Nothing but Unworthy Servants? Kierkegaard and Tauler on Grace, Striving and Cooperation

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Abstract
To counteract the antinomian tendencies of nineteenth-century secular Protestantism, Søren Kierkegaard turns to Johannes Tauler’s sermons, which vividly express a dialectics of works and grace, attacking an inflated asceticism as much as idleness. For reasons of reception history and because of the similarity of the images Kierkegaard and Tauler use, particularly servitude as expressed in Luke 17:10, this article proposes to understand Kierkegaard’s account of grace as ‘Taulerian’ rather than ‘Arminian’. To show the intertwined agency of the human and the divine, the article offers a comparative reading of Tauler’s two sermons on Cantate Sunday, Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourse ‘The Expectancy of an Eternal Salvation’ and the second part of Judge for Yourself. Both Kierkegaard and Tauler design definitory ambiguities for a performative purpose: to help their readers and, respectively, listeners to become receptive to grace by humbling themselves and refraining from fathoming ‘what is not given to be understood’.

Keywords
Prevenient/enabling grace, Luther, mysticism, salvation, meritoriousness, suffering, performativity

Introduction
There is a puzzling ambiguity in Søren Kierkegaard’s work concerning the relation of works and grace. On the one hand—and what Protestant scholars tend to emphasise—is a strong sense of the priority of grace. On the other hand, there is a remarkable focus on the imitation of Christ in the late writings, which makes Kierkegaard attractive...
to Catholic thinkers.\footnote{On the intersections of Kierkegaard’s thought with Catholic theology, see Jack Mulder, Jr, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition: Conflict and Dialogue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). On the relevance of Kierkegaard’s writings for the ressourcement movement, see Joshua Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).} Due to Kierkegaard’s critical statements about Luther, some scholars have even proclaimed that Kierkegaard might have been a Crypto- or Proto-Catholic and would have converted to Catholicism, had he lived longer.\footnote{See for instance Heinrich Roos, *Søren Kierkegaard and Catholicism*, ed. R.M. Brackett (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954). For a critical overview of these speculations initiated by Georg Brandes and Harald Hoffding shortly after Kierkegaard’s death, see Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, p. 2.} This perennial debate has recently been revived. For instance, Jeffrey Morgan argues against Jamie Ferreira that Kierkegaard’s commitment to the priority of grace disappears in his late writings, in which ‘grace meets a person only as a person first strives toward the requirement’.\footnote{Jeffrey Morgan, ‘Grace and Christianity’s Requirement: Moral Striving in Kierkegaard’s *Judge for Yourself!*’, *The Heythrop Journal* 55 (2014), pp. 916–26 (923); emphasis added. Morgan engages with Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 128 and 169.} Morgan bases his argument on the opening prayer of the second part of *Judge for Yourself!*: ‘help us all, … you who are both the prototype and the Redeemer, and in turn the Redeemer and the prototype so that when the striving one droops under the prototype … the Redeemer raises him up again’.\footnote{Søren Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, in *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. XXI, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, henceforth JFY), 147 / Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, vols. 1–28, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1998–2013), vol. 16, 199. In the following, all references to *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* will be abbreviated as SKS plus volume.} Morgan does not, however, consider the end of the prayer, in which Kierkegaard firmly assures that ‘no eternal salvation either can or shall be earned—it has been earned’.\footnote{JFY 147/SKS 16, 199.} Admittedly, this does not lift the tension because Kierkegaard then immediately refers to the footprints of Christ in which the saved one shall ‘find the confidence and boldness to want to strive to follow you’.\footnote{JFY 147/SKS 16, 199.}

In order to come to grips with Kierkegaard’s perplexing account of grace that does not fall neatly into the Protestant–Catholic distinction, scholars have offered categorisations like ‘semi-Pelagian’ (i.e., it is us who need to take the first step toward God’s saving grace) or ‘Arminian’ (i.e., while we cannot achieve anything regarding our salvation, we can accept or refuse God’s offer to turn us around and to draw us toward him).\footnote{The former perspective is embraced by Poul Lübke, ‘Freedom and Modality’, in J. Giles (ed.), *Kierkegaard and Freedom* (London: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 93–104, the latter by Timothy P. Jackson, ‘Armenian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will’, in A. Hannay and G.D. Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 235–56.} Furthermore, David L. Coe’s recent study on Kierkegaard’s reception of Luther brings
the largely forgotten dialectics of Law and Gospel in Luther’s thought to the fore and emphasises that for Kierkegaard, “true Lutheranism” is not an either/or of either grace or works’, but a dialectical tension of both.8 Finding fault with the antinomian tendencies of the nineteenth-century Lutheran Church that has uncoupled faith from works, Kierkegaard writes in his journal in 1849: ‘It is obvious that the tragedy of Xnedom is that Luther’s doctrine of faith has removed the dialectical element [det dialektiske Moment] in such a way that it becomes a den of pure paganism and Epicureanism; one simply forgets that Luther emphasised faith in order to counter a fantastically exaggerated asceticism’.9 Hence, to bring back the balance between faith and works in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard puts the weight on works, just like Luther had to put the weight on sola fide in order to correct the course of the Church in his age.10 Against his smug contemporaries, who regard themselves as born into the Christian faith, without ever experiencing spiritual trials and anxiety about their salvation (like Luther did), Kierkegaard aims at bringing back the ‘requirement’ of Christian faith, that is: the demand to follow Christ not only inwardly, but outwardly too, and suffer for the truth.11

Thus, it is Kierkegaard’s disapproval of the state of the Danish culture, particularly the Lutheran Church, that lies behind his rigorous judgment that ‘Luther struck too hard. He should have done everything to remove the idea of meritoriousness [Fortjenstlighed] from such works [Gjerninger] and, apart from that, let them stand’.12 What is needed, in Kierkegaard’s view, is a re-orientation of Christianity. He agrees with Luther about the grave ‘error’ of the Middle Ages to think that it is possible to resemble Christ because it led to the idea of justification by works, and also to a ‘mistaken, self-righteous

