

Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity

A Study of Imitation, Existence,
and Affect

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Chapter 6

Affect, Admiration, Crowd

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Kierkegaard is widely considered to be among the founders of modern psychology (Klempe 2014; Ferguson 2005). His psychological observations are marked by a serious attention to emotions, affects, feelings, and moods, which are also the philosophical trademark of his reflection. Undoubtedly, Kierkegaard is a pioneer in his theorization of *angst*, and his examination of despair as a psychological-religious category has impacted a number of psychological disciplines, such as existential psychology and psychopathology (McCarthy 2015; Rosfort 2015). Despair and anxiety, but also a number of emotion-related themes such as love in Kierkegaard, have received estimable attention in philosophical literature. Efforts have been dedicated to understanding the relation between particular emotions or emotional states and selfhood, will, subjectivity, and temporality. Other scholars have paid attention to emotions in relation to ethics, epistemology, and ontology (Roberts 1998, 1997, 1993; Conway and Gover 2002; Evans 2006; Rudd 2012; Fremstedal 2014).

While Kierkegaard's philosophy of emotions, affects, and moods did not escape the attention of scholars working in the field of phenomenology (Hanson 2010; Welz 2013), scant consideration has been dedicated to this subject in relation to an important and to some extent parallel trend in philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies, the so-called "affective turn." The scholarly re-turn to affect is prompted by developments in the natural and social sciences that rehabilitated the role of the body in human decision making, value generation, and sociability. The contemporary impetus of the affective turn is motivated by a rigorous attempt to understand the human subject in their complexity, but also by a failure of disciplines privileging the rational, cognitive, and conceptual dimensions of human existence, and by taking the human subject in its individuality, stripping it of social and political contexts. Scholarly focus on affectivity discloses a deeply mimetic view of the human subject. It renders us as engaged in emotional contagion, social imitation, as reflexive and prone to imitative behaviors operating on the register undetected by our consciousness and awareness.

A wide-ranging analysis of affect and affectivity in Kierkegaard is beyond the scope of this book. Focusing on exploring affect in relation to mimesis, this chapter demonstrates Kierkegaard's great alertness to human affectivity in its connection to corporeality, contagion, and sociability. It presents Kierkegaard as acutely aware, *avant la lettre*, of a number of affective phenomena and mechanisms explored by the disciplines of crowd psychology, social cognition, and others. Kierkegaard's penetrating reflections on affectivity in relation to mimesis anticipate some of the theoretical discussions that are central to the affective turn. Rendering affect and human affectivity (*Affectivity* and *affectere*) in mostly negative colors (cf. PF: 49/SKS 4: 253; SUD: 24/SKS 11: 140; WA: 104/SKS 11: 107–108), Kierkegaard offers a sobering critical perspective on the epistemological and moral capacities of the emotion of admiration, a crucial element of the contemporary discussion of excellences in moral exemplarity.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 6.1 opens with a brief genealogical overview of the subject of affects and human affectivity in the grand intellectual discourse from Plato, through Aristotle, to Descartes, Spinoza, Tomkins, and Massumi. It shows a gradual dismantling of the body-mind and emotion-reason axes that have shaped philosophy and the subsequent emergence of the autonomy of affect. It then presents classical philosophical appraisals of two fundamental categories from the domain of human affectivity, namely sympathy and empathy in the works of David Hume and Adam Smith. This introductory section offers an informative background for Section 6.2, which argues for the affective dimension of admiration in Kierkegaard. After a condensed reprisal of the main tenets of moral exemplarity espoused by Linda Zagzebski followed by an account of Kierkegaard's view of sympathy and empathy, I present affective admiration. In my reading, affective admiration in Kierkegaard is essentially linked with envy, but it is also oriented toward the mediocre and base, has a limited motivational capacity, and is highly contagious. Briefly relating affective admiration in Kierkegaard to the contemporary discussion on moral exemplars, I conclude this section with Kierkegaard's critical view of the epistemological and moral trustworthiness of admiration in moral exemplarity. Section 6.3 zooms in on the affective character of Kierkegaard's crowd psychology. Therein I examine his critical remarks on human collectivity, focusing on such key concepts from his social and political philosophy as "crowd" and "the public." Reading his philosophy alongside two French theorists of mass society, Gabriel Tarde and René Girard, I demonstrate Kierkegaard's attunement to such mimetic terms as magnetism, fascination, somnambulism, scapegoating, and violence.

6.1 Affect, Sympathy, Empathy

The philosophical-religious tradition within which Kierkegaard operates is, for the most part, founded on the idea of a separation of body

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and mind. A distinction between emotions and reason is the second fundamental duality that concerned thinkers whose writings Kierkegaard read and whose thought he either cherished or challenged. By surveying some key engagements with thinkers exploring these dualities, we see Kierkegaard joining an important intellectual debate on body-mind/emotions-reason. Treating himself as a patient, Kierkegaard takes a pharmacological approach to affects, breaking from the Platonic dominance of mind over body and turning to Aristotelian observations on habit and (character) formation. Kierkegaard challenges Descartes's body and mind dualism, agreeing with Spinoza on the motivational dimension of emotions and largely incorporating David Hume's, but especially Adam Smith's emphasis on the role of emotions, passions, and habits in the formation of society and its norms.

6.1.1 *Affects and Emotions*

Plato for one exhibits a robust distrust toward the body and emotions. The embodied is the particular, not the true ideal; emotions only distort reasoning. Plato is among the first to verbalize the bond between emotions and the body that constitutes the basis for a rudimentary understanding of affect or affectivity.¹ He readily observes the mimetic aspect of affect that he finds in emotional imitation that often occurs unbeknownst to reason. Criticizing poets and actors, Plato worries that their performances have a tantalizing and debilitating effect on the mental capacities of the audience. There must be a censorship on the practices of the *mimos*, the *mime*, the *poet-actor*, all of whom operate on the affective register that resonates with the audience on a noncognitive level. This affective facet of a poetic-performance constitutes emotional contagion that has a socializing, hence deindividualizing influence on the audience. The scale of the influence of poets on society can be only gauged when considering the predominantly oral-performative character of the culture of Classical Greece.² Thus, apart from disapproving of the compromised educational means of the sophists (discussed in Chapter 1), Plato criticizes “the connection between mimesis and psychological identification” at work in the audience's sympathetic reaction to the performance (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 49).

Unsurprisingly, on the other side of the spectrum, Aristotle positions himself. Rendering human beings as essentially social animals, Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, happiness, includes the habitual cultivation of emotions and affective responses. Classifying important elements of Tragedy in *Poetics*, he identifies as “the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy—Reversal or Recoil of the Action, and Recognition scenes” (*Poetics* 6, 1450a, 12–13). Confronting or startling the audience, these “elements of emotional interest” are intended to generate affects of pity and fear in the viewers that ultimately lead to the purgation of negative emotions, *katharsis*. Donald R. Wehrs interprets Aristotle's take on affects

in tragedy (and epic) as aiming to “educate our affections into ethical sociability by giving us practice in integrating cognitive, emotional, and ethically sociable aspects of body and mind” (2017: 8). This integrative approach to affects and reason is one in which “[e]mpathetic responsiveness and deliberative rationality come together through our simulating a represented suffering” (Wehrs 2017: 8).

Christianity and Christian philosophy interject into the history of philosophy a strong focus on the love of God. The predominant neo-Platonic appraisal of love in relation to the Christian God emphasizes the fact that in its essence, God is love, and Christians should participate in it by loving God and one’s neighbor as oneself. God is by default a higher type of love, essentially different from lust and other bodily desires. St. Augustine treats lust as an inferior thing in his *Confessions*. He famously admits to being consumed by sensual passions (“Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence”) that have their origin in “the bubbling impulses of puberty [that] befogged and obscured [his] heart so that it could not see the difference between love’s serenity and lust’s darkness” (Augustine 1991: 24). Affect is then essentially appraised as governed by the lower type of self-love.

Descartes solidifies the mind-body dualism in philosophy. He distinguishes between passions that pertain to the operations of the soul and those that have their origin in bodily functioning. While the former passions are active and pertain to the volitional actions of the soul, the latter passions are passively received by the soul. Such passive passions “belong to the category of perceptions rendered confused and obscure by the close alliance between the soul and the body” (Descartes 2015: 192 [§28]). Such passions are even called “emotions of the soul” by Descartes, because “there are none that agitate and disturb it [the soul] as strongly as these passions” (Descartes 2015: 192 [§28]). While the soul is primarily responsible for the rational part of our being as it pertains to perceptions, bodily passions often distort the validity of our thinking.

Spinoza demonstrates that the human reason and affects are largely integrated. Affect and affectivity mean for Spinoza that we are subject to emotions and feelings and that we are affected and, hence, deeply influenced by them. Our mental actions are reflected in and influenced by bodily changes, and vice versa. Both our reasoning and our affectivity are subordinated to our primary concern—our subsistence—and contribute to it the enhancement of our sense of vitality (Ioan 2019). For Spinoza, we can experience opposite emotions, such as love and hatred. Yet, we should engage “the power of the mind” to try to control the affectivity of these emotions and feelings. Emotions and feelings influence our desires and appetites and motivate us to action. Good actions that result from mental operations such as conceptual reasoning are essentially motivated by positive affects that arise when we are in the process of thinking. Distinguishing between active and passive affects, Spinoza wants us to learn how to overcome the latter ones, which are often painful and

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inhibiting, to achieve a psychological state of equilibrium and happiness. The prescribed “remedies for the emotions” are again in “the power of the mind” over emotions that is augmented by our increased knowledge of emotions.

Spinoza’s legacy stands behind the contemporary renewed interest in affects. The so-called “affective turn” challenges a number of solidified modern distinctions such as body/mind, affect/emotion, but also subject/object and individual/collective. To understand the thrust of such contestation of philosophical dualities, one must observe that, as Wehrs points out, “In the twentieth century, ‘affect’ was commonly associated with bodily causality and natural science, ‘emotion’ with ideas, outlooks, social sciences and the humanities” (2017: 1). This means that, especially in the analytic tradition of philosophy, affect was considered for a long time hardly a philosophical subject. This tendency has been challenged with recent developments in neurocognitive-evolutionary studies on embodied cognition, mirror neurons, and social psychology (Werhs 2017: 37–38). Antonio Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error* (1994) is an exemplary study that shows the interconnectedness of emotions and reasoning. His empirical research of the brain demonstrates that the mental images that we engage to entertain future-oriented actions must be emotionally invested and must have the capacity to spontaneously generate bodily actions (“somatically marked”) to equip us with the robust tools needed for deliberative choice-making.

