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Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity

By Rick Anthony Furtak

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[1] The title of Rick Anthony Furtak's book is programmatic: Wisdom shall not be seen as the rational alternative to the emotion of love; rather, philosophy, the love of wisdom, shall discover wisdom *in* love and acknowledge the rationality of emotions. The subtitle refers to the methodological approach: After beginning with a critical consideration of ancient Stoicism and its disdain for the emotions, the study draws upon Søren Kierkegaard's writings in order to develop a conceptual account of emotional integrity. As the author announces in the preface, the outcome 'of this guide for the emotionally perplexed is a conception of what it would mean to trust oneself to be rational in being passionate' (xii).

[2] The book is carefully composed. It is divided into three parts, each containing four chapters. Part I mainly discusses the twofold failing of Stoicism, Parts II and III attempt to develop a moral philosophy of emotion that could stand as a positive alternative to Stoicism (cf. 41). Let's have a closer look at the content of these parts:

[3] The first chapter of Part I starts off with a descriptive theory of emotion or passion. Furtak uses both words as 'near-synonyms' (143 n.2) and characterizes emotions as ways 'of seeing the world' (4). In contrast to mere sensations or cognitively irrelevant bodily feelings, they are intentional 'perceptions of significance' (6, 12f), which refer to external objects and rely upon 'some kind of *axiological* belief' about what is of value (5). Significance is defined as a property of any relation in which the perceived matters to the perceiver, who is both active and acted upon by some feature of the world (s)he cares about (cf. 6f). Like Augustine, Furtak takes love, care or concern as the ground and primary condition of all other emotions, since it establishes emotional bonds with the world and in us a readiness for being affected in specific ways (cf. 9-11). He stresses that the capacity for seeing-as exists before we learn to formulate anything in language, although the cares that define our emotional dispositions develop over time (cf. 14f).

[4] Chapters 2 and 3 are a reconstruction of the Stoic view of emotion. Furtak accepts the epistemological claim that emotions are fallible and may be prone to distortion, bias, and excess, but he does not draw the same conclusion as the Stoics, namely that a virtuous person should aim at an expulsion of passions

and the state of *apatheia* (cf. 19–21). He argues that consistent adherence to the principle of total extirpation would prohibit a person from perceiving meaning in the world, condemn to personal disintegration and non-participation, and lead not only to the denial of the singularity of another human being but to moral non-engagement and coldhearted indifference to the sufferings of others (cf. 24, 26f, 29–31).

^[5] The fourth chapter presents the ideal of integrity without apathy, i.e. of emotional wisdom, and outlines the task to distinguish between trustworthy and unacceptable emotions: ‘The cardinal virtue of our renovated ethics would be nothing less than the readiness to be always affected in the right ways, based upon a care for the right things.’ (36)

^[6] Chapters 5 through 8 comprise Part II. It takes up the so-called ‘structural’ argument of the Stoics, which involves a qualified critique of the ways in which emotions are liable to be flawed. Chapter 5 begins with introductory remarks on the relevance of Kierkegaard’s writings, emphasizing the similarities to the Stoic view (e.g. the interconnection of cognition and emotion, the warnings not to care for the wrong things or for trivialities) while stressing that Kierkegaard criticizes false emotion in order to contrast it with authentic *pathos* (cf. 45–49). The following chapters are arranged as an ‘ascent of love’ and a means of identifying ‘the necessary conditions of reliable emotion’ with regard to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious forms of life portrayed in Kierkegaard (51).

^[7] In chapter 6, Furtak analyzes the sentimental understanding of love in the papers of the young aesthete ‘A’ in *Either/Or* and the problems that follow from this pattern of emotional existence, for example the oscillation between responsiveness and disengagement, the self-deceptive falsification of the world in order to feel the way one wants to, the lack of forward-looking or retrospective emotions and the escape from moral commitment in continued relationships (cf. 53, 55, 63).

^[8] In the seventh chapter, he goes on to challenge this pattern from the perspective of Judge William, who addresses ‘A’ in the second volume of *Either/Or* and attempts to persuade him to allow the movement from aesthetic response to ethical resolution, from being affected to taking responsibility, from falling in love to getting married (cf. 65, 67). In contrast to ‘A’s’ chronic discontinuity of character and the fluctuations in his passions, the virtuous person is depicted as someone whose passions are transparently grounded and cultivated in consistent evaluative dispositions which define what is right and what is wrong (cf. 70–74).