8 David L. Coe, Kierkegaard and Luther (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), p. 180.
9 Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks, vols. 1–11, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007–2020, henceforth KJN), vol. 5, 334 / SKS 21, 323 (NB [=Notesbog] 10:132). For an overview of Kierkegaard’s perception of Luther see David Yoon-Jung Kim and Joel D.S. Rasmussen, ‘Martin Luther: Reform, Secularization, and the Question of His “True Successor”’, in Jon Stewart (ed.), Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 173–217. Hermann Deuser argues that Kierkegaard transforms Luther’s doctrine of grace as a ‘reaction to 19th-century postidealism’, that is, against idealistic philosophy and Schleiermacher’s foundation of religion on feeling; Hermann Deuser, ‘Kierkegaard and Luther: Kierkegaard’s “One Thesis”’, in Nils Henrik Gregersen (ed.), The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 205–12 (209).
10 Cf. Kierkegaard’s entry from 1853: ‘Are not C[atholicism] and P[rotestantism] r[ea]llly related to each other as … a building that cannot stand is related to a buttress that cannot stand alone, while the whole of it can stand, be even very stable and secure, when it is put together … In other words, is not Protestant[ism] or Lutheranism r[ea]llly a corrective, and has not a great confusion been brought about in Protest[antism] by its having been made into the normative?’ KJN 11 (part 2), 262–63/SKS 27, 563 (Papir 455).
11 Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, For Self-Examination, in Kierkegaard’s Writings, vol. VII, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17 (henceforth FSE) / SKS 13, 46.
12 KJN 7, 376/SKS 23, 368 (NB 19:57b, 1850).
[indbildsk] inflation of asceticism’,\(^{13}\) which Kierkegaard polemically sums up as ‘scouring oneself, crawling on one’s knees, standing on one leg, etc.’.\(^{14}\) Still, Kierkegaard lauds the Middle Ages for conceiving Christianity ‘along the lines of action, life, existence-transformation [Existents-Omdannelse]’.\(^{15}\) In his view, the Middle Ages with their institutions like the monastery offer the necessary re-orientation for nineteenth-century Christianity, which has gone astray: ‘we therefore need it out there like a navigational beacon at sea [Søemærke] in order to see where we are’.\(^{16}\)

To understand Kierkegaard’s integration of a doctrine of works into Reformation sola fide theology,\(^{17}\) it is helpful to turn to one of the Medieval thinkers whom Kierkegaard might have in mind when speaking of the beacon at sea: Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1360). Tauler does exactly what Kierkegaard criticises Luther for not doing: he removes the self-righteousness and the idea of merit from works and otherwise leaves them standing, emphasising their necessity for the Christian faith.\(^{18}\) Furthermore, the Dominican friar and mystic denounces inflated ascetic practices as much as religious inwardness that does not lead to works of love, and he applies a dialectic of Einbildung and Entbildung in order to highlight the need for a true transformation, that is, a dying-to-self—which resonates with Kierkegaard’s use of indbildning and indbildsk as quoted above.\(^{19}\)

\(^{13}\) KJN 6, 243/SKS 22, 241 (NB 12:162, 1849); KJN 7, 154/SKS 23, 152 (NB 16:86, 1850; translation modified).

\(^{14}\) JFY 192/SKS 16, 238–39.

\(^{15}\) JFY 192/SKS 16, 238.

\(^{16}\) KJN 4, 247/SKS 20, 247 (NB 3:4, 1847). Translation modified.

\(^{17}\) The Catholic philosopher Louis Dupré was the first to point out Kierkegaard’s immense, yet under-valued achievement that consisted in ‘the reintegration of Christian asceticism in the sola fide doctrine of the Reformation. Although it is false that Luther eliminated the necessity of good works, he seems to be somewhat at a loss as to exactly where they fit in his doctrine of justification. This has led many of his followers, supported by their master’s reaction against the Catholic theology of merit, to consider works as altogether superfluous. Coming from a Pietistic background and equipped with a more dialectical mind, Kierkegaard has been able to restore this essential part of the Christian tradition to reformation theology’. Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. xi; see also Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 168.

\(^{18}\) Luther was very impressed by Tauler’s thought, in particular his idea of spiritual trial—a concept that links all three thinkers, as analysed in Simon D. Podmore, *Struggling with God: Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013). On Luther’s reception of Tauler, see Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509–16) in the Context of Their Theological Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), pp. 197–205; and Volker Leppin, ‘Die Verbindung von Augustinismus und Mystik im späten Mittelalter und der frühen reformatorischen Bewegung’, *Lutherjahrbuch* 85 (2018), pp. 130–53.

\(^{19}\) For a detailed analysis of the dialectic of Einbildung (being filled with and formed by creaturely images, materially oriented desires and a smug self-understanding) and its counterpart...
Kierkegaard owned a comprehensive collection of Tauler’s sermons, and the entries in Kierkegaard’s journals and papers suggest that he was fascinated by Tauler’s thought. This is not surprising, after all, as Lee C. Barrett notes, Tauler’s sermons expressed ‘a theological vision that exhibited significant formal parallels to Kierkegaard’s subversion of Catholic and Lutheran scholastic dichotomies’. And yet, until today, Kierkegaard’s reception of the Dominican only received sparse scholarly attention. The following comparison between Kierkegaard’s and Tauler’s accounts of grace and works aims to address this lacuna. As it turns out, should one wish to classify Kierkegaard’s approach to works and grace, it is historically more adequate to call it ‘Taulerian’, rather than ‘Arminian’. The auction protocol of Kierkegaard’s library does not list the works of the sixteenth-century Dutch priest Jakob Hermanszoon (Jacobus Arminius in the Latinized version), thus, it seems likely that Kierkegaard encountered his thought only superficially during his theological education. Hence, for reasons of reception history but also for reasons pertaining to the images and concepts Kierkegaard uses, I propose to understand Kierkegaard’s account of grace not as ‘Arminian’, as Timothy Jackson suggests, but as ‘Taulerian’. This also helps to come to terms with the definitive ambiguities regarding the relation of works and grace: for both thinkers, these ambiguities serve a performative purpose, that is, they help the reader and, respectively, listener into existential kenosis.

Entbildung (being cleansed or emptied of these images and desires) see Hjördis Becker-Lindenthal, ‘Kierkegaard’s Reception of German Vernacular Mysticism: Johann Tauler’s Sermon on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and Kierkegaard’s Practice in Christianity’, International Journal of Philosophy and Theology 80.4–5 (2019), pp. 443–64.

The three volumes of Johann Tauler’s Predigten auf alle Sonn- und Festtage im Jhr. Zur Beförderung eines christlichen und gottseligen Wandels [on the basis of the editions of Johann Arndt and Philipp Jacob Spener], ed. Eduard Kuntze and Johann Heinrich Raphael Biesenthal (Berlin: August Hirschwald, 1841–1842) are listed in the auction protocol as ASKB 245–247. Kierkegaard also encountered Tauler’s thought in the work of Philipp Jacob Spener and Johann Arndt, who highly praise and extensively quote Tauler’s sermons; see Joseph Ballan, ‘The Pietist Impulse in Kierkegaard and Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Devotional Literature’, in Jon Stewart (ed.), Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 21–30.