Brian Massumi is among the most recognizable figures behind the affective turn.³ His 1995 article “The Autonomy of Affect” draws heavily on Spinoza, or more specifically Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza. Massumi provides a number of definitions of affects across his literary production, but they all draw on Spinoza’s seminal view that “affect is the power ‘to affect and be affected’” (2002: 15; 2015: x). For Massumi, Spinoza’s affect is essentially linked with a body’s ability to engage with or respond to movement. The body feels emotional experiences that are action generative, and our reflection on this fact is important to our identity and sense of being in the world. Massumi distinguishes between affect and emotion. Emotions are subjective contents of personal experience that yield cognitive results (Massumi 1995: 88). Affects are noncognitive in the general sense of the term that means engaging concepts and words. In contrast to emotions, which are or can be circumstantially shaped and determined (“indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context”; Massumi 1995: 84), our affective capacity is autonomous. The autonomy of affect pertains to the fact that we are not only influenced on the emotional or cognitive level, but also on an affective level that is independent from the other two levels. Affectivity is also privileged in terms of the length of time needed to generate a reaction. For instance, the arousal of fear in us in a hazardous situation is first processed and evaluated by the body itself that generates the effect of hair standing on end,

which is then translated into cognitively processed data that appraises the situation we are in.

Our affective responses, hence bodily reactions, are independent from personal feelings and emotions, but also from the power of language, reason, and will. This means that affects are often beyond our control. In his *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, Silvan S. Tomkins (2008) offers an in-depth evaluation of affects and human affectivity. The second of this four-volume compendium presents an analysis of, among other things, the relation between volition and affectivity. Tomkins asks: “Why have men’s passions been so often identified with the unconscious, darker, irrational, lower, ungovernable, corrupting, disorganizing elements of his nature?” (2008: 79). The answer is that we are neither in negative control nor in positive control over affects. This lack of control is especially visible in extraordinary situations observed in psychopathology: “Affective responses that are painful cannot be turned off, affective responses which are longed for cannot be turned on,” says Tomkins (2008: 80). Lastly, affects are self-reflexive and self-enhancing. For instance, he indicates that affective anger has “the anger-arousing potential of anger”; the effects of the discharge of this affective emotion are “tending to rearouse the same affect” (Tomkins 2008: 81). While experiencing fear, observes Gibbs, one’s hair standing on end will reinforce the experience of fear to the degree that it may mutate into panic (2008: 130–145).

6.1.2 Sympathy and Empathy

The two key theoreticians of sympathy and empathy in modern philosophy are David Hume and Adam Smith. While they at times use sympathy and empathy to denote a range of similar objects, sympathy refers to the capacity of “entering into other points of view,” and empathy refers to the state of becoming concerned with someone’s emotional state and the arousal of the motivation to assist them (Ilyes 2017: 98). A brief exposition of their respective treatments of sympathy and empathy offers an important point of reference for Kierkegaard’s conceptualization of sympathy and admiration. It also provides a background for Kierkegaard’s remarks that position him closer to thinkers such as Massumi and Tomkins, but also Tarde on the subject of the autonomy of affect, discussed in the last section of this chapter. In that sense, Kierkegaard is to be positioned as a “transitional” thinker between Hume and Smith, and Massumi and Tomkins.

For David Hume, emotions, passions, and sentiments play an important role in morality. Hume develops his moral psychology in relation to the notions of sympathy, empathy, and the view of shared emotions. His account of empathy in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2007) focuses on an understanding of emotion as available to us in perception as impressions that have different magnitude, which he calls “vivacity.” We perceive

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emotions in ourselves but also in others. Engaging such words as contagion, Hume points out that some emotions that we feel, while at a given moment experienced with a minimal intensity, can be augmented by the fact that they are shared by a group of people (2007: 286). Such shared emotions create a mood that has an affective influence on someone entering the group and not experiencing that emotion initially. Sympathy denotes our ability of responding to our perceptions of the experiences of various emotions and feelings in people and to involve ourselves in them. Defining sympathy in Hume's *Treatise*, Anthony Pitson states:

Sympathy is a principle that explains the pleasing effect upon us of a cheerful face and the dampening effects of angry or sorrowful one. ... [W]hat distinguishes sympathy, as Hume conceives of it, is the fact that we come to *share* that feeling, whether it is of happiness or sadness.

(2020: 95)

The intensity of our sympathetic relationship with others depends on various factors of similarity and proximity. We are more predisposed to sympathize with those who are more like us regarding social status, interests, and way of life, but also those who are simply closer to us by virtue of family relations.

Hume states in the *Treatise* that the “sentiments of others can never affect as, but by becoming, in some measure, our own” (2007: 378). By this he means that our sympathetic sharing of emotions requires a “conversion” of perceived emotions in others from the formed idea of their emotional states to their “impressions” incorporated into the mind. Hence, a perception of people experiencing pleasure is for Hume “converted” into the feeling of pleasure in the observer. This conversion is of an immediate character. It is a semi-automated process that is partially beyond our control; it triggers in us physical responses such as shedding tears in reaction to someone's misfortune. For our own benefit, we should moderate that automatic response by identifying a comparative difference between our state and the state of the person in peril. Yet, moderation that aims at minimizing the magnitude of our sympathizing with others may lead to the unwanted consequences of raising in us a feeling of self-satisfaction and complacency, instead of the feelings that generate empathy. While of an immediate character, the conversion of sympathy has two components: cognitive and affective. Although Hume does not make the distinction, Sharon R. Krause distinguishes between the faculty of cognitive sympathy and affective sympathy in Hume to allow room for deliberation, but also to explain the fact that not every cognitive act yields the feelings of sympathy for others (2013: 80).⁴

Smith focuses on the bigger picture within which our perception of emotions in others occurs. He differs from Hume by insisting on focusing

on how perception, but primarily the imagination, operates in relation to the entire situation in which one encounters a person that is either suffering or is overwhelmed with joy. Ilyes explains the mechanism of empathy thus: “We imagine the entire situation that another person is in, and use this to imagine how we would feel in that situation” (2017: 100). This explains in Smith the range of emotions that arise in us when we observe someone who does not experience that emotion in situations where in fact one should. Smith states:

Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality. We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner.
(Smith 2002: 15)

Smith’s account of sympathy addresses the problem in Hume’s theory of emotions with respect to situations where a person breaking moral codes does not in fact experience the feelings of anxiety, regret, etc. Seeing someone audaciously shoplifting, the rise in us of emotions associated with culpability testifies to the fact that shoplifting is morally wrong. A lack of that experience of the emotional arousal on the part of the observer would suggest that the observer approves of shoplifting.

Smith’s theory of sympathetic approbation assumes that there is a correspondence between approbation and adoption of the opinion of others. Approval has a reflective dimension. To approve of someone’s conduct is to recognize in oneself a correspondence between their conduct and one’s own, whether factual or imaginative. To this Smith adds that the principle of approval of values and norms pertains also to that of “the sentiments or passions of others” (2002: 21). This raises some concerns with respect to the cognitive dimension of sympathy, as Smith states that emotions can be felt “instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of them” and that we are susceptible to moods and emotional contagion (2002: 28). Being mindful of Plato’s criticism of the affective dimension of emotions makes it hard to miss the danger lurking behind Smith’s theory of passions. We can be influenced and manipulated by passions that are affective in the sense of serving a socializing purpose, but also unconscious.

The lack of scrutiny of the mind over emotions is confirmed, if not augmented, by Smith’s employment of music to explain the nature of passions and their affective dimension. When music “imitates the notes of anger, it inspires us with fear. Joy, grief, love, admiration, devotion, are all

of them passions which are naturally musical” (Smith 2002: 45). Music is undoubtedly among the most affective and imitative media. It affects us on a range of levels from bodily to reflective. Musical frequencies create responsive, sympathetic vibrations in the body, to which we respond with arousal of emotions, mood changes, and body movements. Smith’s affective vision of the nature of emotions brings him closer to modern theoreticians of affectivity such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Gustave Le Bon, and Gabriel Tarde, but also contemporary thinkers such as Brian Massumi and Nidesh Lawtoo. Body and affects, which since the inception of philosophy have been regarded with suspicion, are now incorporated into moral and social theory.

While the spontaneity of the emotional transference in Hume and Smith suggests emotional contagion, the subject discussed toward the end of this chapter, for Ilyes such situations are rather an exception than the norm with regard to accurately understood sympathetic reactions (2017: 101). She interprets both thinkers as intentionally making room for reflection and awareness with relation to our recognition of the appropriated value of emotions (Ilyes 2017: 101). Even for Hume, who identifies emotions as objects of our cognition, but also as being object-oriented (we are fearful *of* something, we grieve *for* someone), the arousal of emotions refers not to the fact that they are represented to us in the person we empathize with, but are often initiated from our inference based on the principle of cause and effect (2007: 368). For Smith, one’s empathetic response to another’s emotional state includes the act of reflective comparison with one’s imaginative anticipation of such a response. “For Hume, such a comparison is not essential to empathy: the imagination’s task is to reconstruct what the other person is feeling, not what I would feel in her situation, as it is in Smith” (Ilyes 2017: 101).

6.2 Kierkegaard, Sympathy, Admiration

This section demonstrates a distinctively affective reading of admiration in Kierkegaard. Affective admiration proves problematic for the contemporary discussion of exemplarity in moral psychology, as it challenges the moral and epistemological capacity of admiration. This section also corrects problematic engagements of admiration in Kierkegaard to support the motivational, moral, and epistemological capacities of admiration in relation to moral exemplars. These exploits, which seek in Kierkegaard confirmation of the cognitive and motivational value of admiration for exemplarity, are not entirely true to his overall rendering of this emotion.

6.2.1 *Admiration and Exemplarity in Moral Education*

The study of exemplarity has been burgeoning for the last two decades especially in the philosophical disciplines concerned with moral education

and moral development. In those discussions, scholars have focused on determining who an exemplar is by arguing for the right set of characteristics one should possess. Scholars have also considered what in the exemplars is actually of value for the imitators. The other important aspect in the debate pertains to identifying the right means that would allow for identification of the exemplars. Robert Audi (2017), Kristján Kristjánsson (2010, 2017), and Linda Zagzebski (2013, 2017) argue for the role of emotions in that respect, particularly admiration, honour, and awe.

