

**THE INVERSE DIALECTIC OF JEST AND EARNESTNESS
IN KIERKEGAARD'S THEOLOGY**

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According to Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus, "[t]he first condition for becoming a Christian is to become unconditionally turned inward" in earnestness (*Alvor*), which is a major concept in Kierkegaard's writings that is synonymous to certitude, inwardness, subjectivity, and faith in signifying the constituent of the eternal in a human being.¹ Declining to define or talk about earnestness in "the jest of abstraction," the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis associates it with disposition, not in the sense of a natural disposition or habit but as an "acquired originality," the object of which is always oneself, namely what it means to exist spiritually as a self, spirit, or concrete personality, and whoever lacks earnestness in that regard, Vigilius observes, is a "joker" (*Spøgefugl*), no matter how serious one may be about other things.² Jest (*Spøg*) is nevertheless a very important concept without which we cannot properly understand earnestness and the relation of human freedom and striving to the eternal and grace in Kierkegaard's theology. Speaking in the voice of the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard suggests that it is impossible to understand earnestness if one does not understand jest and that it is important to understand in jest what jest is.³ Both jest and earnestness are among the most frequently used terms in Kierkegaard's authorship, yet jest has been given very little attention in studies of

¹ *PC*, 225; *CA*, 146, 151; *CD*, 237-38; *CUP*, 210, 224; *WL*, 190, 320; *JP*, 2:2112 / *SKP VB* 65; *JP*, 2:2113 / *SKP VB* 66; *JP*, 2:2114 / *SKP V* 227:5.

² *CA* 150.

³ *CUP* 1:70-71, 139.

his thought.⁴ In an effort to give jest its due — or at least to move jestingly in that direction — this essay proposes to consider what jest is for Kierkegaard and how it informs his understanding of earnestness in a dialectical manner.

The concept of jest appears in almost all of Kierkegaard's works, beginning with *The Concept of Irony* (1841), where he identifies two forms of irony, the first and most common form being "to say something earnestly that is not meant in earnest," and the second, more rare form being "to say as a jest, jestingly, something that is meant in earnest."⁵ The ironist is thus described as a person who is always making himself seem to be other than he actually is, hiding jest in earnestness and earnestness in jest.⁶ The model or paradigm of such ironic jesting for Kierkegaard is the Greek philosopher Socrates (470/469-399 BCE), who according to the figures Quidam and Frater Taciturnus in *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) "was the most earnest man in Greece" yet concealed his earnestness in jest in such a way as to be able to see the most profound earnestness and the greatest jest at one and the same time.⁷ In *Prefaces* (1844), a satirical jest in its own right, the pseudonymous author Nicholas Notabene describes Greek philosophy, by which he means Socrates, as being "like a god who walks about in human form and at every moment works a miracle with the humble everyday phrase, although in everything he still resembles an ordinary human being except insofar as that sadness... transfigures itself as a divine jest that rejuvenates his figure almost to the point of jocularity."⁸ Speaking in his own voice in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard describes Socrates' art as "paganism's supreme ingenuity" in working for the good by way of jest in order to prevent people from

⁴ See *Fundamental Polyglot Konkordans til Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, compiled by Alastair McKinnon (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 925-28, 23-25; John J. Davenport, "Earnestness," *Kierkegaard's Concepts Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Steward (Burlington, VT and Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 219-27; John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd. and New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2000), 79-80, 82, 94, 124-25.

⁵ *CI*, 248.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷ *SLW*, 365-66, 415; see also *CUP*, 1: 88.

⁸ *P*, 42.

taking the earnestness of the good in vain.⁹ Lacking any earnestness in themselves, however, they utterly failed to see the earnestness in Socrates' words and therefore chose to understand them only as jest. The pseudonym Johannes Climacus likewise regards Socrates as a jester (*Spøgfugl*) whose words sound like a jest yet express the highest earnestness.¹⁰ But he also credits the style of the German theologian Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) with being a "mixture of jest and earnestness that makes it impossible for a third person to know definitely which is which — unless the third person knows it by himself."¹¹

Jest appears in several different forms or senses in Kierkegaard's writings, sometimes simply as "innocent and God-pleasing jest," at other times in sharp contrast to earnestness.¹² More commonly, however, it appears in combination with earnestness as the unity of jest and earnestness, that is, both jest and earnestness at the same time, as in "earnest jest," "jesting earnestness," "divine jest," "holy jest," "devout jest," and "gracious jest."¹³ For Kierkegaard, jest and earnestness are united only by that which is upbuilding or edifying.¹⁴ The unity of jest and earnestness is thus operative in both an ethical-religious and Christian context as an expression of the inverse dialectic that informs his understanding of religiousness in general and Christianity in particular.¹⁵ As defined in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the formula for this dialectic is: "the positive is distinguished by the negative."¹⁶ In the religious sphere this means that "the positive is

⁹ *UDVS*, 97.