For instance, Kierkegaard notes in 1847: ‘NB. Tauler: The one who regards pain like joy / And joy like pain / Should thank God for such indifference’. KJN 4, 140/SKS 20, , 142 (NB 2:10; my translation). See Peter Šajda, ‘Tauler: A Teacher in Spiritual Dietethics. Kierkegaard’s Reception of Johannes Tauler’, in Jon Stewart (ed.), Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 265–87.

Lee C. Barrett, ‘Kierkegaard and Johannes Tauler on Faith, Love, and Natural Desire for God: A Way beyond a Catholic/Protestant Impasse’, Toronto Journal of Theology 32.1 (2016), pp. 25–43 (26).

In Kierkegaard’s notes on H.N. Clausen’s Lectures on Dogmatics (Dogmatiske Forelesninger, 1833–34), ‘the Arminians’ are mentioned three times in passing; KJN 3, 50, 50n, 60/SKS 19, 55, 55n, 69 (Not. 1:7; Not. 1:8). There are no entries on Jacobus Arminius or Jakob Hermanszoon in Kierkegaard’s writings.

See Jackson, ‘Armenian Edification’.
While drawing on the wider work of Tauler and Kierkegaard, the following comparison of their understanding of grace, works and human agency focuses on Tauler’s two sermons for Cantate Sunday (the fourth Sunday after Easter) and Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding Discourses* ‘The Expectancy of Eternal Salvation’ and ‘He Must Increase; I Must Decrease’ from 1844, as much as the second part of Kierkegaard’s *Judge for Yourself!* (‘Christ as the Prototype’) published in 1855. The analysis of Tauler’s sermons is followed by an exploration of the performative role of the paradoxical account of grace and works. Central to both Kierkegaard’s and Tauler’s texts is the reference to Lk. 17:10: ‘So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty”’. Finally, the analysis of the image of servitude, together with Kierkegaard’s imagery of childhood, leads to a reassessment of human agency and the role of works for faith.

**Obstacles Inhibiting Grace: Tauler’s Sermons for Cantate Sunday**

The two sermons which Tauler gave on the fourth Sunday after Easter are dedicated to Jn 16:5-15. Tauler puts special emphasis on Jn 16:7: ‘it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you’. Central to Tauler’s exposition is his advice that in order to be filled and transformed by the Holy Spirit, we first need to let go of all that is dear to us: our attachment to material things and mundane relations, but more importantly, our sinful will, our worldly sagacity and the smug understanding of ourselves as capable and righteous beings. While the call to ascetic self-knowledge and a thorough existential kenosis25 is based on Tauler’s theological anthropology (the fall being the core reason for human incapacities), it gains its urgency from Tauler’s critical observations of a decline in the lives of his contemporaries, particularly in the Church and monastic life.26

In the first sermon, Tauler invites his listeners to explore their sinfulness. ‘Who among the living is obeying God and His commandments as one should?’, he demands to know. Most people defy God’s will and their good intuitions and, thus, sin against God and their neighbour. What, then, Tauler further asks, ‘are we supposed to think of those people who are so pleased with the way they have structured their daily lives, so pleased with their habits and spiritual practices, that they do not want to submit themselves in

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25 On ascetic self-knowledge, see Alois M. Haas, *Nim Din Selbes War. Studien zur Lehre von der Selbsterkenntnis bei Meister Eckhart, Joahannes Tauler und Heinrich Seuse* (Freiburg: Paulus, 1971), pp. 83–100. For an interpretation of Tauler’s and Kierkegaard’s dying-to-self as existential kenosis, see Hjördis Becker-Lindenthal and Ruby S. Guyatt, ‘Kierkegaard on Existential Kenosis and the Power of the Image’, *Modern Theology* 35.4 (2019), pp. 706–27. David R. Law coined the term ‘existential kenoticism’; David R. Law, *Kierkegaard’s Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 287.

26 For the cultural situation that motivates Tauler’s critique, see Louise Gnädinger, *Johannes Tauler. Lebenswelt und mystische Lehre* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993), pp. 30–64.
obedience to God and their fellow human beings? As highly as they might think of their good deeds, such fullness of oneself necessarily excludes one from salvation. The other sinfulness is equally serious and apparently very common among Tauler’s contemporaries: the tendency to all-too-quickly judge others while regarding oneself as righteous and in no need to question one’s behaviour and attitudes, in particular the seriousness of one’s devotion to God. Do not judge others, Tauler enjoins his listeners, ‘instead, examine yourself and you will find enough to judge and condemn’. Furthermore, he warns of the subconscious strategy that tries to evade the suffering of an authentic imitation of Christ: ‘by all means, do not act like those people, who stay outward-oriented when God demands inwardness, and, in turn, want to cultivate inwardness when God requests outward action’. Tauler’s contemporaries need to become less lenient with themselves; after all, it is the lack of relentless self-inspection and evaluation that raises ‘huge walls between themselves and God’.

To highlight the severity of the situation, Tauler stresses that every single individual will be held responsible for her actions by God: ‘know that no one will respond for you, but everyone will have to give an account for themselves’. Furthermore, Tauler exposes the mindset as deluded which assigns soteriological merit to one’s works. Whatever they do, human beings will always be ‘nothing’, Tauler emphasises, quoting Paul: ‘If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves’ (Gal. 6:3). Tauler’s warning against trusting in one’s capability to make oneself worthy for salvation runs through the whole sermon and culminates in a reference to Luke: ‘So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty”’ (Lk. 17:10).

Tauler returns to the idea of servitude in the second sermon, reminding his listeners again that human beings as such are incapable of good works. Not only is it hubristic to think that one could achieve anything by oneself, but it is also blasphemous. Tauler subtly, but powerfully, points this out by reminding his listeners that Jesus Christ understood himself as a servant: ‘All those who haughtily assume that they can do something good by themselves are mistaken because the Lord himself says: I have not come of my own accord, but he who sent me is true, and my teaching is not my own’.

Still, the second sermon addresses the three obstacles that inhibit the reception of grace in the soul, with the implicit appeal to destroy these obstacles, which suggests that the listeners are not fully devoid of agency as implied earlier. Building on the first sermon’s exploration of contemporary sinfulness, the second sermon describes the obstacles as firstly, knowingly continuing to live sinfully, that is, not following God’s

27 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 3, p. 82. In order to depict Kierkegaard’s perception of Tauler as adequately as possible, I will quote from this edition rather than from the critical edition Die Predigten Taulers: aus der Engelberger und der Freiburger Handschrift sowie aus Schmidts Abschriften der ehemaligen Straßburger Handschriften, ed. Ferdinand Vetter (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910). All translations are mine.

28 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 82.

29 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 87.

30 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 83.

31 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 85.