Focusing primarily on admiration, Zagzebski finds it to be a trustworthy means of detecting both moral exemplars and the desirable traits in them. Positioning admiration as the fundamental element of a moral theory based on exemplarism, Zagzebski stresses four important aspects of this emotion. First, admiration is a trustworthy means of detecting qualities that are desirable for human moral development. It is an emotional response to an excellence, which has predominantly a moral and, more specifically, an aretaic dimension. Second, admiration “is something that attracts a person to moral improvement” (Zagzebski 2013: 194). It does so through its sheer emotional character. The power of admiration to move us into a particular direction translates especially into the third dimension of admiration: it leads to imitation. Imitation is considered to be distinct from mimicry insofar as it is “more discriminatory, more targeted” (Zagzebski 2017: 130). Of interest for Zagzebski is in fact emulation “in which the emulated person is perceived as a model in some respect” (2017: 140). Fourth, so understood, imitation can therefore be scrutinized by reflection.

While sketching admiration, Zagzebski points to two of its aspects that could be potentially problematic for her reading of this emotion. First, admiration can be influenced and engineered. Here, she understands the fact that admiration can be taught (“is subject to education through the example of the emotional reactions of other persons”) and can be “shaped by the emotional responses of others” (Zagzebski 2013: 200–201). These aspects of admiration are not sufficiently explained, though, especially with regard to the interconnections between admiration and other emotions. Referring to Kierkegaard, Zagzebski notices the link between admiration and envy, but she renders the complexity of this emotion as an unusual “distortion of admiration,” rather than its natural structure (2017: 50). Hence, as I argue later, Zagzebski does not have a proper view of admiration in Kierkegaard, and she mistakenly takes Kierkegaard as her ally with regard to moral and epistemological capacities of admiration. Second, believing that admiration can “survive reflection” and that subsequently it must be decided by an agent whether we “trust it” (Zagzebski 2013: 201), Zagzebski is only vaguely aware of Kierkegaard’s criticism of the motivational character of admiration and its self-evidentiality in relation to the detection of excellences.

Kierkegaard's critical reading of admiration is especially pertinent to the context of moral exemplarity. Yet, as I will argue in the last chapter of this book, the affective character of admiration and human affectivity more broadly are problematic for human authenticity and the development of the individual and social self. Hence, Kierkegaard's insights into the affective nature of human beings are important for philosophy more broadly. They are also strikingly aligned with contemporary studies of admiration in neuroscience, human behavior, crowd psychology, and emotional contagion.⁵ These remarks will lead us to Section 6.3 that unveils Kierkegaard's insights about the affective nature of human sociability.

I define the affective in admiration in Kierkegaard as meaning its shared emotional character that is: (1) essentially influenceable by other emotions, affects, and the body, hence malleable; (2) contagious, unconscious, involuntary, and collective, hence prone to mimicry; (3) oriented toward the average (rather than excellence) hence corruptible; and (4) having a limited motivational power.

6.2.2 *Sympathy*

Admiration in Kierkegaard is essentially linked with sympathy and empathy. The Danish for sympathy is *Sympathie*. Kierkegaard also uses *Medlidenhed*, which translates into English as "suffering with," and means the act of sympathizing and empathizing with someone, but also producing a fellow feeling that grasps their emotional state. Sympathy exhibits for Kierkegaard a strongly preferential tone. We sympathize with individuals but also with groups of people. One important description of sympathy appears in *The Concept of Anxiety* where Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Vigilius Haufniensis, presents a rather Smithian account of sympathy:

One must have sympathy [*Sympathie*]. However, this sympathy is true only when one admits rightly and profoundly to oneself that what has happened to one human being can happen to all. Only then can one benefit both oneself and others.

(CA: 54/SKS 4: 359)

Sympathy is then presented here as comprising one's ability to imaginatively and reflectively reconstruct the situation the other is in. As we learn from "A Married Man" in *Stages on Life's Way*, this ability, understood as a universal human feat, must be practiced, and expressed in real spatiotemporal life (SLW: 113/SKS 6: 107).

True sympathy is contrasted with "a cowardly sympathy" that, after it identifies an imperfection in the other and possibly pities them in consequence of that recognition, ends up emphasizing one's essential difference

from the afflicted person. “Cowardly sympathy” not only looks down on someone but relishes in the illusion of one’s immunity from the identified problem. Genuine sympathy is the skill of the psychological observer who, as I have discussed in Chapter 4, has the ability “to incline and bend himself to other people and imitate their attitudes” (CA: 54–55/SKS 4: 359). In the religious sense, sympathy is more than compassion toward the unfortunate, but is the lived experience of “all true equality for the fortunate, the rich and powerful, and for the halt, the blind, and the lame” (JP 1: 457/SKS 27: 361, Papir 340: 15), and it is embodied in the non-preferential neighbor love (WL: 140/SKS 9: 142).

Sympathy in Kierkegaard is affective for a number of reasons. It operates on the collective level and has a motivational character. Haufniensis presents it as “the most paltry of all social virtuosities and aptitudes” (CA: 119–120/SKS 4: 421). Kierkegaard’s “deep sympathy for simply and solely being human, especially the suffering, unhappy, handicapped, and the like,” motivates him to take in his life a self-sacrificial path (JP 1: 1017/SKS 23: 20, NB15: 19; JP 1: 236/SKS 21: 286, NB10: 57). Sympathy is contagious. Although he does not seek suffering himself, the sufferings of others prompt the rise of empathy in Kierkegaard (PV: 80–81/SKS 16:59). His sacrifice is meant to comfort their suffering and clarify the truth of Christianity; as Kierkegaard assumes, his martyrdom will cure their suffering. The contagious dimension of sympathy is indicative of the frustration of the essence of Christianity that is to be found in self-sacrifice. Speaking of the passion to sacrifice one’s life to testify for the truth of Christianity, Kierkegaard specifies that this passion can also mutate into “sympathy, which spreads itself about and gets to be loved, esteemed by men.” The contagiousness of passions is then something negative that reduces Christianity to “a merely human sympathy” (JP 1: 488/SKS 21: 97–98, NB7: 43).

Sympathy is affective as it produces ambivalent reactions; in a Spinozian sense, sympathy in Kierkegaard can simultaneously generate conflated feelings and reactions. Haufniensis calls it the phenomenon of sympathetic antipathy and attributes it to anxiety. “Anxiety is *sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy* [*en sympatetisk Antipathie og en antipatetisk Sympathie*]” (CA: 42/SKS 4: 348) for Haufniensis, because, as a passion, emotion, or even a kind of a desire, anxiety is essentially ambiguous. By calling it a *sympathetic antipathy*, Haufniensis distinguishes it from Augustine’s concupiscence, which is a powerful desire that usually has one direction and a particular effect on the body, pleasing or displeasing. Haufniensis says: “One speaks of a pleasing anxiety, a pleasing anxiousness, and of a strange anxiety, a bashful anxiety, etc.” (CA: 42/SKS 4: 348). Sympathy is then essentially ambivalent and linked with its opposite, antipathy. Lastly, as we learn from *Stages on Life’s Way*, sympathy is sympathy generative. The more we sympathize with someone’s situation, the more sympathy arises in us (SLW: 113–114/SKS 6: 107–108). This observation overlaps with Spinoza’s affective account of

passions, where the expression of passion enlivens this and other related passions. Sympathy must be, as I have indicated, expressed in the temporal, otherwise it remains in idealized, imaginative “human sympathy” (JP1: 347/SKS 22: 284, NB13: 18).

In “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage” from *Either/Or 2*, its author, Judge William, presents sympathy as prompting admiration (“neither shall I be so unsympathetic [*udeeltagende*] that I would withhold my admiration”) utilizing the Smithian account of sympathy as largely will-dependent. Yet, the Danish “*udeeltagende*” for sympathy means in the quote the property of being “non-participatory;” hence, the whole context in the passage renders sympathy as a Humean “participatory” appropriation of someone’s perspective as one’s own (EO 2: 31/SKS 3: 39). A more empathetic view of sympathy we see in an open letter written by a pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or 2*, Victor Eremita to Kierkegaard. Therein, Eremita expresses “sympathy for [Kierkegaard’s] sufferings” and “tak[es] pride in daring to admire [him]” (EO 2: 391/Pap IV-B 20). Admiration and sympathy respond to Kierkegaard’s peculiar literary situation where he is being commonly “unjustly” called out to admit that he in fact is Eremita and to take responsibility for explaining the complexity of the authorial production.

6.2.3 *Admiration*

Kierkegaard’s interest in admiration resembles many concerns around this emotion articulated by thinkers such as Descartes, Smith, Hume, and Kant. His reading of admiration shows significant knowledge of Aristotle’s consideration of this emotion in relation to envy and emulation (CD: 130–131/SKS 10: 141). Descartes’s and Spinoza’s works reconstruct how admiration arises in us and how it influences our dispositions to pursue that which is beneficial to us. They also inquire into how admiration influences the overall functionality of individuals in the world. Smith pursues knowledge of the relation between admiration and other emotions, which he calls sentiments. He is especially focused on distinguishing admiration from the related sentiments of wonder and surprise. Smith also wants to understand to what extent admiration enhances or inhibits various operations of the mind.

Kant distinguishes between respect [*Achtung, Ehrfurcht*] and admiration [*Bewunderung*], which he often characterizes as a kind of astonishment [*Verwunderung*] or surprise [*Erstaunen*] (Merritt 2017: 462–463). While Kant sees admiration as delegated to appreciate the natural sublime or athletic feats, respect is oriented toward the moral law. This means that the latter compels me to accept particular aspects of the moral law as mine; in contrast, admiration arises in me when I witness or learn about things that, in principle, will not be applicable or will not affect my life (Merritt 2012: 47–48).

Often offering groundbreaking analyses of passions, moods, and affects, Kierkegaard indicates that emotions disclose our human nature. Yet, while such emotive traits as a solemn mood of contemplation or passionate determination to act are signs of our individuality and character, other passions and affects, often of an immediate character, are the hallmarks of our inauthenticity that on the whole stem from social dependency (Roberts 1998: 178). These negative emotions and passions disclose the limits of human nature essentially affected by the Christian category of sin.