^[9] Furtak finishes the second part with a chapter on ‘The Romantic Imagination’, i.e. the ‘faculty of access to unrealized possibilities’ (79). On the one hand, this faculty might catch the aesthete in a bad infinity of possibilities; on the other hand, it frees him from mundane entanglements and allows him to imagine a better world (cf. 81). From this point of view, Furtak offers a more charitable reading of the aesthete and a critique of the ethicist, who lacks this faculty (cf. 82f): While the ethicist is complacent about the existing order and accepts the conventional evaluative standards of prevailing social practices and institutions, the aesthete refuses to reduce himself to conformity and revolts against surrounding values,

which enables him to question the premises of traditional morality (cf. 80, 83, 85). Moreover, the ethicist lays so much emphasis on deliberate decision that the will threatens to replace the passionate receptivity and openness to unforeseen significance that the aesthete exemplifies (cf. 87). Regarding the flaws of both positions, Furtak proposes complementary structural corrections in the sense of a 'non-sentimental romanticism' (88): The aesthete should assent to the proposition that is implicit in his momentary emotion and let it be transformed into habit, and the ethicist should believe in the possibility of new axiological discoveries and find sanction for his highest values in something other than local authority. What could be a more reliable source to ground our emotions?

^[10] The transition to the third part of the book involves the transition to Kierkegaard's account of the religious sphere of existence. Part III contains chapters 9–12 and deals with the 'fundamental' Stoic argument that emotions are categorically wrong with regard to value. In opposition to this view, Furtak argues for the possible validity of emotional perception (cf. 91). He wants to prove 'that the passions can be rationally legitimate' and truthful, which requires not only that they are internally consistent but also that they must 'be outwardly grounded', i.e. they shall correspond to nothing less than the 'objective' conditions in the universe (92).

^[11] With reference to Kierkegaard's 1847 ethics *Works of Love*, Furtak holds in chapter 9 that the ground and necessary premise of human existence and of all significance in life is love, and that the creative source of all love, the primary love upon which everything else is ontologically dependent, is God (cf. 97f, 107). When we see things with loving eyes, they appear meaningful, we appreciate them for being what they are and trust that there is some benign significance to everything—in spite of all doubt in situations when this is not evident (cf. 100, 105).

^[12] However, as Furtak explains in chapter 10, a person who is moved in love to other beings becomes vulnerable, susceptible to passion and can be affected by non-controllable contingent events, since what is valued might be taken away, and whom I care about might hurt me (cf. 108–111). That's why suffering is love's logical consequence. But still, although what builds us up is also what makes us suffer, only love can suffer *and* maintain the perspective of a comprehensive acceptance of life that saves us from despair (cf. 116–118).

^[13] Chapter 11 proclaims 'Value on the Other Side of Nihilism' and advocates faith in love as a non-stoic resolution of the moral-psychological problem of defining how a passionate life could be both legitimate and worth living (cf. 119). Furtak points out that love is a category through which we perceive and conceptualize the world, a key to the inner nature of particular beings that opens up knowledge of the other and is essential also to the realization of self-identity (cf. 122f). He interprets Kierkegaard's notion of 'repetition' as a normative ideal of moral existence, in which one works out one's relation to temporal reality by way of affirming the past in its existential impact on one's present day identity and future bearing, by seeking the infinite gift of love in the finite and by hoping for the renewal of its emotional power over time (cf. 126–132). It implies the

transformation of a selfish love into one which – after having been drawn toward nihilism – is purified of egotistical demands on the beloved (cf. 135).

^[14] The final chapter on ‘The Tragicomedy of Passionate Existence’ summarizes the result of the inquiry with conclusions on virtue and value: First, an ethics of taking responsibility for one’s being shaped by particular concerns and responses is necessary for reliable emotional perception; and, second, an understanding of love as the basis of moral engagement leads to the recognition of value in the world and a warmhearted participation in a shared reality (cf. 137f). Last but not least, a loving perspective on an imperfect world includes a sense of humor which is reconciled to its ambiguity, embracing jubilation and pain alike (cf. 139f).

^[15] In agreement with recent accounts of love – like, e.g., Martha Nussbaum’s, Robert Solomon’s, Robert C. Roberts’ and Harry Frankfurt’s – Furtak has written a lucid and illuminating defense of the view that being rational cannot be equated with remaining dispassionate, and that integrity cannot be equated with invulnerability, in short: that love and wisdom need not be at odds with one another. On the contrary, love’s wisdom judges what truly matters in human existence, and therefore it is worth taking the risk of suffering.

^[16] One of the most important merits of Furtak’s book is that it takes a fresh look at Kierkegaard’s relation to ancient philosophy and offers new insights into how he studied not only Plato and Aristotle but also the Stoics. Developing Kierkegaard in contradistinction to the Stoics both responds to a *desideratum* in regard to Kierkegaard research and is helpful in regard to recent philosophical debates on emotion. Furtak’s fruitful combination of a thorough historical investigation and a conceptual approach to emotion reveals, for example, the mostly neglected religious dimension of love.

^[17] It would be an understatement to say that *Wisdom in Love* is ‘well-written.’ The literary style of this book is felicitous, both precise and poetical, invoking the voices of great writers like Dostoevsky, Camus, Kundera, de Unamuno, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, Rilke, Musil and Nietzsche. It contains a treasure trove in footnotes and shows that its author is acquainted with an impressive amount of primary and secondary texts.