32 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 91. Tauler refers to Jn 7:28 and 7:16.
commands, but being orientated towards worldly riches and prestige. Secondly, the obstacles consist in appreciating one’s physical comfort above all else and being attached to one’s life. The third obstacle appears to be the most serious one, also because it is very difficult to detect. While abstaining from the first two depravities, the ones who keep up the third obstacle in their souls appear to lead impeccably devout religious lives. They are, however, only outwardly displaying signs of penitence, and they are ‘abusing’ the sacraments because they do not inwardly relate to God, are not ‘desiring the spiritual truth’.33

How, then, can one remove these obstacles? A thorough dying-to-self is necessary. Reaching true salvation is not possible except through true ‘Gelassenheit’, that is, a ‘renouncement not only of oneself but also of all things that are pleasing to our nature’.34 Consequently, Tauler invites his listeners to arrange their lives in such a way that they will become ‘worthy to be enraptured by the light of grace, which might replace the light of nature in us’.35 The process of being filled with grace is described as God’s inpouring of himself into the powers of the soul. He makes these powers grow in similarity to him and ‘imprints them with the colour of his divinity’.36 As a consequence the soul is stripped of its works. Instead, God becomes active in the soul, performs his works through it.

At first sight, the chronological order seems to be this: first, we remove the ‘obstacles’, that is, detach ourselves from worldly values, annihilate smugness and repent in authentic inwardness. Once empty, the Holy Spirit arrives and fills us. As a result, we are transformed or ‘tinted’ by the Divine, to keep Tauler’s metaphor. In this way, God can and does finally work through us. At last, then, our works become truly good works—but they are not completely our works anymore. In this process, grace appears to be conditional upon the human effort to prepare the soul for the reception of the Holy Spirit. But perplexingly, Tauler also suggests that even at the very first stage, which is supposed to precede grace, the human ability to enter the process of existential kenosis is dependent on grace! At the end of the sermon, he calls upon the benevolence of God, hoping that he ‘might give us His grace, so that we, too, will be freed of all obstacles and once reach this state [in which God performs his works through us]. Amen’.37 Hence, Tauler leaves his listeners with a paradox: without grace, we are not able to reach a state worthy of grace.

33 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 90. The three obstacles reflect Tauler’s anthropology that follows Plotinus and Origin in depicting the human being as threefold, that is, consisting of an outer, an inner and a ‘most inward’ human being. On Tauler’s anthropology and its sources, see Haas, Nim Din Selbes War, pp. 134–39; Gnädinger, Johannes Tauler, pp. 129–36 and Jörg Gabriel, Rückkehr zu Gott. Die Predigten Johanne Taulers in ihrem zeit-und geistesgeschichtlichen Kontext, zugleich eine Geschichte hochmittelalterlicher Spiritualität und Theologie (Würzburg: Echter, 2013), pp. 381–86.
34 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 88.
35 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, pp. 93–94.
36 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 93.
37 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 94.
Active Passivity and the Performative Ambiguity of the Text

At the heart of the tension between divine grace and human works lies Tauler’s complex account of passivity.38 While human beings in themselves are not capable of achieving anything good, the one thing that they are able to do is to accept or refuse the offer of grace to empty them and prepare them for the reception of the inpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the first sermon on Pentecost, Tauler gives a vivid image of the ‘double work’ of the Spirit: like heavy rain that becomes a stream, ripping away the soil and at the same time filling the land with its water, the Spirit fills as much as it empties.39

But a difference occurs when this comparison is applied to the soul: while a river’s coastline does not get a say in whether or not it is reshaped, a person can resist the mighty powers of the Spirit. There is a choice, suggesting an active passivity of the believer: ‘A person must let the self be caught, taken captive, and let the self be completely emptied of all creaturely, temporal and transient things, and be made ready’ .40 But Tauler rushes to assert that one may not draw the slightest bit of self-assuredness out of one’s decision. The person ‘ought to lose everything—even the losing of the self ought to be let go of’.41 As Bernard McGinn notes, Tauler’s main goal is to remind his listeners of the hubris inherent in the idea of self-dependence; ‘the only thing that is actually in our power is to interfere with God’s work’,42 that is, to evade the painful process of existential kenosis.

We find a similar tension in Kierkegaard, who, while stressing that ‘the hum[an] being is capable of nothing whatever’,43 also emphasises that salvation is dependent on a person’s free choice. In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard addresses the mind-bending, infinite process that tries to combine a strict Protestant justification-by-grace-through-faith-without-works doctrine with the idea of freedom. He insists on the necessity of having at least some kind of choice. Giving a voice to Lutheranism’s precautionary measures against the rehabilitation of works, Kierkegaard writes:

[‘]But no one can give himself faith, it is a gift of God for which I must pray[’]. Fine. But can I myself pray, or are we to go further and say, [‘]No, praying—i.e. praying for faith—is a gift of God that no one can give himself; it must be given to him[’]? And what then? Then, once again, the ability to pray rightly that I might have the ability to pray rightly must be also given to me, etc. There are many, many complications [konvoluter, literally ‘envelopes’]—but at one or

38 See Richard Kieckhefer, ‘The Notion of Passivity in the Sermons of Tauler’, Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiéval 48 (1981), pp. 198–211.
39 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 166. In the original, Tauler speaks of the Rhine turning into a flood; Die Predigten Taulers (Vetter edn, as above, V 25/60e), p. 304; cf. Bernard McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (New York: Crossroad, 2005), p. 268.
40 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 167 (all emphases mine).
41 Die Predigten Taulers (Vetter edn, as above, V 25/60), p. 306 (translation McGinn, The Harvest, p. 268). Arndt and Spener do not translate this sentence.
42 McGinn, The Harvest, p. 270.
43 KJN 5, 244/SKS 21, 235 (NB 9:59, 1849).
another point they must all be stopped by subjectivity … [S]ubjectivity cannot be excluded, unless we want to have fatalism.\textsuperscript{44}

In the earlier work \textit{Philosophical Fragments}, Kierkegaard solves this problem through the idea that God gives us the truth together with the condition to approach the truth. By ourselves, we are not capable of anything. However, we need to cooperate, that is, we need to \textit{accept} our truth-ignoring sinfulness that is revealed to us at the same time when God reveals himself to us. Thus, Kierkegaard stresses the role of subjectivity and its free choice to humble itself and decide for reason to ‘will its own downfall’\textsuperscript{45}. The canny twist here is that the self’s decision and the ‘work’ of accepting one’s sinfulness can hardly be regarded as meritorious, because, as Stephen Evans notes, ‘it consists precisely in the individual’s recognition that there is no merit present within him or her’.\textsuperscript{46}

While the \textit{Philosophical Fragments} focus on reason’s active-passive cooperation with grace, Kierkegaard’s later thought additionally considers the specific agency involved in suffering. The only thing that we are able to do is to accept or refuse the invitation to follow Christ in suffering. Faith inflicts this upon us to offer the opportunity for an existential kenosis, that is, to get cleansed and emptied of our sinfulness. It is fully in our hands to get out of the distress: ‘the voluntary is [the] suffering in faith’s struggle with God. I have it in my power to escape this’.\textsuperscript{47} How exactly can one evade the pain? Very easily, Kierkegaard’s contemporaries do it constantly: they adjust the requirement to follow Christ to the customs of their bourgeois life, and they also ignore the paradoxical implications of the Crucified as the God-Man which go beyond what they can understand with worldly sagacity. Thus, they evade the self-surrender of reason demanded by faith.