¹⁰ *CUP*, 1:87-88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69, 103; see also *SLW*, 440-41.

¹² *EUD*, 253; *LD*, 281-82; *C*, 178-79; *SLW*, 48, 55; *TDIO*, 10. 28.73.77; *WL*, 30, 98, 126, 184, 346, 353.

¹³ *UDVS*, 124, 196; *CUP*, 1:101, 137, 138, 135, 462; *CD*, 9; *JP*, 2:1135; *JFY*, 186. See also *SLW*, 365, 440; *CUP*, 1:104, 290; *JP*, 4:4924.

¹⁴ *KJN*, 2, JJ90 / *JP*, 4:4924.

¹⁵ On inverse dialectic see Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ *CUP*, 1:432.

continually in the negative, and the negative is its distinctive mark."¹⁷ In his journals Kierkegaard likewise states that "the formula for Christianity is that Christianity is always the positive that is recognizable by the negative."¹⁸ That is, the positive spiritual qualities of faith, hope, love, joy, and consolation are given expression in and recognized by negative qualifications such as the consciousness of sin, the possibility of offense, dying to the world, self-denial, and suffering. In like inverse manner, earnestness is distinguishable by jest, or as Kierkegaard expresses it in *Christian Discourses*, one must learn to look at everything turned around, so that what appears to be only a meaningless jest is just the opposite, namely "the earnestness of eternity."¹⁹

The inverse dialectic of jest and earnestness is most thoroughly spelled out in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), where it comes to the fore in the context of Climacus' definition of the ethical as becoming subjective, which in his view is the highest task assigned to a human being.²⁰ As Climacus understands it, the ethical constitutes "the most original element in every human being" and has "an irrefutable claim upon every existing individual," so that "whatever a person achieves in the world, even the most amazing thing, is nevertheless dubious" if one has not been ethically clear to and about oneself in choosing.²¹ The ethical has its concreteness only in inwardness or earnestness. For Climacus, therefore, "true ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost of one's ability, but also, uplifted in divine jest, in never thinking whether or not one thereby achieves something. As soon as the will begins to cast a covetous eye on the outcome, the individual begins to become immoral."²² Inasmuch as God needs no human being yet can require everything of us "for nothing," since we are all unworthy servants in relation to the divine, the ethical individual, elevated in holy jest, says: "Let me be as if created

¹⁷ Ibid., 524, 532.

¹⁸ *KJN*, 8, NB25:32 / *JP*, 4:4680; *KJN*, 8, NB22:158 / *JP*, 4:4666; see also *JP*, 4:4696.

¹⁹ *CD*, 150-51.

²⁰ *CUP*, 1:129, 138-39.

²¹ Ibid., 134, 144.

²² Ibid., 135; see also 506.

for the sake of a whim," that is, in jest, yet "I shall with utmost strenuousness will the ethical," which is earnestness.²³ As Climacus understands it, then, jesting earnestness consists in developing oneself to the utmost of one's capability, perhaps even producing a great effect in the external world, while nevertheless understanding that the external means nothing either *pro* or *con* concerning one's ethical status before God: "The earnestness is his own inner life; the jest is that it pleases God to attach this importance to his striving, to the striving of one who is only an unworthy servant."²⁴ In the process of trying to fulfill this ethical requirement, however, one goes backward rather than forward in the effort to bring one's existence into conformity with the highest good or eternal happiness.²⁵ Or more accurately, one goes forward inversely by going backward, inasmuch as for Climacus "immersing oneself in something means to go forward," although backward in expression.²⁶ In striving inwardly to renounce one's finite existence in immediacy, worldliness, or relative ends for the sake of the absolute or eternal, one discovers that one is unable to transform oneself, for as soon as one has done it once, one must do it again and again, making progress chimerical and occasioning continuous suffering and the consciousness of guilt as the essential and decisive expressions of existential pathos respectively.²⁷ As Climacus describes this plight:

The religious person lies in the finite as a helpless infant; he wants to hold on to the conception [of God] absolutely, and this is what annihilates him; he wills to do everything, and while he is willing it, the powerlessness begins, because for a finite being there is indeed a meanwhile. He wills to do everything; he wants to express this relation absolutely, but he cannot make the finite commensurate with it.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 136-37.