Kierkegaard discusses admiration in relation to individual exemplars—which he dubs “prototypes”—or social entities such as gatherings or various groups of people, and their attitudes, values, and actions. He also presents various crafts, skills, and works of art deemed worthy of admiration. “Admiration” [*Beundring*] or “to admire” [*beundre*] feature densely throughout his authorship. An important sustained analysis of admiration is present in Kierkegaard’s discourse from 1848 entitled: “The Joy of It: That the Weaker You Become the Stronger God Becomes in You.” Therein Kierkegaard dialectically defines admiration as “in itself a duplexity” (CD: 130/SKS 10: 141). This duplexity in admiration pertains to the fact that admiration can affect us on both positive and negative levels; it can effect a feeling of happiness and unhappiness in us. Drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between emulation and envy, emotions that result from being exposed to an excellence of which we are deprived, Kierkegaard states that admiration may initially produce pain in us:

That admiration’s first feeling is one of pain is seen in this, that if someone senses superiority but admits it reluctantly, not joyfully, then he is far from being happy: on the contrary he is exceedingly unhappy, in the most distressing pain.

(CD: 131/SKS 10: 141)

After we come to terms with the superiority that produces admiration in us, we become more authentic and wholesome through conscious reconciliation with that which on the emotional level we find of value. This safeguards us from “succumbing to the superiority” of admiration and from entering into bitterness and envy.

Kierkegaard engages admiration to laud and appreciate human crafts and achievements, such as the skillful harmonizing of themes and a mastery of language in a novel. There are a number of other instances that indicate that an arousal of admiration in us when encountering something extraordinary is a positive, or a warranted sign of recognition of that particular good; here, Kierkegaard largely agrees with Zagzebski, for whom admiration spontaneously responds to excellences. One such example is Kierkegaard’s admiration formulated *expressis verbis* in relation to the writing prowess of his contemporary Gyllembourg-Ehrensward, especially

her work entitled *The Story of Everyday Life*. In his appraisal of the book *Two Ages*, entitled *A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard says:

How admirably and masterfully the author knows how to control a glittering and delusive weakness such as this, communicating at all times the impression of a fictitious-real character; likewise the ease with which the interrelated situations are invented, the naturalness with which the thread of continuity runs throughout the story, continually illuminating Mrs. Waller's lack of character in the momentary mirror of reflection, fleetingly, for in fact there is nothing to dwell upon.

(TA: 54/SKS 8: 53)

Yet, the same book suggests that admiration can be problematic. The reasons for Kierkegaard's distrust of admiration are complex; his review predominantly calls out the malleability of admiration and its cyclical nature. Heretofore, scholars have only considered a small number of those reasons.

The most explored reason behind Kierkegaard's distrust of admiration is formulated in the period of his so-called "second authorship" that stretches from 1847 to 1855, especially in *Practice in Christianity*. Published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, the book focuses on admiration's shortcomings and inadequacies with regards to the requirements of an authentic Christian existence, which demands from Christians not admiration but imitation. The dominant reading of Kierkegaard's criticism of admiration focuses on its tendency to make individuals into detached spectators of the Christian drama, rather than active participants who want to *follow after* Christ (Pardi 2013: 17–21; Minister 2017). Rob Compaijen (2017) paints a more nuanced reading of admiration in Kierkegaard. While he concedes the criticism of the attributed detached attitude of the admirer toward the admired in Kierkegaard, Compaijen notes that admiration is not wrong *per se*. Rather, considered as a "spontaneous admiration," it is not effective enough to solve the problem of the ethical motivation to be like the exemplar (2017: 572–573).

Focusing solely on Kierkegaard's criticism of admiration painted against the specifically Christian element of his thought obscures and reduces the complexity of its appraisal in Kierkegaard. As I argue, his distrust of admiration is based on Kierkegaard's psychological and sociological observations on human nature. He finds admiration to be a highly affective emotion: it is affected by and mingles with other, often opposite emotions; it is oriented toward achieving mediocrity and baseness, rather than merit and virtue; it has a limited motivational power. Lastly, admiration is collective and contagious.

Kierkegaard's early analyses of admiration's ability to evoke, but also to mutate into other emotions come from the already mentioned short

piece, *A Literary Review*. Discussing a hypothetical situation where spectators observe the exploits of a “brave person who skates out on the thin ice,” Kierkegaard specifies how the initial “authentic admiration” that arises in us when we observe the extraordinary and praiseworthy becomes socially manipulated and engineered into the common and uninteresting, but also “foolish and ridiculous:”

But whereas what usually happens where admiration is authentic is that the admirer is inspired by the thought of being a man just like the distinguished person, is humbled by the awareness of not having been able to accomplish this great thing himself, is ethically encouraged by the prototype to follow this exceptional man’s example to the best of his ability, here again practical common sense would alter the pattern of admiration. Even at the giddy height of the fanfare and the volley of hurrahs, the celebrators at the banquet would have a shrewd and practical understanding that their hero’s exploit was not all that good.

(TA: 72/SKS 8: 70)

6.2.3.1 *Admiration and Envy*

The altering of the pattern of admiration that Kierkegaard is alluding to in the previous passage harkens back to Aristotle’s distinction between envy and emulation. Aristotle defines emulation as a painful but positive emotion that arises in us when we recognize a good in someone that we ourselves do not possess but are determined to acquire; its opposite is envy, which characterizes the person who “tries to prevent his neighbour from having” that honorable good (*Rhetoric*, 161). In contrast to Aristotle, who paints a “sharp conceptual and moral contrast drawn between emulation and envy” (Kristjánsson 2016: 104), Kierkegaard assumes a more fluent transition from “following this exceptional man’s example” to enviously denigrating the excellence. For instance, in “An Occasional Discourse” from 1847, Kierkegaard raises the bar, suggesting an existence of human comportment where “admiration and envy are united” (UDVS: 127/SKS 8: 227).

A more sustained analysis of the relation between the two emotions indicates that admiration can be conflated or united with envy, but that it can also mutate into envy on four interrelated levels. First, as we have already established, we can become envious of those who we admire, because we may feel that we cannot measure up to their standards. Such an emotion can still be a form of admiration, because it is focused on that which is magnificent, but with an envious twist (JP4: 4213/SKS 24: 292, NB23: 181).

Second, our admiration of someone can spur envy in others against the admired person, or even us. We see that formula at work in *Practice*

in *Christianity*, where Kierkegaard suggests that a person meritoriously admired by an individual, yet deliberately unrecognized as that by a group of people, may become a target of their contempt, mockery, and violence (PC: 240–243/SKS 12: 233–236). Those who refuse to appreciate a meritoriously admirable person do so to avoid a confrontation with the moral and non-moral excellences expressed by the admired person. Their motivation for that rejection is in their unwillingness to approve of the standards that would force them to challenge their own lessened standards. This process of dealing with the enviously admired can be better understood when read alongside Smith’s view of admiration as approbation. Smith states: “To approve of the passions of another ... is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them” (2002: 21). For Smith and Kierkegaard, our admiration of a given person is tantamount to our approbation of their values. Yet, as Kierkegaard points out, often individuals who experience an arousal of the feeling of admiration toward someone whose values they do not appreciate, stricken by this conflict, become motivated to “resolve” this opposition by turning against the admired person rather than by revisiting their values.

Third, our dissatisfaction with the admired person can be displaced by bitterness toward them. For Kierkegaard, it is admiration that turned into anger and violence that killed both Socrates and Christ. Such an envious and violent admiration is exerted by the former admirers of the Danish actress, Johanne Luise Heiberg, whose case Kierkegaard elaborates in *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Finding admiration to be often determined by the changing social “cannibalistic taste for human sacrifices,” Kierkegaard doubts whether admiration can indeed offer a reliable way of identifying value (CD: 304/SKS 14: 94).

Fourth, the emotion of admiration can mutate into envy directed toward the admirer themselves. Calling it “unhappy admiration,” Kierkegaard describes this facet of admiration as resulting from one’s unwillingness to both acknowledge the admired traits recognized in the exemplar and to act on that recognition to acquire these traits. In consequence, the admirer “must get rid of it [the admired quality], pass it off as a bagatelle, nonsense, and folly, for it seems as if it would choke him” (SUD: 86/SKS 11: 199). The unhappy admirer attempts this act of reassessment and rejection of the recognized value to save one’s present sense of selfhood, which appears to them as being of lesser value in comparison with the admired person. Kierkegaard diagnoses such a person thus:

An admirer who feels that he cannot become happy by abandoning himself to it chooses to be envious of that which he admires. So he speaks another language wherein that which he actually admires is a trifle, a rather stupid, insipid, peculiar, and exaggerated thing.

(SUD: 86/SKS 11: 199)

Conceding that “Admiration is happy self-surrender; [and] envy is unhappy self-assertion,” Kierkegaard indicates a kind of freedom and release that stems from the fact that one admits to themselves that they are facing someone who, while morally superior, is not a disintegrating threat to their own self (SUD: 86/ SKS 11: 199).

6.2.3.2 Admiration, Motivation, Mediocrity

For Kierkegaard, admiration is not powerful enough to motivate us to do the good. At face value, this claim has a distinctively Kantian flavor. For Kant, only respect for the moral law “motivates” us to fulfill it. Yet Kierkegaard is skeptical of the self-motivating character of knowledge and reasoning. He criticizes admiration’s ability to motivate us to learn and practically express in our lives what we find morally desirable in others. The inability of admiration to motivate individuals to reproduce in real life types of behavior they find desirable or praiseworthy in others is caused by the nature of this emotion. Admiration has a cycle: its initial intensity is necessarily followed by a process of fading and eventual dispersion; it must be “nourished” and revived to be of motivational capacity (CD: 304/SKS 14: 94). The more we dwell on our admiration of someone, the more we think about and analyze it, the less power it has to motivate us to act. Admiration must be acted upon, and to achieve action, we need a degree of willingness that is not always generated by admiration (JP 2: 1895/SKS 24: 277, NB23: 144). Without the extra component that generates the decision to act on it, admiration is the expression of human indulgence in indecisiveness. Kierkegaard confirms as much in *Practice in Christianity* and his journals, linking admiration to “evasion” thus:

Here admiration is totally inappropriate and ordinarily is deceit, a cunning that seeks evasion and excuse. If I know a man whom I must esteem because of his unselfishness, self-sacrifice, magnanimity, etc., then I am not to admire but am supposed to be like [*ligne*] him; I am not to deceive and fool myself into thinking that it is something meritorious on my part, but on the contrary I am to understand that it is merely the invention of my sloth and spinelessness; I am to resemble [*ligne*] him and immediately begin my effort to resemble [*efter at ligne*] him.