In sum, nineteenth-century Christendom has conveniently forgotten about the spiritual trial that led to Luther’s \textit{sola fide} theology. In ‘The Expectancy of Eternal Salvation’, Kierkegaard addresses the result: eternal salvation has become a ‘loose and idle phrase’, and God is perceived as resembling ‘a weak human being who does not have the heart to deny eternal salvation to anyone’—indeed, so weak that he forces it on everyone’.\textsuperscript{48} In other words: his contemporaries assume they can live in whatever way they want because salvation is certain; in fact, it is so certain that they do not even have to ponder it anymore. To break such insouciance and destroy the notion of cheap grace, Kierkegaard experimentally re-introduces the idea of conditional grace.

\textsuperscript{44} KJN 6, 421/SKS 22, 145 (NB 14:123).
\textsuperscript{45} Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{Philosophical Fragments}, in \textit{Kierkegaard’s Writings}, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 47 (henceforth PF) / SKS 4, 252.
\textsuperscript{46} C. Stephen Evans, ‘Salvation, Sin and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard’, in Clark H. Pinnock (ed.), \textit{The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism} (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie, 1989), pp. 181–89 (184).
\textsuperscript{47} KJN 7, 254/SKS 23, 250 (NB 17:111a, 1850).
\textsuperscript{48} Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses}, in \textit{Kierkegaard’s Writings}, vol. 5, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 254, 257 (henceforth EUD) /SKS 5, 251, 253.
He meets his contemporaries on their level, that is, he applies the perspective of worldly sagacity and bourgeois culture. He starts like this: Transitions should best be prepared, otherwise they are hazardous—on this everyone agrees. A drunken man who would suddenly wake up at a different place, not knowing where he is, would feel terribly confused and stressed. Wouldn’t it be similar for the person who dies and suddenly finds herself in heaven? She would die of shame, Kierkegaard suggests, because heaven’s salvation and her unworthiness would not correspond. And Kierkegaard troubles his contemporaries (who assume that everyone gets saved, whether they want it or not) even more, cunningly adding that ‘this person would inevitably feel as unhappy as someone who in a strange country wishes only to leave it’. 49 Therefore, it is in line with bourgeois sagacity to be concerned about one’s transition to the afterlife.

Having unsettled his readers through this travesty of Pascal’s wager, Kierkegaard then induces uncertainty in the seemingly guaranteed matter of salvation. Now that his reader has become concerned about salvation, he would surely ‘grasp that there must be a condition’. 50 This condition, however, one can never fathom finitely, because dealing with eternity, one’s concern about one’s worthiness never finds rest—‘an uncertainty will always remain in everything he finds out, and this uncertainty nourishes the concern, and the concern nourishes the uncertainty’. 51 And even if ‘there were particular conditions that could be expressed accurately in words and by means of which observant thought could test the state of the single individual; … how then could he ever with finite certainty be able to decide whether these conditions were present in him?’ 52 Whether these conditions are acts, moods, specific conceptions, does anyone actually know themselves so well that they would ‘take the responsibility for guaranteeing that these conditions are present in [them] just as they ought to be’ and not caused by egotistic motives? Kierkegaard’s answer to that is negative. Next, he rebukes the human tendency to judge others: ‘But if there continually remains an uncertainty in his soul, because of which he resorts to grace, how could it enter his mind to want to decide this for others, inasmuch as before one begins on that, one must first be altogether certain about oneself’. 53

The hypothetic statements about meritoriousness serve a performative purpose. They meet the reader on her level, accepting the criteria of bourgeois rationality and then turn them against themselves in a kind of elenctic process. At the end, the reader is thoroughly puzzled and bereft of the former certainty of her assumptions about grace, which turned grace into a cheap item. After the vertiginous ride on the machinery of bourgeois saggaciousness, the reader is emptied of any cognitive certainties, but also of any smugness regarding her ethical capacities and the confidence to judge others. The kenotic treatment of the reader culminates in a reference to Lk. 17:10. Kierkegaard highlights that the only thing a human being can (and must) do is to strive to perform good works and help the

49 EUD 258/SKS 5, 254.
50 EUD 268/SKS 5, 263.
51 EUD 268/SKS 5, 263–64.
52 EUD 269/SKS 5, 264.
53 EUD 269/SKS 5, 264.
neighbour with all one’s might, but in deep humbleness: ‘If you can do something for a person, then do it properly ashamed, for we are all unworthy servants [unyttige Tjenere], and even our good deeds [Velgjerninger] are nothing but human fabrications, fragile and very ambiguous, but every person has heaven’s salvation only by the grace and mercy of God’.  

The tension in this *Upbuilding Discourse* is not lifted at the end, to the contrary: on the one hand, the Lutheran doctrine is emphasised. Do not expect God’s grace ‘by virtue of some finite condition, because then it is not grace’—this resonates through the whole text. On the other hand, the relevance of works is not abolished; and the idea is nourished that there might be a condition for grace which we, qua human understanding, are simply unable to grasp. The atmosphere that is thus created is not one of security and assurance but of nervous anxiety. In this way, the prayer at the end of ‘The Expectancy’ can exert its full power, exemplifying our need for grace:

> Father in heaven, when I think about the matter of my salvation, I do not take out the accounting, because I know very well that I cannot repay one in a thousand … And I will not build my salvation on any work, not on the very best I may have done, since you alone know whether it was a good work … Save my soul from the niggling spirit that wants to diminish you and your gift … save my mind from the pondering that wants to fathom what is not given to be understood … Since I am capable of nothing myself, should I not desire the concern and confidence and courage to believe you and in this faith to expect your salvation?