²⁴ Ibid., 139. See also 78.

²⁵ Ibid., 527.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 433, 526.

²⁸ Ibid., 484.

How one relates to the suffering entailed in this existential plight is what determines the difference between a humorist and a religious personality and the corresponding forms of humor or jest which they exemplify. Climacus identifies two forms of humor that function as boundary categories on the border of the religious and within the religious. The first is between the ethical and the religious; the second is between immanent religiousness or Religiousness A and paradoxical religiousness or Religiousness B (Christianity). In the first form of humor the humorist understands suffering as belonging essentially to existence and thus feels the pain of suffering but does not comprehend its meaning and thus revokes it in the form of jest by making light of the existential plight and opting for retirement out of existence into the eternal by way of Platonic recollection on the basis of the presupposition that the eternal is immanent in everything.²⁹ The second form of humor, which Climacus calls "holy jest," functions as the incognito of the religious personality, who appears outwardly to be a humorist but inwardly is not inasmuch as the religious person exists in a relationship to God, whereas the humorist does not, and he or she understands that one is nothing before God and can do nothing of oneself.³⁰ Religiously, Climacus observes, "the task is to comprehend that a person is nothing at all before God or to be nothing at all and thereby to be before God, and he continually insists upon having this incapability before him, and its disappearance is the disappearance of religiousness."³¹ This situation becomes comic or humorous to the religious individual "when to all outward appearances in the external world it seems that he is capable of a great deal."³² "But if this jest is to be a holy jest and continue," Climacus observes,

it must at no moment disturb for him the earnestness that before God he is nothing and is capable of nothing, and the work of holding this fast, and the suffering of expressing it existentially. If, for example, Napoleon had been a genuinely religious personality, he would have had a rare opportunity for the most divine amusement, because

²⁹ Ibid., 447-48, 451.

³⁰ Ibid., 505.

³¹ Ibid., 461.

³² Ibid., 462.

seemingly to be capable of everything and then divinely to understand this as an illusion — indeed, this is jest in earnest!³³

The inverse dialectic of jest and earnestness comes into play here once again as Climacus points out that “the negative is the sign, because the greatest effort is distinguishable by one’s becoming nothing through it.”³⁴ Noting the contradiction between the Sunday preaching that declares a human being is capable of nothing at all while on the other six days of the week everyone, including the pastor, is capable of a great deal, Climacus suggests that “one of the two must be a jest; either what the pastor says is a jest, a kind of parlor game one plays at times,” or the pastor is right and the rest of us are wrong.³⁵ But if the pastor is right, does this mean that one should not “undertake anything at all because all is vanity and futility?”³⁶ The answer, of course, is no, for in that case, Climacus observes,

[one] will not have the opportunity to understand the jest, since there is no contradiction in putting it together with life’s earnestness, no contradiction that everything is vanity in the eyes of a vain person. Laziness, inactivity, snobbishness about the finite are a poor jest or, more correctly, are no jest at all. But to shorten the night’s sleep and buy the day’s hours and not spare oneself, and then to understand that it is all a jest: yes, that is earnestness. Viewed religiously, the positive is always distinguishable by the negative — earnestness by the jest — that it is religious earnestness, not direct earnestness. To have the fate of many people in one’s hand, to transform the world, and then continually to understand that this is jest — yes, that is earnestness! But in order to be capable of this, all the passions of finitude must be dead, all selfishness rooted out, the selfishness that wants to have everything and the selfishness that proudly turns away from everything. But that is just the trouble, and here is the suffering

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 464.

³⁵ Ibid., 471.