(PC: 242/SKS 12: 235)

And,

With respect to a merely human prototype [*menneskeligt Forbillede*] ... there is no time for admiration—get busy right away with the task of imitating him [Christ]. The ethical truth of the matter is just this—that admiration is suspiciously like an evasion.

(JP4: 4454/SKS 21: 285, NB10: 56)

While it seems that the first quotation radically dismisses the value of admiration as such, the second passage demonstrates that the problem with admiration is that it needs an extra push from the will. Hence, in contrast to proponents of moral exemplarity such as Zagzebski, who argue for admiration's self-motivating character, Kierkegaard finds admiration insufficient to propel one into action. The problem in Zagzebski's theory is not simply that at fault is mostly "spontaneous admiration," as has been argued by Compaijen, who suggests a more reflective type of admiration as a remedy to the problem with admiration's self-motivation. In fact, as the two previous passages indicate, a more robust reflection results from but also produces in one "a cunning that seeks evasion and excuse" (PC: 242/SKS 12: 235).

Kierkegaard's criticism of admiration here is largely motivated by the religious underpinnings of the doctrine of sin and the fallen human nature; we can trust neither our own affective responses nor our reasoning for that matter, as it is often engaged to justify our actions that result from our propensity to lower the bar of responsibility. Kierkegaard seems to be criticizing Aristotle here with respect to his idea of the habitual education of affective responses. While Kierkegaard is not wholly dismissive of Aristotle's character building, he points out that what needs to be accounted for is the Christian category of sin that hampers many of our seemingly well-motivated actions.

These critical remarks bring Kierkegaard close to Spinoza, who sees the key to moral motivation not simply in knowledge or emotions, but in our greater awareness of the complexity of the entanglement of both. This knowledge consists in knowing how emotions operate, how to disentangle them when they appear to us in a confused manner, and, in consequence, how to direct and reorganize them anew by linking with other passions. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, admiration does not necessarily target the virtuous, but instead can be—and indeed tends to be—about something mediocre or even base. This point about admiration's orientation toward the mediocre and base is another factor that challenges the theory of moral exemplarity that ascribes to admiration the ability to detect moral and non-moral excellences.

Kierkegaard says that admiration frustrates people's determination and ambitions to achieve something great. Speaking of the "levelling" power of admiration in an entry entitled "Criminal Mediocrity," he writes: "they see that by indolence and minor performances they very easily manage to become admired, loved, esteemed, and rewarded in every way by all the mediocrity, which is the great power in society" (JP 3: 2686/Pap. XI-3 B 177). To that end, Kierkegaard presents admiration as problematic when it comes to targeting excellence and perfection. Criticizing admiration for being impotent in identifying the virtuous and excellence, he presents in his journal the master of thieves and the champion cheating student as

exemplifying situations where one can admire something dishonorable, hence, ironically, the non-admirable.

Just as in the grades the one who was most esteemed by his comrades was the boy who knew how to fool the teacher most cleverly, so the world always admires one thing only—a dishonesty more clever than the previous one.

(JP 2: 2232/SKS 26: 33, NB31: 44)

This kind of approbation, he remarks elsewhere, “is wasted on the unrighteous and the dissolute just as much as it is offered to the righteous” (EUD: 151/SKS 5: 152). By this Kierkegaard means not only the fact that admiration’s “aboutness” is directed toward the good and the bad, but also that it is socially determined.

6.2.3.3 *Admiration, Sociability, Contagion*

The sociability of admiration and its contagious dimension—subjects discussed more deeply in the following part of this chapter—are important aspects of Kierkegaard’s affective reading of this emotion. While admiration has often an individual dimension—we can admire someone for some reason—it also has a collective dimension—where, for instance, a group of people admires a person or their skill. In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de silentio speaks of “public admiration” evoked in an audience that produces affective outcomes such as tears thus: “It is great when the poet in presenting his tragic hero for public admiration dares to say: ‘Weep for him, for he deserves it’” (FT: 66/SKS 4: 158). Linking public admiration with worldly admiration, Johannes de silentio takes the latter to represent an instance of collective admiration. The danger of any collective emotion is that it can effortlessly proliferate among people where it can often become detached from its original object. The poet must be able to “keep the crowd under restraint” so it is focused on the merit toward which admiration is directed (FT: 66/SKS 4: 158).

This need for the control of the crowd in relation to emotions such as admiration—a clearly Platonic remark—is not simply metaphorical; Kierkegaard finds admiration to be a highly contagious emotion. It spreads easily between people as an unconscious, sympathetic, fellow feeling, especially in gatherings. It is a social and collective “entity” that resembles such domains as moods, trends, policies, or even ideologies. He presents crowds as often engaging in or being bewitched by admiration. As an affective emotion, admiration is at the foundation of social bonding. Its social manifestation, often expressed in outbursts of admiration, has its basis in the social unconscious that ties people together around a shared value.

In his pseudonymous essay “Does a Human Being Have the Right to Let Himself Be Put to Death for the Truth?” its author speaks of admiration that “darkly lurks in the age” (WA: 81/SKS 11: 85). Calling it contemptuously “the age’s admiration,” Kierkegaard attributes to it a kind of potentiality of force that can be shaped and directed by those who understand its mechanism. One such person for Kierkegaard is “a psychologist” who is able to awaken collective admiration among his fellowmen to, for instance, cause violence. This is possible since “Spurned admiration is at the same moment an absolute passion of indignation” (WA: 81/SKS 11: 85). This Spinozian remark, which suggests the conflation and interrelation of emotions that represent different, often opposing valences, indicates that its generation and further enhancement lead to uncontrolled and rapid outbursts of collective violence.

Our knowledge of the mechanism of affective admiration cannot protect us against its charm. An example of this is given in Kierkegaard’s critique of sermons delivered by one of his contemporaries, the widely admired and respected bishop Mynster. Kierkegaard shows how Mynster’s pathos-filled, emotional invocations have a contagious effect on the congregation of listeners.

Mynster orates and says: And He did not withhold the great words, but He [Christ] said them: I am indeed a king—and then Mynster weeps, and I, Miss Jespersen, Student Møller, Chairman of the Board Nissen, Grocer Grønberg, etc. etc.—all of us weep and admire Mynster; many a one is not at all clear whether he is weeping at the thought of Christ or shedding tears of admiration for Mynster.

(JP 3: 3348/SKS 23: 411, NB20: 35)

This passage indicates that the affectivity of admiration operates irrespective of the character formation and social standing of the affected. Equally affected are the educated and uneducated, or the bourgeoisie and the working class. Even Kierkegaard, so vigilantly aware of the affective power of admiration, is not immune to it. In this comment Kierkegaard takes on Aristotle’s supposition that morally developed persons are immune to the affective, hence the collective, involuntary, and unconscious dimensions of admiration. Our knowledge of how admiration operates, but also our ability to identify persons exerting affective influence on others, is important in trying to “control” it, but it does not guarantee that we are immune from its negative effects. Here, Kierkegaard seems to be moving beyond Spinoza, for whom the key to controlling passive affects lies in the knowledge of their operations.

Kierkegaard’s remark concerning the affective dimension of Mynster’s preaching demonstrates that he is cognizant of what Gabriel Tarde calls the power of “magnetism” and “prestige.” Discussing the foundational element of society in *The Laws of Imitation*, Tarde draws attention to

figures that produce in us not admiration—which he sees as largely warranting excellence—but fascination. Such persons magnetize us through their charisma and display of positive emotions. “The magnetizer does not need to lie or terrorize to secure the blind belief and the passive obedience of his magnetized subjects. He has prestige—that tells the story” (Tarde 1903: 78). The magnetizer is someone who, like a psychologist, provides the magnetized objects the occasion to vent their often unconscious emotions and urges. Tarde adds:

[T]here is in the magnetized subject a certain potential force of belief and desire which is anchored in all kinds of sleeping but unforgotten memories, and that this force seeks expression just as the water of a lake seeks an outlet.

(1903: 78)

Mynster is such a magnetizer who, taking advantage of his prestige and oratorical skills, unifies people around their unconscious and unadmitted resistance to following through with the radical requirements of Christianity (JP 4: 6761/SKS 24: 348–349, NB24: 51).

6.3 Crowd, Contagion, Violence

“The Crowd is Untruth” is one of the most famous quotes from Kierkegaard known to readers beyond the academy. It signals Kierkegaard’s vehement criticism of phenomena that followed the emergence of mass society, such as fashion, entertainment, press, the public. The Enlightenment, which hoped to bring about further liberation of human individuality and the reign of reason, brought standardization and affect-generated collective behaviors. Yet for the first time in centuries, multitudes of people were able to unite to redefine their place in the world and gain meaning and power.

6.3.1 *Crowd and the Public*

The emergence of mass society was hardly something to celebrate for Kierkegaard. The advent of crowds occurred at the expense of the individual – the category essentially defining every human being. The crowd is, for Kierkegaard, a dangerous phenomenon that can exercise force while being anonymous; it is a phantom that cannot be held accountable for its actions. It functions in the sphere of doxa. Operating predominantly in the realm of physical proximity, it projects the power of opinion that shapes customs, policies, laws, and religion.

The functioning of the crowd is largely based on shared feelings, emotions, passions, and affects. Despite many observations from scholars who locate his interest in the phenomenon of human collectivity to his

later production, Kierkegaard expresses his contempt for crowds already as early as in his pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling*. Initially indicating the difficulty with discerning the knight of faith from a crowd of people in “Preliminary Expectoration” (FT: 39/SKS 4: 134), Johannes de silentio embarks on a critique of those who would like to attempt to replicate the knight of faith collectively (FT: 79–81/SKS 4: 170–171). The knight of faith is presented as worthy of admiration and imitation, but such imitation proves challenging for people as it must occur on an individual level. Put differently, whether the knight of faith can be imitated, and what it actually means, is a matter of individual discernment, not a consensual decision that deflects and disperses the responsibility and gravity of that judgment on a number of people. Collective appropriation of the knight of faith is simply “cheating ... in the world of spirit.” In his own words,

A dozen sectarians go arm in arm with one another ... The sectarians deafen one another with their noise and clamor, keep anxiety away with their screeching. A hooting carnival crowd like that thinks it is assaulting heaven, believes it is going along the same path as the knight of faith, who in the loneliness of the universe never hears another human voice but walks alone with his dreadful responsibility.
(FT: 80/SKS 4: 170–171)

The effect that is achieved in grouping, as we have seen in the previous section, is largely a lowering of moral and intellectual expectations fortified by unified mutual reassurance. This resembles the echo chamber effect occurring in social gatherings immune to feedback from the outside. Johannes de silentio’s acrimonious account of the crowd of believers has a distinctly animal and primal tone. Their collectivity is founded and strengthened by affective behaviors attributed to herd animals such as “hooting,” producing “noise and clamor,” and “screeching.” This “carnivality” and the lowering expectations eventuated by the crowd is largely behind what the author calls, ironically, “the worldly admiration of expertise.”