In this *Upbuilding Discourse*, then, Kierkegaard follows his declared goal to ‘preach people to pieces so that they seek refuge in grace’. He reintroduces the requirement of the Law as described in Luther’s sermon on the Gospel for the fourth Sunday in Advent. What Kierkegaard additionally does, however, is to initiate a process of existential kenosis in the reader, hence assisting her in the only task of which human beings are truly capable: in a struggle with the paradoxical features of faith to empty oneself of hubristic self-images, concerning one’s seeming meritoriousness and self-righteousness, as much as one’s cognitive ability that ‘wants to fathom what is not given to be understood’. Not only is the reader told that the whole matter of salvation, of the relation

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54 EUD 270–71/SKS 5, 266.
55 EUD 268/SKS 5, 264.
56 EUD 273/SKS 5, 267. My emphasis.
57 KJN 6, 252/SKS 22, 249 (NB 12:177, 1849).
58 Luther describes the task of the preacher as follows: ‘First, he must preach the Law so that the people may learn what great things God demands of us; of these we cannot perform any because of the impotence of our nature which has been corrupted by Adam’s fall’. Martin Luther, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker et al., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), vol. 1, p. 131; see Coe, *Kierkegaard and Luther*, p. 82. While Kierkegaard comments in his journal that what Luther says about preaching the Law corresponds to what he, Kierkegaard, usually says about Jesus Christ as the prototype, ‘The Expectancy’ shows that Kierkegaard also turns to the Law to ‘preach people to pieces’; KJN 6, 252/SKS 22, 249 (NB 12:177, 1849).
59 EUD 273/SKS 5, 267.
of works and grace, exceeds the capacity of human understanding, she also gets to experience this when reading.

While Tauler’s second sermon for Cantate Sunday is gentler in tone, it follows a similar agenda. The propositional statements about grace and works do not simply serve the goal of explaining or solving this intricate theological issue. The tension in the depiction of human agency, which is best described as ‘active passivity’, causes bewilderment. Moreover, the severe call to responsibility when it comes to removing the obstacles that inhibit grace is counteracted with the finishing plea that God’s grace may remove these obstacles. The matter at hand is not a doctrinal issue, but something that Kierkegaard so appreciatingly calls an ‘existence transformation’—in this case the realization that we are not supposed to try to ‘fathom what is not given to be understood’.

Tauler and Kierkegaard have designed their texts as an occasion for existential kenosis, with the ultimate aim to elicit humbleness—the core Christian attitude that appears to be lacking in both the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Reassessing Human Agency

Both Kierkegaard and Tauler remove the idea of meritoriousness from works, but, apart from that, let them stand. As shown, the tension thus created serves a performative purpose. We are supposed to continuously ponder our incapability to achieve anything good. And even if we were capable, we would never have any certainty as to whether our works were truly good. Admittedly, from a purely doctrinal perspective, this is not fully convincing. After all, if some of our works might be good, the idea of meritoriousness would still stand. But Kierkegaard and Tauler are decidedly approaching the relation of grace and works not from a doctrinal, theoretical perspective. Instead, they both aim to counteract the ‘shift that is made from the first-person perspective of participation in the life of faith to the third-person standpoint of theoretical contemplation on it’.

From the first-person perspective, that is, from the one striving and concerned about salvation, the idea of meritoriousness becomes irrelevant. If one can never, qua human understanding, be sure about the nature of one’s deeds, and never comprehend the intricate relation between God’s grace and one’s agency, then one should better take the idea of merit out of the equation. Nota bene, this does not mean that works are removed as well. Hence, we are encouraged to continuously strive and try our very best. Thus, when Tauler and Kierkegaard speak of ‘meritoriousness’ that needs to be removed, they have smugness and self-certainty in mind. Works still need to be done, but in humbleness and self-forgetfulness, that is, with complete disregard to anything like meritoriousness. Tauler ends his first sermon for Cantate Sunday with the appeal to perform works of love, but in a truly loving manner, that is, without any regard for oneself. Moreover, in his

60 JFY 192/SKS 16, 238.
61 EUD 272/SKS 5, 267.
62 Cf. KJN 7, 376/SKS 23, 368 (NB 19:57b, 1850).
63 Daniel Watts, ‘Participation in Grace: Kierkegaard’s Corrective to Luther’, Studies in Christian Ethics (2021). http://repository.essex.ac.uk/id/eprint/31325.
sermon for Ash Wednesday, Tauler does not leave any doubts about his understanding of works, rejecting any kind of quietism with the firm maxim: ‘you should always strive and try to do your best, but you should never rely on it nor think highly about yourself because of it’.64 We find something similar in Kierkegaard, who, counteracting the antinomian tendencies of nineteenth-century Lutheranism, reminds his contemporaries that ‘your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required—that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nevertheless grace’.65

Both Tauler’s and Kierkegaard’s account of humble striving is based on the idea that our works are not truly ours. This implies a particular understanding of human agency, which they express with reference to the image of servitude in Lk. 17:10. Kierkegaard indirectly returns to this image in the second part of Judge for Yourself!, which revolves around Matt. 6:24: ‘No one can serve two masters’—namely, no one can serve God and mammon; no one is justified in calling oneself a Christian while living according to worldly values. The second part of Judge for Yourself!, entitled ‘Christ as the Prototype’, attacks his contemporaries’ convenient misinterpretation of Luther’s sola fide theology as having cut the link of faith and works. This allows them to unscrupulously serve the modern form of mammon: the ‘cultured public’66 with its values of success, sagaciousness, and physical and mental comfort. Against this, Kierkegaard re-introduces the necessity of works, which—to avoid the ‘error of the Middle Ages’—are inextricably linked with humbleness. The prototype for such attitude towards works is the God-Man himself, who, after all, took ‘the form of a servant’.67

Recall that we find a similar reminder in Tauler’s second sermon for Cantate Sunday: ‘All those who haughtily assume that they can do something good by themselves are mistaken because the Lord himself says: I have not come of my own accord, but he who sent me is true, and my teaching is not my own’.68 Even Jesus Christ acted on the behalf of someone else, namely, God. His agency was essentially the agency of an obedient servant.