³⁶ Ibid.

in dying to oneself, and although the distinguishing feature of the ethical is that it is so easy to understand in its abstract expression, it is so difficult to understand *in concreto*.³⁷

Although Climacus uses the example of Christian preaching to make his point here, the expression of humor as the incognito of the religious person pertains specifically to Religiousness A or immanent religiousness, leaving open the question of how the inverse dialectic of jest and earnestness applies to Religiousness B or Christianity, which in his view is a forward rather than backward movement by virtue of a relation to the absolute paradox of the eternal in time as the point at which all Christian categories are situated.³⁸ To see how this dialectic operates more specifically in Christianity, therefore, we must turn to Kierkegaard's upbuilding and Christian works.

Let us begin by considering the first of three discourses in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* (1843 and 1844) based on the text, "Every Good and Every Perfect Gift is from Above," from James 1:17, which was one of Kierkegaard's favorite biblical verses. Although these discourses are intended to be broadly ethical-religious rather than specifically Christian in content, they are applicable to both forms of religiousness. The first discourse emphasizes that every good and perfect gift comes from God, who is "the one who does everything" in us.³⁹ God's gifts thus should be acknowledged and received with meekness, humility, joy, courage, faith, trust, thankfulness, courage, and love, which are themselves good and perfect gifts from God.⁴⁰ Admitting that we are neither good nor perfect in ourselves, so that even the love with which we accept God's gifts is impure due to the sinful change that takes place in everything received from God, Kierkegaard suggests that we love God truly only when we love him according to our imperfection, that is, with a love that is "born of repentance," which in his view "is more beautiful than any other love" inasmuch as "in repentance it is God who loves

³⁷ Ibid., 472.

³⁸ Ibid., 104.

³⁹ *EUD*, 46.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 36, 38, 41, 42-44, 45-46.

you."⁴¹ It is in and through repentance, then, that we receive everything from God, even the thanksgiving which we presumably bring to him. Yet even that, Kierkegaard points out, is a *jest*, namely a receiving of something that God has given to us while granting us "the childlike joy" of regarding our thanksgiving as a gift to him from us.⁴² Although repentance on our part is required in order to love God truly and to be receptive to his good gifts, the emphasis in this discourse and throughout the entire collection is clearly on God as the source and giver of all spiritual qualities, which are perfect in themselves. Thus they are not gifts to be perfected in or by us through a process of personal striving. On the contrary, in Kierkegaard's view a human being's highest perfection is to need God: "In a human being's relationship with God, it is inverted: the more he needs God, the more deeply he comprehends that he is in need of God, and then the more he in his need presses forward to God, the more perfect he is."⁴³

Here again we see the inverse dialectic that governs Kierkegaard's understanding of ethical-religious existence in general and Christianity in particular. From an inverse perspective, perfection is not something we accomplish on our own but only by becoming convinced that we are "capable of nothing, nothing at all."⁴⁴ Outwardly, it may appear that we are capable of doing a great deal, but inwardly to comprehend one's total inability to do the good, Kierkegaard claims, "is the highest thing of which a human being is capable."⁴⁵ Yet even that is a misunderstanding inasmuch as in Kierkegaard's view "the human being is a helpless creature" in which "all other understanding that makes him understand that he can help himself is but a misunderstanding, even though in the eyes of the world he is regarded as courageous."⁴⁶ God, by contrast, is capable of everything, while correspondingly our greatness and highest perfection consists precisely in being capable of doing

⁴¹ Ibid., 45-46.

⁴² Ibid., 46.

⁴³ Ibid., 303.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 307.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 308-9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 309, translation modified.

nothing at all by ourselves.⁴⁷ Pointing to Moses as an example of a person whose greatness consisted in understanding that he was capable of nothing at all and his work was entirely the Lord's, Kierkegaard states: "Just as knowing oneself in one's own nothingness is the condition for knowing God, so knowing God is the condition for the sanctification of a human being by God's assistance and according to his intention," which is "to create in him a new human being."⁴⁸ A sense of one's own nothingness, then, is a prerequisite not only for a true knowledge of oneself and God but also for the new creation and sanctification of oneself as a human being, whose "exalted destiny" is to be "God's co-worker" in ruling over creation as his servant.⁴⁹