Kierkegaard’s references to the crowd are formulated in relation to his radical apology of individuality (JP 2: 2030/SKS 24: 32, NB21: 34; PV: 105–124/SKS 16: 85–104). He positions himself as a continuator of Schleiermacher’s ethics of individuality, but also as a kind of response to Hegel’s philosophy of the system as well as the less widely known figure of Johann Kaspar Schmid, known as Max Stirner. Some scholars situate Kierkegaard alongside existentialist critics of mass society such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Ortega y Gasset (Tuttle 1996). His remarks about mass society anticipate a number of problems discussed now in the disciplines of crowd psychology and even social ontology, locating him among the precursors of sociology such as Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, and Emile Durkheim (Kaftanski 2020). That intellectual tradition

emphasizes the fundamental role of imitation in humans in the formation and the functioning of society. This tradition has received renewed attention from the French anthropologist René Girard. His theory of mimetic desire and scapegoating has been analyzed in relation to Kierkegaard most notably by Charles Bellinger. His groundbreaking (Bellinger 1996) essay with a symptomatic title, “‘The Crowd Is Untruth’: A Comparison of Kierkegaard and Girard,” identifies in Kierkegaard’s works such key elements from Girard’s writings as scapegoating, the social crisis, victimhood, mimetic desire, and violence.

To avoid redoubling Bellinger’s efforts, I explore passages in Kierkegaard that, to my knowledge, have not been studied in an attempt to call attention to distinct points of convergence and divergence between these two thinkers. I find reading Kierkegaard alongside Girard to be beneficial to both Kierkegaardians and Girardians—these considerations shed an important light on the complexity of Kierkegaard’s engagement of mimesis and expose Girard scholars to an important yet largely ignored precursor of his thought. Kierkegaard, as I argue, is especially important in that context as he challenges Girard on his claim that our awareness of the mechanisms of mimetic desire and scapegoating are the key to largely freeing ourselves from them. Christ represents for Girard the conscious victim who, by voluntarily sacrificing his life for the sake of humanity, stops the perpetuation of violence by cancelling the desire for retribution. Christ is the model for imitation if we want to avoid the dangers of mimetic desire. Yet as I have argued in Chapters 4 and 5, Kierkegaard demonstrates the inherent difficulties in the imitation of Christ. Moreover, Kierkegaard is rather skeptical of the cognitive power over the unconscious. His reflections on our limited immunity from affectivity, such as in the example of Mynster, should motivate Girard scholars to search for more adequate forms of resistance to affective mimesis. In the last chapter of this book, I offer one way to mitigate the problem of affective mimesis by exploring what I term existential mimesis in Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard identifies such distinct social beings as the crowd and public. He also refers in his writings to “the human race” (CA: 25–29/SKS 4: 332–336) and “humanity *in abstracto*” (SUD: 31/SKS 11: 147), “generation” and “the present age” (TA: 84/SKS 8: 81), the majority and the people (WA: 229/Pap. IX B 24), Christendom, and a number of political and social entities.⁶ His conceptualizations lack systematicity, and the meanings behind concepts often overlap. While he attributes similar elements to the crowd and the public, the former has a distinctly anonymous character and suggests spontaneous gatherings of people; the public is being formed around a particular idea or value and does not need physical proximity to generate the power of influence. A readership of a newspaper, the advent of which Kierkegaard has felt personally on his own skin, is an example of a public. Kierkegaard also attributes a number of anthropomorphic characteristics to social beings such as sagacity,

presumptuousness, as well as some disparaged human phenomena such as chatter, nosiness, hyper reflection, or business.

Kierkegaard's distinction between crowds and publics and his analysis of the press largely prefigure Tarde's observations about modern society. Nidesh Lawtoo (2013) skillfully situates Tarde's systematic scholarly work on the crowd, the public, and the press against Gustave Le Bon's prominent assertion that "our age is the 'age of the crowds'"; rather, we are living in "the age of the public and publics" (Lawtoo 2013: 104). Lawtoo explains:

It is true that the psychic disposition of the public is essentially the same as the crowd. What characterizes both social groups is a lack of rational control over one's opinions, credulity, vulnerability to emotional contagion, psychic suggestibility, and, more generally, an inclination for what Tarde calls imitation. And yet what distinguishes the public from the crowd is the fact that unconscious forms of imitation are no longer determined by physical proximity to others; they are no longer a matter of being swept off one's feet by the emotional contagion a physical mass generates.

(2013: 104–105)

What we see in the further exploration of the crowd, the public, and the press, and their interrelationships in Kierkegaard, is that the unobservable people bonding in the form of a dispersed crowd is as influential on the formation of collective identity as observable groupings of people. Furthermore, the public in the form of journalism and mass media is even more forceful and, in fact, more pernicious than crowds as it influences at a distance by creating public opinion shared by readerships and audiences. Public opinion does not only pertain to the cognitive aspect of shared information; it also creates a communal experience of sharing congenial information that reinforces the paradoxical bond of anonymity between people that is in effect detrimental to the communal life and social fabric.

While it has been argued extensively that Kierkegaard is not an anti-social thinker (Lappano 2017), he attributes a number of malaises that affect the modern subject to human sociality. His point is that, as has been indicated throughout this book, a human being is essentially an individual and all that makes him forget or abstract from this fact is essentially evil; deindividuation leads to inauthenticity. In his own words, "The idolized positive principle of sociality in our age is the consuming, demoralizing principle that in the thralldom of reflection transforms even virtues into *vitia splendida* [glittering vices]" (TA: 86/SKS 8: 82).

That principle of socializing and deindividuating, which Kierkegaard calls "leveling," is problematic for four main reasons. First, it lobbies for a consensual approach to the formation of values. Second, the negative

effects of leveling are not simply measured in the lowering of the bar for social norms, but in deindividualization and the building of a hostile environment for those who challenge such norms and the mechanism responsible for their formation. Third, leveling also affects those who willingly participate in it believing that, overall, it is beneficial for them. This is the case as the complexity of the mechanism of leveling and its detrimental consequences for all stakeholders are not readily detectable to those carrying it out. Fourth, building upon the previous points, leveling is a “force” that is being generated unbeknownst to those who willingly participate in this generation. At best, it is only detectible to its devotees on some levels, not all. In Kierkegaard’s words,

Leveling is not the action of one individual but a reflection-game in the hand of an abstract power. [T]he individual who levels others is himself carried along, and so on. While the individual egoistically thinks he knows what he is doing, it must be said that they all know not what they do, for just as inspired enthusiastic unanimity results in something more than is not individuals’, a something more emerges here also. A demon that no individual can control is conjured up, and although the individual selfishly enjoys the abstraction during the brief moment of pleasure in the leveling, he is also underwriting his own downfall.

(TA: 86/SKS 8: 82)

To describe this uncanny force of leveling, Kierkegaard is undoubtedly using a rather obsolete and nowadays questionable quasi-religious language. Undeniably, he perceives leveling as symptomatic of the modern spiritual crisis of faith and religious institutions; he responds to leveling with religious means by calling for a religious awakening (TA: 88–89/SKS 8: 84–85). Yet, his reflections also disclose a great attunement to a dimension of human functioning that emerges in collective environments of groupings and congregations. While he does not attempt a conceptual distinction between the psychology of individual and group psychology akin to those we find in Freud, Tarde, or Durkheim, Kierkegaard’s “something more that emerges” in collective environments captures the powerful “unknown” foreign to a post-Enlightenment positivistic reflection zooming in on human individuality. The leveling of the crowds is imperceptible to reflection that takes the collective as reducible to an aggregate of individuals. Human grouping and related phenomena are not generated merely by the voluntary entering into agreement to further common interests. On the contrary, sociability on a rudimentary level is often unplanned and unintentional—Kierkegaard calls it “this spontaneous combustion of the human race, produced by the friction that occurs when the separateness of individual inwardness in the religious life is omitted” (TA: 87/SKS 8: 83–84). In a draft of H.H.’s *Two*

Ethical-Religious Essays, which he finally decides to exclude from the final manuscript, Kierkegaard provides us with a description of the public and the crowd surprisingly aligned with modern and contemporary social theories. In this rarely quoted passage, Kierkegaard states that the public and the crowd are “a prodigious monstrosity with many heads ... a hundred-thousand-legged monster” that is “an irrational enormity, or an enormous irrationality that nevertheless has physical force ... whose enormous power cannot be defined humanly but can be more accurately defined as the power of a machine” (WA: 229/Pap. IX B 24).

Kierkegaard’s remarks about the crowd’s superficial knowledge of its own actions (“they all know not what they do”) and the uncanny force that awakens in the collective process (“a something more emerges here also. A demon ...”) bring us back to Tarde. As we have established in the case of Mynster, for Tarde humans operate largely on the affective, unconscious, and collective levels fundamental for human sociality. On the social level, we are largely predisposed to suggestion and hypnosis: “the social man [is] a veritable somnambulist” (Tarde 1903: 76). This radical idea, which for Tarde is the subject of the emerging discipline of “*sociological psychology* (which begins where physiological psychology leaves off)” (1903: 204), renders the collective existence as somehow immersed in a half-dream in which we are susceptible to contagion and suggestion from other members of society, especially the magnetization of extraordinary figures from the present and the past (1903: 77). “Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous” (Tarde 1903: 77).

By this radical vision of human collectivity, Tarde wants to challenge Smith’s idea that the sharing of emotions is somehow conscious and consensual. “*Mutual imitation*, mutual prestige or *sympathy*, in the meaning of Adam Smith, is produced only in so-called waking life and among people who seem to exercise no magnetic influence over one another” (Tarde 1903: 79). By this Tarde means that such imitative emotions as *sympathy* are accounted for in philosophy by taking on board the conscious, reflective, and highly individualized view of humans. Smith erroneously takes the object of observation out of the social context in which emotional sharing is exercised. Undoubtedly, Kierkegaard’s sustained focus on human collectivity and the unconscious-affective position him as a transitory figure between Smith and Tarde, paving the way to the analysis of human affectivity present in the thought of theorists of affect such as Tomkins and Massumi.