Addressing the deficits of their respective cultures, Kierkegaard and Tauler bring different aspects of Jesus Christ’s servitude to the fore: Tauler emphasises that servants, even the best of them, do not ‘own’ their works (not even Jesus Christ did), while Kierkegaard highlights that Jesus Christ performed works, fulfilling a God-given task. Tauler fights hubris and wants to humble the ones who think highly of themselves because of their works. At the same time, however, he soothes and calms those among his listeners that are despairing over the worthlessness of their works: While everyone should consider themselves a dutiful servant who day and night strives to fulfill her role as best as possible, they should also rest assured that like every good master, one

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64 Die Predigten Taulers (Vetter edn, as above, V 13), p. 6; the sermon is not included in Johann Tauler’s Predigten. See Adolar Zumkeller, ‘Das Ungenügen der menschlichen Werke bei den dt. Predigern des Mittelalters’, Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie 81.3 (1959), pp. 265–305 (274).
65 FSE 17/SKS 13, 46. See also JFY 154/SKS 16, 203.
66 JFY 155/SKS 16, 204.
67 Cf. Phil. 2:7.
68 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 91.
day God will say: ‘O, you devoted and loyal servant, often, you were not fully abiding, [but] much of this shall be ignored, go in to the joy of your Lord’.69

Kierkegaard, by contrast, is more scathing in his approach because his contemporaries do not fear for their salvation at all, as we have seen in ‘The Expectancy of Eternal Salvation’, the second of the Three Upbuilding Discourses from 1844. Hence, Kierkegaard stresses that we must strive with all our might and never feel secure. In ‘He Must Increase; I Must Decrease’ (the third discourse from the same collection), Kierkegaard reminds his readers:

Every human being is only an instrument [Redskab] and does not know when the moment will come when he will be put aside. If he himself does not at times evoke this thought, he is a hireling, an unfaithful servant [en Leiesvend, en utro Tjener], who is trying to free himself and to cheat the Lord of the uncertainty in which he comprehends his own nothingness.70

Through the image of the servant Kierkegaard re-introduces the aspects of duty, powerlessness, dependency, even fear. This does not mean, however, that Kierkegaard sees God as a fearsome ruler. We must keep in mind that he wants to re-establish the dialectical tension between Law and Gospel. To correct the antinomian tendencies of nineteenth-century Lutheranism, Kierkegaard tries to stir up his contemporaries with the imagery of inescapable bondage. However, he also balances this imagery with the assuring and soothing images of childhood.

Like the servant, the child is, strictly speaking, not free in its actions. It does not have the authority, nor the material means, the physical strength and the judgmental abilities to bring about a larger action (at least as a young child). However, this does not mean that the child perceives itself as living in a state of insecurity, dependence and powerlessness. Kierkegaard uses a variety of images here, among them a toddler called ‘little Ludvig’. On one of the daily rides in his stroller, which Ludvig immensely enjoys, his mother comes up with something to delight him even more, and Kierkegaard vividly depicts the resulting joy of the child: ‘would he like to try to push the stroller himself? And he can! What! He can? Yes, look, Auntie, little Ludvig can push the stroller himself!’71

Obviously, it is still the mother who is doing the work of pushing the stroller, but she does not mention this to little Ludvig, who is so happy and proud, huffing and puffing; ‘in the sweat of the brow he is pushing the stroller’.72 And this, Kierkegaard argues, is the same with being able to work: ‘Properly understood …, it is pure delight, something God has thought to delight human beings, something about which God has said to himself: It will definitely delight them more than continually being pushed in a stroller’.73

Hence, Kierkegaard implies, we should enjoy ourselves in working and be grateful for everything we do, without ever assigning any merit to ourselves. Moreover, since we

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69 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 85. Tauler implicitly refers to Matt. 25:21.
70 EUD 282/SKS 5, 275.
71 JFY 185/SKS 16, 232.
72 JFY 185/SKS 16, 232.
73 JFY 185/SKS 16, 233.
understand our actions as powered by God, as a sign of his love, we should show our gratitude by striving extra hard. When Ludvig has become an adult, Kierkegaard imagines, he will understand ‘the true situation’—that it was not him, but his mother who pushed the stroller. Does this make him upset? Far from it, he fondly and gratefully remembers his mother’s deep love for him, and he applies this experience to his God-relation. It reminds him ‘how much he is, in a far higher sense, still in the same situation as the child, that when the adult works it really is someone else—it is God who is working’. Ludvig does not, however, turn to quietism, thinking ‘Well, if it is really God who is working, would it not be best that I be exempted?’ Remembering the love of his mother, who let her little son experience the feeling of achieving something by himself, grown-up Ludvig puts extra effort in his works, and through this striving now feels the love of God.

The anecdote probably brings back similar memories from our own childhood. We, the readers, are called to realise how much we are in the same situation as grown-up Ludvig: what we as children regarded as our own actions turned out to be silently facilitated by our caregivers. However, one cannot help but notice a dissonance in the analogy: it surely makes a difference whether one knows that someone else is active (e.g., pushing the stroller) at the very moment that one is putting in all one’s strength? Indeed; this is the point that Kierkegaard is making. While the child takes pride and huge delight in experiencing itself as independent and capable of grand actions, thereby immensely overestimating itself, it does not realise the depth of his parent’s love. Only the adult, when finally realising the former dependency, incapability and unjustified pride, gets to realise the parent’s love, leniency and care. It is this love that is important for Kierkegaard to communicate. Evoking the warm feeling of our parent’s love in us, he hopes that the analogy leads us to become aware of the love of God. The gratitude for this immense love, he thinks, spills over into the unceasing effort to work as hard as we can, but to understand our agency as a gift of love.

In becoming more industrious while remaining humble, we reply to God’s love, showing our gratitude and worshipping him properly. While Tauler integrates the element of God’s caring love into his Lord-servant image, Kierkegaard additionally refers to the parent-child relationship to balance the connotations of fear and powerlessness that his use of the imagery of servitude creates. Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s parent-child analogy functions as a transition to another aspect of the discussion of works and grace. The God-fearing worker, who continuously strives hard to respond to God’s love, will increasingly understand ‘that God is the co-worker [Medarbeider]’. Cooperating with God—quite an astonishing shift from the image of the unworthy servant! But the co-worker is just the opposite pole to the unworthy servant, guaranteeing that the dialectical tension is kept, namely, the tension between Law and Gospel, between being nothing and being loved by God. Kierkegaard also refers to the humble seamstress

74 JFY 186/SKS 16, 233.
75 JFY 186/SKS 16, 233.
76 JFY 186/SKS 16, 233.
77 JFY 186/SKS 16, 233.
who understands ‘that only when she herself is sewing will God sew for her’. This further illustrates the loving inventiveness of enabling grace, which conceals itself by seemingly giving the human being the power not only over her salvation but also over whether or not God shall be active in this world.

