not making a “metaphysical thesis”, but rather an ethical one. A person’s vocation, or calling, is “part of what makes him who he is in the sense that it is part of what gives his existence, his life, a unity that is humanly and morally significant. It is part of what matters about his being himself” (Adams, 1987: 455). In other words, were someone to pursue becoming a novelist as their vocation, then this vocation is what gives their self unity and purpose throughout their life. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Graeber argues that roughly 40% of workers consider their jobs to be entirely, or mostly “bullshit” (2019). However, it is worth noting that much of Graeber’s data has been refuted as it “is not based on robust empirical research” and that “[t]he proportion of employees describing their jobs as useless is low and declining and bears little relationship to Graeber’s predictions” (Soffia, Wood, & Burchell, 2021). However, that said, I am less interested in the statistical claims Graeber makes, and more with the philosophical (moral) issue of “bullshit jobs” and the relation to Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness – and most crucially, whether Graeber’s response to the issue of meaningless work might be helpful in considering how to respond to Kierkegaardian busyness in a wholly secular way. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. In a discussion with Gordon Finlayson at “Philosophy as a Way of Life”, UCD/TCD Annual Graduate Conference (Dublin, 2019), it was suggested by Finlayson that Adorno bases the concept of pseudo-action on Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness. Whilst I have not been able to find direct reference to Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness by Adorno, the closest Adorno comes to a direct reference, is in discussion of pseudo-activity, wherein he writes: “ […] praxis accrues a somewhat illusory character, […] Words like ‘industriousness’ [*Betriebsamkeit*] and ‘busyness’ [*Geschäftigkeit*] express the nuances quite succinctly” (Adorno, 1998: 260). [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)