The anonymous, abstracting, and spontaneous aspect of the crowd receives a more distinct characteristic in Kierkegaard’s concept of the public. He introduces this notion in *A Literary Review*. Commending the literary talent of Gyllembourg-Ehrensward and her ability to sustain excellent readership while not giving in to intellectual and literary fads

for the sake of keeping her readers interested in her works, Kierkegaard praises the public for recognizing her literary and authorial merits: “*And the reading public has been faithful to the author*” (TA: 16/SKS 8: 20). Yet, for the most part, the public is the object of his criticism. The public receives a distinctly pejorative meaning further on in the book, where Kierkegaard notices that the public can also gather around an idea or an objective that escapes any efforts of sustained scrutiny. In contrast to the virtues of the literary production of Gyllembourg-Ehrensward, one can hardly scrutinize and be held accountable for the production of the press, for Kierkegaard. Suspending for a moment the fact that Gyllembourg-Ehrensward’s works were published anonymously—she was in fact commonly considered to be a male author for much of her life—and that Kierkegaard himself published under numerous and confusing pseudonyms, his point is that the press produces highly impactful articles without specific authors who can be challenged and held accountable (JP 2: 2149/SKS 20: 153, NB2: 32). “The press wants to influence by means of coverage, but coverage is simply the power of the lie, a sensate power, like the power of fists” (JP 2: 2158/SKS 21: 183, NB8: 93). The readership of a newspaper is fundamentally volatile and represents for Kierkegaard the “human-swarm” and “confused mob” that hardly engages with content that requires any sustained intellectual effort in critically processing read opinions (JP 2: 1375/SKS 21: 76, NB7: 3). By providing room for demoralizing and often slanderous content, the press gathers readers around distressing and malicious ideas that provide them with a sense of collective identity generated by the magnitude of press coverage and circulation (JP 2: 2162/SKS 22: 62, NB11: 110).

The famous Corsair affair allowed Kierkegaard to feel the power of the press directly. After an initial critique from Kierkegaard for a problematic journalistic ethics and lack of professionalism, *The Corsair*, a Danish tabloid-like newspaper, launched a campaign of mockery and public shaming directed at Kierkegaard. Various caricatures and mocking opinions published by *The Corsair* instilled a negative public opinion about Kierkegaard as a person and author. In response to the affair, Kierkegaard expresses his disparagement of and denies his willingness to have “a public” that he calls a “phantasmic nonentity” (COR: 201/Pap. VII 1-B 70).

Qualifying the public as a phantom, “monstrous nonentity,” but also “a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage” (TA: 90–91/SKS 8: 86), Kierkegaard points to the fact that it provides individuals with an illusory identity and community. While society should motivate individuals and assist them in finding an authentic life, an idea with which Kierkegaard would agree (albeit somewhat reluctantly), by mobilizing people around trivialities, the public is clearly steered away from topics of existential importance. Indeed, the public is especially present where “strong communal life” is absent. In such an environment thrives the press, which groups individuals together to

eventually deindividualize them, giving them a false sense of community. What bonds them is the fact that they follow the same medium; they do not form genuine relationships that require physical contact and the exchange of ideas. On an unprecedented scale, mass media nurture this sense of belonging among anonymous and mutually unknown people by creating the experience of simultaneous consumption of alike information that can rarely be adequately scrutinized and challenged. As Tarde says: “Men who are mutually suggestible in this way do not touch each other, nor do they see or hear each other: they sit, each one of them, at home, reading the same newspaper, scattered around a vast territory” (1989: 38; *translation following* Lawtoo 2013).

This deindividualization created by mass media and public opinion also dismantles responsibility. In Kierkegaard’s own words:

[T]he press create[s] this abstraction “the public,” made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can be united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and yet are claimed to be a whole. The public is a corps, outnumbering all the people together, but this corps can never be called up for inspection; indeed, it cannot even have so much as a single representative, because it is itself an abstraction.

(TA: 91/SKS 8: 87)

Dispersed responsibility undermines individuality by taking away freedom, which requires that one is accountable for one’s actions. Through ostracism and ridicule, it pressures people to comply and adopt the opinion of the public. Motivated by fear of expulsion from communal life and exploiting the need for communal belonging, the press assimilates complying individuals to a group. The dispersion of individuality and responsibility encourages collective formations to violently deal with all opposition and criticism. In case things go south, all and none are held responsible.

This reasoning is confirmed in Kierkegaard’s journals where, evaluating the defects of the modern times—the present age or the age of reflection—he explains the mechanism of social assimilation by referring to social imitation: “In times of reflection it is frequently only fear of men which intimidates the individuals into being like the others; then abstractions like the public, which are actually ‘the others,’ become the tyrant” (JP 1: 1088/SKS 25: 48, NB26: 42). Being the tyrant, the public can exercise force over noncomplying individuals. Benefiting from and feeding on any kind of human fear is criticized by Kierkegaard as being “animalistic [*Dyriske*]” (JP 1: 83/SKS 26: 23, NB31: 30). Elsewhere, speaking of the necessity of practically returning to the category of the single individual, Kierkegaard indicates that becoming that individual is a risky business that can cost an arm and a leg:

[Th]e practice of [becoming a single individual] is always dangerous and at times may claim the lives of its practitioners. For the self-willed race and the confused crowds regard the highest, divinely understood, as high treason against “the race,” “the crowd,” “the public” etc.

(JP 2: 2004/SKS 20: 281, NB3: 77)

6.3.2 *Violence and Contagion*

Violence is a critical theme that runs throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship. It is a key part of such important and positively appraised issues as martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Both are for Kierkegaard the hallmarks of genuine Christianity. Fueled by envy, violence is also on the horizon of potentialities in admiration. The Danish actress Johanne Luise Heiberg from Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, after initially arousing admiration in her spectators, eventually, like a genius (discussed in Chapter 1) falls victim to “the power-craving crowd.” After becoming bored with her, the public turns Heiberg into an object of mutually shared contempt. Perceived as “uncooperative,” she is violently discarded like an obsolete object.⁷

Admiration can also produce violence against those who are unwilling to recognize a publicly admired person as worthy of respect. The aforementioned example of contagious admiration generated by the preaching of Bishop Mynster testifies to the power of collective emotions. A related passage from the same period on Mynster’s preaching demonstrates that those who are not convinced by Mynster’s preaching and want to follow a more radical version of Christianity may indeed contradict the preacher and reveal the dissonance between his preaching and the Christian requirement of suffering and martyrdom. Mynster’s preaching “veils, tones down, suppresses, omits some of what is most decisively Christian” (M: 16, 17/SKS 14: 137, 138). Eradication of the imitation of Christ from Christianity is “pure Mynsterism,” says Kierkegaard in his journal (JP 1: 1087/SKS 24: 507, NB25: 89). Mynster’s Christianity is an oxymoron, like “a virgin with a flock of children” (M: 18/SKS 14: 138).

Anyone attempting truth-witnessing, which demands from “*a follower of Jesus Christ ... to proclaim the doctrine [of Christianity] in poverty, in abasement, in renunciation of everything, in the most unconditional heterogeneity to this world, at the greatest distance from all use or assistance of worldly power,*” will collide with “the whole ecclesiastical established order,” not just with the single person of Mynster (M: 20/SKS 14: 141). Challenging Mynster’s authority means challenging the authority of the Danish Lutheran Church and those who represent it by, among other things, endorsing Mynster as the truth-witness.

As Mynster’s authority results from public admiration, and as it is solidified by such powerful institutions as the national church, challenging Mynster will not in fact stir his followers to reevaluate the merits

of his character and integrity. To the contrary. As we have learned, as a contagious emotion, admiration precedes merit; to maintain the *status quo*, the followers of Mynster will strive to do away with the Mynster's attacker, rather than taking it up with the bishop. Kierkegaard says:

But precisely when Mynster is most admired, in his most brilliant moments—precisely then he is, from a Christian point of view, most untrue. It is dreadful to imagine how this same crowd, which is silent with admiration, would rage against a poor mistreated apostle—who did what Mynster orates about.

(JP 3: 3499/SKS 23: 262, NB18: 16)

Mynster's example shows that human collectivity is not problematic for Kierkegaard just because it compromises human individuality. It is true that sociability is a highly imitative phenomenon that impinges on human authenticity and negatively affects the human spiritual dimension. Indeed, for Kierkegaard the difference between the individual and the crowd has spiritual underpinnings as it has been established by God (JP 2: 1825/Pap. XI 3-B 199). Yet, Kierkegaard also readily observes in collectivity an unprecedented potentiality for humans to cause violence *via* intimidation and physical harm. This worries him especially as the violence at stake has an affective, hence unconscious and imitative dimension.

The idea that Christ but also Socrates were collectively martyred is often expressed by Kierkegaard in his journals. For instance, criticizing the novelistic skill of Victor Hugo by accusing him of playing to the crowd, he asks rhetorically: "What tyrant, what idol is he worshiping with this speech? It is 'the crowd,' 'voting,' and the like. And has it claimed no sacrifices? It claimed Christ and Socrates and 'the host of martyrs'" (JP 1: 820/SKS 23: 41, NB15: 62). Kierkegaard's most sustained exposition of the formation and the functioning of affective violence is present in "Does a Human Being Have the Right to Let Himself Be Put to Death for the Truth?" This essay, accounts for the affective violence that put Christ to death and that is able to take away the life of a Christian who would like to become a martyr walking in Christ's footsteps. It offers an insight into mass psychology by explaining the mechanism of collective violence, which also largely anticipates Girard's theory of mimetic desire and scapegoating.

The essay starts with a claim that Christ was put to death because he refused to join either of two sociopolitical classes that desperately wanted him to acknowledge and endorse their ideals. This caused both classes to resent him: "For that very reason the lower class was just as indignant with him as the upper class, since each was pursuing its own interest and wanted him to join them in self-love" (WA: 59/SKS 11: 65). The building of the tension between Christ and the two classes was based on a preexisting conflict between these two classes: "The mighty hated him because

the people wanted to make him king, and the people hated him because he refused to be king" (WA: 60/SKS 11: 66). H.H. explains that Christ has failed the expectations of his contemporaries by refusing to take the role that was tailored for him to suit their needs. His rejection of that role "became the sting in their embitterment and made the rage of hate bloodthirsty when he then refused" (WA: 60/SKS 11: 66). His contemporaries were so fixed on ("infatuated" with) the idea that Christ was "the Expected One" that they made an idol out of Him ("they had comprehended his infinite superiority") (WA: 61/SKS 11: 66). His rejection made them "furious," which the author remarks four times in one sentence. Indicated among other things is their anger over their own mistake in the misidentification; to deal with it, they directed this anger toward Christ.