In *Works of Love* (1847) the concept of jest is viewed strictly from a Christian perspective as it relates to Christian love, whose "most characteristic specification," Kierkegaard claims, is building up, so that "[w]herever upbuilding is, there is love, and wherever love is, there is upbuilding" inasmuch as both possess the quality of being able to give themselves completely and to be present in everything.⁵⁰ Noting that "to build up" is a metaphorical expression frequently used in Holy Scripture, Kierkegaard regards it as an "upbuilding jest" or earnestness "when someone humbly manages to be satisfied with the scriptural word instead of busily making new discoveries that will busily displace the old, when someone gratefully and inwardly appropriates what has been handed down from the fathers and establishes a new acquaintance with the old and familiar."⁵¹ When love is understood from a biblical and/or Christian perspective, Kierkegaard observes, one no longer plays "on humanity's childish stage, which leaves in doubt whether it is jest or earnestness," inasmuch as for the Christian "the one and only earnestness" consists in relating oneself to God in such a way as to become nothing before him

⁴⁷ Ibid., 310-11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 311, 325.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁰ *WL*, 212, 214, 216.

⁵¹ Ibid., 210.

in the infinite debt of love to other people and to God, who is Love itself.⁵² It is only in self-denial that one relates oneself to God in a Christian manner, for it is only in self-denial that one holds fast to God and discovers that God exists.⁵³ For Kierkegaard, therefore, “the relationship of self-denial to God, or to relate oneself to God in self-denial, ought to be everything, ought to be the earnestness” with which one overcomes the illusion that one is capable of something and comes to understand instead that one is capable of nothing at all, whereas God the Omnipotent One is one’s co-worker in and through whom one is able to do everything through divine assistance.⁵⁴ Earnestness is thus equated with inward self-denial and outward self-sacrificing unselfishness in the recognition that one’s relationship to God is everything. Consequently, whether a person’s works of love are finished or not “ought to be a jest,” that is, “the God-relationship itself ought to be more important to him than the yield” in the “utterly earnest conviction that God is the one who is helping him.”⁵⁵ Only by loving the neighbor in self-denial, then, can one achieve the highest, which for Kierkegaard is to become an instrument for God, “completely and wholly transformed into simply being an active power in the hands of God,” which every human being can do if he or she so wills.⁵⁶

In *Christian Discourses* (1848) Kierkegaard uses his favorite examples from nature, the lily and the bird, to elucidate the dialectic of jest and earnestness in Christianity. Noting that the Sermon on the Mount was preached at the foot of the mountain rather than on top of Mt. Sinai, where the Law was given to Moses, he observes that, in being referred to by Jesus in that sermon, the lily and the bird were present as well, making the Gospel sound as if it “ends up jesting.”⁵⁷ For Kierkegaard, however, the earnestness of the Gospel “becomes all the more holy just because the lily and the bird are there” inasmuch as “it becomes that by way of

⁵² Ibid., 102-103, 190, 264-65, 320.

⁵³ Ibid., 362, 364.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 86, 362-63, 365.

⁵⁵ Ibid., WL, 364-65.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 86, 279, 364; see also *CD*, 83-84.

⁵⁷ *CD*, 9.

the jest," although "it still remains a jest that the lily and the bird are there."⁵⁸ The lily and the bird are jestingly employed as assistant teachers by the Gospel to clarify what paganism is and what is required of the Christian. Being neither pagans nor Christians, nor opposed to either of these contending parties, the lily and the bird function as neutral or non-judgmental, non-condemnatory teachers of the difference between paganism and Christianity by doing nothing at all, living as they do in an unconcerned, carefree manner in total dependence upon God. Yet by their help we can get to know the cares of the pagans — and perhaps those of people in the pagan but so-called Christian country of Denmark and other places as well — which distinguish them from the true Christian, who lives like the lily and the bird without care by existing for God in total dependence upon him.

In *Practice in Christianity* (1850), the dialectic of jest and earnestness is seen as being essential to the art of indirect communication in Christianity.⁵⁹ It appears first of all in the communication of the God-Man as a sign of contradiction who combines in himself the qualitative contradiction of being the unity of God and an individual human being, which cannot be communicated directly because it is impossible for the recipient to determine whether the communication is in earnest or a jest. In this case, therefore, the earnestness of the communication lies not in the communication itself but in making the recipient self-active by drawing attention to itself in such a way as to show that it contains a contradiction that requires a response of either faith or offense on the recipient's part. To do that, the communicator must make him/herself into a nobody or nonperson, as it were, by continually placing the qualitative opposites of jest and earnestness together in such a way as to make the composite into a "dialectical knot" which the recipient must untie him/herself through double-reflection and the choice of whether to believe or not.⁶⁰