The discourse ‘He Must Increase; I Must Decrease’, which explores the preparatory role of John the Baptist for Christianity, further addresses the paradoxical link between humble servitude and powerful agency. Kierkegaard refers to the biblical parables of the master who leaves his servants at home when travelling. In one version, the master puts a servant in charge of his household, assigning him the management of the other servants and his possessions (Lk. 12:42-48). In another version, the master entrusts ten of his servants with his money (Lk. 19:12-27). In the first parable, the servant abuses his power, and the second parable culminates in the disgrace of the servant who did not invest the money. While these parables justify the idea of bondage due to the servant’s seeming incapability to lead others wisely and make good use of the resources in line with the master’s interests, Kierkegaard’s retelling of the parables comes with an astonishing twist. In his version, it is the servant who goes on a journey. If he is unfaithful, he convinces himself that ‘he can go so far away that the master cannot take away what has been entrusted to him’. But the servant is not accounting for the short-lived security of financial assets—‘property and gold can vanish like a dream’. This reminds the reader that while it is tempting to forget that our abilities and means belong to God and that we are supposed to work according to God’s interests, such forgetfulness will not lead to happiness. What is truly empowering, however, is the humbling thought of being dismissed, which ‘liberates the servant to be one of God’s co-workers, just as the thought of death liberates a person, saves him from being a bond servant who wants to belong only to the earth, from being a cheat who does not want to belong to God’.

Tauler’s depiction of cooperation appears to significantly differ from Kierkegaard’s account. Tauler seems to regard a union of God and the soul as possible, for instance, when he speaks about the final effect of the soul’s active-passive cooperation with grace in which the soul is filled with the Holy Spirit: ‘in this unification, the soul is so glorified in God that it does not perform its works in a creaturely manner anymore, but in a divine manner and in the form of God, whose color it received and with whom it has been united’. Because of such an idea of union, Kierkegaard accuses mysticism of annihilating the difference between God and human being.

It is, however, missed by Kierkegaard (and by Kierkegaard scholarship, too) that Tauler develops a highly complex account of union-in-difference that only appears to the human being as an identity of God and the soul. In Tauler’s second sermon for Cantate Sunday, the statement about the apparent union of the soul with God is

78 JFY 183/SKS 16, 230.
79 EUD 282/SKS 5, 275.
80 EUD 282/SKS 5, 275.
81 EUD 282/SKS 5, 275.
82 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 93.
83 Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, Søren Kierkegaards Papirer, ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1970), vol. 13, p. 67 (Pap. II C 28).
immediately followed by a modification. The soul only ‘gets close to a divine color and similarity with God’; it is a result of the immense grace that the soul ‘cannot distinguish anymore how she is [different from God]. God, however, still regards the soul as a creature’.84 Thus, the target of Kierkegaard’s seeming ‘anti-mysticism’ on a closer look turns out to be a strawman. Indeed, not only for Kierkegaard but for Tauler as well, ‘it is only by an act of grace on God’s part and not by the mystic’s striving for experience of or union with the Divine that [s]he comes into God’s presence’.85 As shown in the above analysis of Tauler’s ‘double work of the spirit’, which empties and fills, that is, prepares the soul for its graceful transformation (if the soul accepts the invitation of suffering), Tauler firmly reminds his listeners that in themselves, they are incapable of achieving anything—and this is exactly what Kierkegaard points out to be the non-negotiable difference between God and the human person, which, notably, becomes obvious in the context of his definition of grace quoted earlier: ‘There is an infinite, yawning, qualitative difference between God and human beings. This means—or the expression for this is—that the human being is capable of nothing whatever; it is God who gives everything’.86

**Conclusion**

There are remarkable similarities in Tauler’s and Kierkegaard’s accounts of works and grace. Both emphasise that in themselves, human beings are not capable of achieving anything, thus, even when it comes to cleansing the soul and preparing it for the reception of grace, the latter, paradoxically, is already involved. Still, while grace is indispensable for salvation, it is not irresistible. It is up to the human being whether she accepts the invitation of suffering, submitting herself to an existential kenosis that makes the soul receptive to grace. Without the human being’s active-passive cooperation, grace is insufficient. And yet, Kierkegaard and Tauler insist on the inappropriateness of the idea of merit. While this is not satisfying from a doctrinal point of view, it helps to keep in mind that both thinkers approached the issue of grace from the perspective of the one who experiences grace. Furthermore, for both Kierkegaard and Tauler, the content of the concept ‘merit’ is determined primarily by smugness and pride, and to a lesser degree by agency. And the human agency involved is so closely intertwined with the divine agency that it is difficult for the human understanding to keep both apart.

Particularly in Tauler’s second sermon for Cantate Sunday, the idea of a gradually increasing grace becomes evident: it is there from the onset but needs to be embraced

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84 Johann Tauler’s Predigten, vol. 2, p. 93; emphases added. See Dietmar Mieth, *Im Wirken schauen. Die Einheit von vita activa und vita contemplativa bei Meister Eckhart und Johannes Tauler* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2018), p. 260. The most thorough refutation of the idea that the unio mystica necessarily implies identity is offered by Christine Büchner, *Die Transformation des Einheitsdenkens Meister Eckharts bei Heinrich Seuse und Johannes Tauler* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007).

85 David R. Law, ‘Kierkegaard’s Anti-Mysticism’, *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 14.2 (1993), pp. 102–11 (109). See also Podmore, *Struggling with God*, pp. 77–89.

86 KJN 5, 244/SKS 21, 235 (NB 9:59, 1849).
in humble acceptance. Therefore, both Tauler and Kierkegaard do not tire to stress, again and again, that their contemporaries need to humble themselves. Due to different cultural circumstances, Tauler and Kierkegaard highlight other aspects of self-righteousness and smugness: a blasé attitude toward salvation in nineteenth-century bourgeois Lutheranism, and a hubristic self-dependence based on an inflated asceticism in the fourteenth century. To strengthen the dialectic tension between Law and Gospel, Kierkegaard brings the relevance of works to the fore, or, more precisely: of striving. Like Tauler, he also reminds his contemporaries that they can never be fully certain that their good deeds are really ‘good’. And since they are, as human beings, unable to determine whether their works, in principle, would make them worthy for salvation, they are even less capable of judging others in this regard. Furthermore, both Kierkegaard and Tauler do not only argue that humbleness is needed. They also aim at eliciting such humbleness in their audience. Their articulations of the relation of works and grace are ambiguous on purpose: they let the reader and listener experience her cognitive limits as a human being. We cannot understand the workings of grace—but we are also not supposed to.

Neither Tauler nor Kierkegaard write about grace and works in order to contribute to a purely doctrinal discussion. They are interested in how the relation of works and grace translates into the daily life of their fellow human beings. Their texts, thus, are performative; they aim at an ‘existence-transformation’. Both Tauler and Kierkegaard call their readers and listeners to responsibility: while we should not think that we can achieve anything good by ourselves, it is in our power, first, to accept the graceful offer to become receptive to grace, and second, to continuously strive and always do our best, but without pride. Hence, a more precise expression for the ‘Arminianism’ in Kierkegaard’s work might be ‘Taulerianism’.

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87 JFY 192/SKS 16, 238.