Another important angle that contributed to putting Christ to death pertains to the historical-political situation of the nation of Israel that shaped their national psyche, for H.H. The political subjugation of the Jews created in them a paradoxical blend of feelings of superiority and self-loathing. This conflicted sense of pride was enraged by Christ's refusal to fulfill his duty; his act was taken as "akin to treason against his contemporaries, against the nation, against the nation's cause" (WA: 62/SKS 11: 68). Christ then experiences in his life "the greatest possible human contrasts from elevation to abasement in such a short time" (WA: 63/SKS 11: 69). Such a complete reversal of action is possible because, as we have established, the emotion of admiration is in a Spinozian sense bound to its opposite, envy. Yet in the mass grouping, the alteration in the valence of emotions seems to take place at a much faster pace. From being summoned to be the king of the Jews, Christ is now the target of their hate and violence.

With the speed of the first impression of the extraordinary (wanting to make Christ king), the generation rushes straight to the opposite extreme, wanting to kill him—that is, from the *direct* expression for the extraordinary the generation rushes to the opposite expression for the extraordinary.

(WA: 62/SKS 11: 68)

The author of the essay emphasizes both the quickness with which the alteration of the crowd's relation to the extraordinary occurs, but also the fact that "wanting to make Christ king" and "wanting to kill him" are equally justifiable reactions of the crowd toward "the extraordinary." The quickness and the spontaneity of this altering reaction of the crowd suggests a kind of affective independence of that swing of valences on the pendulum of affectivity. Indeed, speaking of collective occurrences, Kierkegaard often uses such words as "rush," "upheaval," "raging." They indicate not only hastiness but also thoughtlessness and an uncontrollable discharge of force.

Despite its apparent dynamism, this collectivity of force that often takes the shape of mass political movement is for Kierkegaard “no action at all” (WA: 227/Pap. IX B 24). It is affective, unconscious, collective, and contagious because it transpires below the radar of awareness, will, and individual decision making. No noble action can, for Kierkegaard, have a collective composition, even if the cause seems to be deserving of praise (WA: 76/SKS 11: 80). The French Revolution, which resulted from the collective storming of the Bastille, transpired “without any acting personality who knows definitely beforehand what he wants, so that afterward he is able to say definitely whether what he wanted has occurred or not” (WA: 227/Pap. IX B 24). The European phenomenon of the Spring of Nations—or “The Age of Revolution” as it is termed in *A Literary Review*—is just a jumbled collection of “events” effected by people mutually imitating each other without any particular purpose:

Everything everywhere is an event, in many places an aping that even regarded as aping is not action, because again it is not an individual who apes something foreign and now in his own country is acting—no, the aping quite correctly consists in a kind of commotion that arises, God knows how-and then something happens.

(WA: 227/Pap. IX B 24)

Praising the social changes that occurred in mass revolutions is rarely meritorious because it lacks clear standards for verifying such events’ success. Rather, people swept up by the moment eventuating mass movements are prone to explain away the result, deluding themselves that what has been achieved was planned and is desired.

Such *post factum* justification of actions that stemmed from overexcitement of the moment is in stark contrast to Kierkegaard’s conception of freedom which, as we have established, requires individual responsibility. A sustained reflection on spontaneous mass actions demonstrates that they are indeed like infectious diseases, which can never be justified as something positive and welcomed. In his own words:

But that the upheaval occurs and has occurred in such a way is again the old evil, this shoving of responsibility away from oneself, forced, to be sure, into something big on such a scale that finally existence must assume the paternity for what occurs in the world of free rational beings, somewhat as in nature, so that these upheavals are to be regarded meaninglessly and inhumanly as natural phenomena, and thus revolutions and republics arise in quite the same sense as there is cholera.

(WA: 228/Pap. IX B 24)

Kierkegaard’s great interest in and knowledge of illnesses would surprise many. He witnessed firsthand an epidemic of cholera in Copenhagen in

the period June 12–October 1 that killed almost 5,000 people in 1853; his brother Peter Christian was “seriously ill” with typhus in 1835 (Watkin 2010: 44). In *Postscript*, Kierkegaard writes about vaccination in the context of half-truth and compromised Christianity that needs “a radical cure,” not “half-measures” (CUP1: 294/SKS 7: 268). “Sickness” is literally incorporated into the title of his pseudonymous *The Sickness unto Death*, and the subjects of the relation between a patient and a doctor and of treatment are densely featured there and throughout many of his pseudonymous and signed works. The heavily contagious aspect of the reference to cholera in relation to mass political actions comes to light when related to a striking reference in his late writings: “One person is enough to give a whole city cholera” (M: 252/SKS 13: 308). No wonder that Kierkegaard recommends nipping contagion in the bud, even using a form of force. His measures would suggest a kind of lockdown. It is obvious to him that when someone is affected by this highly infectious disease, that person needs to be guarded and forced to stay put using power. This we see in *Stage’s on Life’s Way*, where the pseudonymous author of “In Vino Veritas,” William Afham, states that “when there is cholera, a soldier is stationed outside the house” (SLW: 38/SKS 6: 41).

H.H.’s description of Christ’s death at the hands of the crowd resonates with Girard’s account of collective violence. Christ represents “an innocent person” for both thinkers and the violence of crowds has a sacrificial dimension (WA: 64/SKS 11: 70; Girard 1986: 122, 198–202). The victimhood of Christ takes place in a society plagued by crises and takes the shape of a scapegoat who unites opposing sides of a conflict around the persecuted figure. Indeed, Kierkegaard talks about the death of Christ as uniting both “the mighty” and “the people” (WA: 60/SKS 11:66). Girard presents the Gospels as revealing that scapegoats are “the spontaneous agents of reconciliation, since, in the final paroxysm of mimeticism, they unite in opposition to themselves those who were organized in opposition to each other by the effects of a previous weaker mimeticism” (Girard 1986: 166). Kierkegaard and Girard indicate that the killing of the innocent victim can be exercised by an unprompted mob of people, but also by human collectives that are organized around an idea (WA: 68/SKS 11: 73; Girard 1986: 89–90, 139–140).

Yet for Kierkegaard the scapegoated person is not oblivious to the victimary mechanism that person participates in. In stark difference to Girard’s theory, for Kierkegaard the crowd’s collective violence is partially caused by the victim. Kierkegaard’s martyr is someone who incites violence by fueling the passionless crowd with negative emotions. H.H. makes it clear in the essay:

It is not the age that is to have the energy to put someone to death or make him a martyr; it is the martyr, the prospective martyr, who is

to have the energy to give the age passion, in this case the passion of indignation, to put him to death.

(WA: 79/SKS 11: 83)

The martyr is a conscious victim who voluntarily incites the collective to put him to death (“*the voluntary collaboration in one’s own death*, which is the real self-sacrifice for the truth”; WA: 70/SKS 11: 75). This death-drive on the part of the martyr is not something that one cherishes as an end in itself; it is the truth that the martyr is committed to expressing in their life by “witnessing” it, and this self-sacrificing truth-witnessing is the inciting element to violence:

“If I jack up the definition of truth even higher, such as it truly is for me, then this will lead to my death; the end must be that either the government or the people (whichever of these two powers he now relates to) will put me to death.”

(WA: 71/SKS 11: 76)

In this chapter I have attempted a systematic presentation of the role of mimesis in Kierkegaard’s conceptualization of such moral emotions as sympathy/empathy and admiration. I have also brought forth the way mimesis is operative in the individual-collective of his sociopolitical thought. As I have argued, especially the affective dimension of mimesis contributes to human contagious behaviors that render us inauthentic by diminishing our capacity to act freely, but also to the annihilation of human individuality in process of standardizing socialization. Kierkegaard’s affective admiration forces us to rethink the objects of our respect as it questions the moral and epistemological reliability of admiration. Kierkegaard cautions us that, on the one hand, *what* and *who* we value as deserving praise may in fact result from collective suggestibility and peer pressure. On the other hand, he points to the fact that, while frequently analyzed in separation, our emotions are experienced as being intertwined with other, often opposing emotions. The scholarly work that has been accomplished here, which predominantly focuses on the negative influence of mimesis on the genuineness of human existence, leads to the concluding chapter of this book that presents a positive concept of mimesis that can successfully address the identified malaises of the modern man.

Notes

- 1 For a more comprehensive, historically oriented theoretical analysis of affect and affectivity, see Werhs (2017).
- 2 “The poet’s representation amounts to a kind of physical pointing that grips and involves those present ... People often describe the immediate physical effects of such an oral poetic presentation as a contagion—a series of

- elementary mimetic processes by which listeners achieve a sameness with one another and which spreads epidemically” (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 47).
- 3 Important work has recently been dedicated to tracking and reconstructing the genealogies of affect theory it tracks (Stanley 2017: 97–112).
 - 4 Krause calls the first type of sympathy (S1) and the second (S2). See also Scudder (2020: 55).
 - 5 See De Vignemont and Singer (2006); Hurley and Chater (2005); Haidt and Seder (2009); and Immordino-Yang and Sylvan (2010).
 - 6 TA: 90/SKS 8: 86: “An approximate leveling can be accomplished by a particular social class or profession, for example, the clergy, the middle class, the farmers, by the people themselves, but all this is still only the movement of abstraction within the concretions of individuality.”
 - 7 It is not hard to miss a repetition of that pattern in Kierkegaard’s relation to Mynster. A number of his references to Mynster are positive and demonstrate his reverence for and admiration of Mynster (Cf. JP 5:5408/SKS 18: 57, EE: 165; JP 6: 6693/SKS 24: 74, NB21: 122). Mostly late references in journals and newspaper articles and pamphlets from *The Moment* indicate Kierkegaard’s vicious, personally motivated attack on Mynster during his life but especially after his death (Cf. JP 6: 6795/SKS 24: 499–501; JP 6: 6954/Pap. XI3 B 93; M: 15/SKS 14: 133).

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