In *Judge for Yourself!* (1951/52) Kierkegaard returns to the example of the lily and the bird as an expression of the dialectic of jest and earnestness in the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *PC*, 125, 133.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 133.

context of a discussion of Christ as the prototype for humankind, focusing this time on the text from the Sermon on the Mount for which the bird and the lily serve as illustrations, namely “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). Christianity is once again contrasted to the merely human wisdom, sensibleness, or sagacity of the cultured age in his time, which views the requirement of the unconditioned of human beings as madness and a “ludicrous exaggeration” that no sensible person is capable of meeting or at most only to a certain degree. Kierkegaard suggests that Christ’s life “must have been designed from the very beginning to express serving only one master” by fulfilling the unconditional requirement as a prototype for humanity.⁶¹ Born in poverty and lowliness as an illegitimate child, he came and remained in the world in order to suffer and to use his powers of omnipotence to become nothing in the eyes of the world while at the same time drawing attention to himself as if he were “something utterly extraordinary” in wanting to establish a kingdom that is not of this world right smack in the middle of this world.⁶² In order to keep the matter from becoming “all too earnest” and “deadly with anxiety” by asking people to look at him as the embodiment of the truth of his words, Christ diverts attention instead to the lily and the bird as symbols of what he signifies.⁶³ Ordinarily, Kierkegaard observes, to ask someone to consider the lilies and the birds would not be taken as the expression of earnestness on the part of the speaker but merely baubles and empty words.⁶⁴ When spoken by Christ, however, the words are an expression of earnestness, although an “earnestness toned down almost to a jest” by virtue of the ludicrousness of the lily and the bird being our teachers.⁶⁵ “Yet it is not therefore a laughing matter — however odd it is that the sparrow has now become a professor,” Kierkegaard states, “because the teacher’s presence during the lesson means that no one dares to laugh.”⁶⁶

⁶¹ *JFY*, 154, 160.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 160-61, 174-75.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

What do we learn by paying attention to the bird and the lily in this instance? Kierkegaard suggests that their instruction "is always plain, reliable, not vacillating in mood, but 'the same and about the same and always the same,'" namely the peace to be found in resting in God.⁶⁷ By resting in God the lilies and the birds are able to be happy today in carefree joy and thus to have their own "merriest jest" with sorrow by continually putting it off until tomorrow, which never comes. Moreover, they neither sow nor spin, leaving it to God in heaven to provide for their needs. Unlike the lilies and the birds, however, human beings do sew and spin. The main lesson we should learn from them, therefore, "is to understand that when human beings spin and sew it is nevertheless really God who spins and sews."⁶⁸ Using the example of a seamstress, Kierkegaard explains that this does not mean that she should not sew or become less diligent in her work but rather should understand that only when she is sewing does God sew for her, so that:

by continually sewing she may continually understand that — what a gracious jest — it is God who sews, every stitch, so that by continually sewing she may continually understand — what earnestness! — that it is God who sews, every stitch. And when, instructed by the lily and the bird, she has understood this, then she has grasped the meaning of life, and her life has in the highest sense become meaningful.⁶⁹

The lily and the bird not only teach us the meaning of life but also the meaning of work, which is also discerned inversely by "considering the matter upside down," namely that "work is not toil and trouble from which one would rather be free" but that "God has allowed human beings to be able to work in order to give them an enjoyment, a feeling of independence."⁷⁰ To illustrate this "godly understanding" of what it means to work, Kierkegaard concocts another example, this time a little child named Ludvig, who takes delight in believing that he is pushing the stroller

⁶⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 183.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 184-85.

himself on his daily ride when it is really his mother who is pushing it.⁷¹ Being able to push it himself is comparable to being able to work, which when properly understood enables one to have pure delight and enjoyment. But Kierkegaard goes on to suggest that there is “an even higher godly understanding of work,” namely that it is God who works when we work.⁷² Thus, even when little Ludvig becomes an adult and is actually able to move the stroller himself, Kierkegaard suggests that he is still in the same situation as a child, namely that when the adult works it is really God who is working. But like the diligent seamstress, “the worthy, honest, God-fearing worker... becomes all the more industrious” so as increasingly to understand what a gracious jest and earnestness it is that God is her or his co-worker.⁷³ Kierkegaard thus concludes that we owe much to the lily and the bird, for when they were appointed to be our prototype and schoolmaster, “the Law was abrogated and jest was assigned its place in the kingdom of heaven,” freeing us from “the strict discipline” of the Law.⁷⁴

Does this mean, then, that the earnestness of imitating Christ is a jest? To this question Kierkegaard answers with a quick No, for two reasons: first of all because he thinks that it “would make the Gospel so easy that basically it would become poetry,” which is exactly what the imitation of Christ is intended to prevent; and secondly because it would only be an expression of Jewish piety, not Christianity, inasmuch as “what is crucial in Christianity” is not manifested by the birds and lilies at all, namely to suffer for the doctrine, which is what constitutes the true imitation of Christ.⁷⁵ In Kierkegaard’s journals, however, a different point of view concerning this question is expressed. In an entry from 1849 he equates Luther’s doctrine of faith with “the religiousness of manhood” (*Manddommens Religieusitet*) in contrast to the “childlike relation of equality” between the believer and Christ as the Exemplar in youth, a time when it seems possible to attain the

⁷¹ Ibid., 185.

⁷² Ibid., 186.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 187.

ideal if one strives to the utmost of one's abilities.⁷⁶ As the youth develops into manhood, however, "God becomes more and more infinite" to the believer and he feels himself to be "farther and farther away from God," with the result that the ideal becomes "so infinitely elevated" that all one's efforts to resemble Christ are transformed "into an insane nothing or into a sort of God-fearing joke" in the faith that one is saved by faith alone.⁷⁷ And in another journal entry from 1852 Kierkegaard states:

If imitation — even in its most extreme efforts — in earnest (i.e. before God) is to claim significance as something in the sense of being meritorious, it must be as a sort of a jest, something childish: what is in earnest is the atonement.... Yes, where something rigorous is required, that is where there can be talk of meritoriousness; but when everything is grace, meritoriousness is impossible — it is impossible to have merit in the face of grace.⁷⁸

Indeed, for Kierkegaard, "the first thing you learn when you relate yourself to God in everything is that you have no merit whatever."⁷⁹ Thus, even when, out of joy and gratitude over the atonement, that is, over the fact that restitution for one's sins has been made by Christ, "an honest effort" at striving emerges, it is nonetheless to be regarded "almost as a jest — however honest and earnest it may be."⁸⁰

What then should we conclude from this excursion into the inverse dialectic of jest and earnestness in Kierkegaard's theology? First and foremost, it is apparent that Kierkegaard is a dialectical thinker through and through, affirming both jest and earnestness, freedom and grace, divine agency and human agency, independence and dependence, continuous striving yet an incapacity to do anything at all on our own. Thus, to emphasize one of these terms to the exclusion or

⁷⁶ *KJN*, 6, NB, 14:41 / *JP*, 2:1135.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* See also *KJN*, 8:NB, 22:57 / *JP*, 2:2140.

⁷⁸ *KJN*, 8, 25:67 / *JP* 2:1909.

⁷⁹ *WL*, 385.

⁸⁰ *KJN*, 6, NB, 14:42 / *JP*, 1:983.

neglect of the other is to miss or misconstrue the thoroughly dialectical character of his theology. But it is also important to discern the inverse, indirect, paradoxical nature of Kierkegaard's dialectic. It is not just a matter of affirming both terms but of understanding how they are held together, which is not simply by discussing one term in one text and the other in another, depending on the particular rhetorical context and strategy being employed at the time. While it is true that Kierkegaard sometimes does discuss them separately in such a manner, the question remains as to how they actually fit together in human life. We have seen that Kierkegaard is consistent in his emphasis on our human nothingness and total inability to accomplish anything on our own in both ethical-religious and Christian contexts. But whereas the ethical-religious individual runs aground and gets no further along in actually establishing an absolute relation to the absolute than the nonreligious person who does not concern himself with such matters at all, in Christianity God works in and through us as his co-workers to accomplish the divine will in the world, with the result that, paradoxically, all our striving, in itself only a jest if understood as accomplishing something on our own, is actually God working within and through us, which constitutes the earnestness of eternity. Jest, then, is a crucial category for understanding the relation of human agency to divine agency and grace in Kierkegaard's theology. Not only does it serve to humble all our striving in relation to the divine, it testifies indirectly and inversely to the Christian conviction that God is and remains active in the world precisely in and through our earnest yet jesting efforts to serve the divine will in the imitation of Christ.