^[18] If there’s a critique to be made, it concerns the fact that Furtak hardly ever enters in explicit discussion with the secondary literature he quotes. He chooses the comments that fit into his own line of thought but keeps silent about disagreements. He thereby deprives himself of the opportunity to substantiate his position in contrast to other possible options in current controversies. For instance, the results of the Kierkegaard exegesis in the ninth chapter (‘Love as Necessary Premise’) could have been related to other accounts of love in contemporary philosophy of emotion and philosophy of religion. Let me mention three subject areas that are in need of clarification:

^[19] Firstly and basically, to what extent is it justified to subsume Kierkegaard’s description of love in *Works of Love*¹ under the concept of emotion as Furtak has

1. S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love (Kierkegaard’s Writings 16)*, ed. and trans. by H.V. Hong

introduced it in his first chapter?

[20] I am somewhat troubled by Furtak's procedure, since he quotes only a part of what Kierkegaard is saying (cf. 99, 177 n.61, 182 n.115). He quotes Kierkegaard's statement that love is the 'passion of the emotions'² or the 'emotional passion' [as a translation of 'Kjerlighed³ er en Følelses Lidenskab'] as well as the draft 'Love is certainly an emotion'⁴ without mentioning that both sentences continue with 'but. . .,' i.e. with a restriction or even an objection. Kierkegaard adds two points, namely 1. that love is not only a relation between human beings 'but in this emotion a person [. . .] should first relate to God',⁵ and 2. he denies that Christian love is a 'shirking of the tasks',⁶ an 'inactive' or 'hidden, private, mysterious feeling' [Følelse] or a 'mood' [Stemning]; it is 'sheer action'.⁷

[21] As to the first point, Kierkegaard emphasizes that God is the 'middle term'⁸ in human relationships, namely 'the love' that connects a lover and a beloved.⁹ Note that he does not directly identify 'emotion' [Følelse] with God, since this could be misunderstood as a deification of a human faculty; rather, he describes it as a mode of relating ourselves to God and other persons and differentiates between human love and its origin and criterion in God's love.¹⁰ Although Furtak stresses that Kierkegaard sees love as a 'gift' (cf. 106, 132, 134), he does not always manage to preclude this misunderstanding, since he defines love both as an 'emotional force,' a 'subjective mode of comportment,' a human capacity or state of character *and* as 'divinity' and 'sacred force' (97, 99f, 103, 108, 120f, 125).¹¹

[22] As to the second point, Kierkegaard is suspicious of Følelse in the sense of quietist introspection. Used in this context, Følelse does not correspond to Furtak's understanding of emotion. Furtak has accentuated the epistemic aspect of emotions and interprets them according to the paradigm of perception, while Kierkegaard focuses on the ethical relevance of love, which does not only consist in cognitive seeing-as and a volitional *disposition* to act but in the active and actual *performance* of love, that is, in deeds done in a loving way. Furtak is well aware of Kierkegaard's emphasis on loving as 'a spontaneous activity' (101) and of its religious significance as commanded love but leaves the reader with the question

and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1995 (cited as KW 16).

2. KW 16, 112.

3. Furtak introduces *Kjærlighed* as Kierkegaard's word for unselfish love and *Kjerlighed* as a variant spelling; however, different from what is suggested (cf. 179 n.80, 102, 178 n.78), at least in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard consequently uses only the latter spelling.

4. KW 16, 436.

5. KW 16, 112.

6. KW 16, 106.

7. KW 16, 99.

8. KW 16, 107.

9. KW 16, 121.

10. KW 16, 3, 8–10.

11. That this is a contentious issue is demonstrated by Robert S. Solomon, who writes that love is 'not a gift from God (much less *is* it God). [. . .] Love is an emotion, nothing else.' Cf. R.S. Solomon, *Love: Emotion, Myth and Metaphor*, New York 1981, 34.

as to what extent this goes with the before-mentioned paradigm of emotion or transcends it.

[23] Secondly, to what extent is it justified to portray Kierkegaard as a virtue ethicist?

[24] Furtak describes love as an initially pre-individual and pre-moral force and unreliable impetus that 'can be refined and developed into the religious virtue' of neighborly love that forms the heart and moral identity of a person (98f, cf. xii). So love becomes '*what is best in us*', defining the self 'by virtue of its love' (138). This view is supported by *Works of Love* insofar as love is called a characteristic or quality as well as an active work that is acquired at every moment.¹² But one could also refer to the discourses on love as duty and interpret the book in a deontological sense.¹³ Kierkegaard's 1847 ethics includes all these aspects but cannot be reduced to one of them, since it focuses on the ethical qualification and modality not only of the moral agent, of the action or its result but of the whole situation and process of communication.¹⁴ It does not prescribe *what* is to be done but describes *how* we should ideally do whatever we do, offering a normative phenomenology of the practice of loving.

[25] According to the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, all ancient ethics was based on the presupposition that virtue can be realized; Kierkegaard's first ethics (described in the 1843 writings), however, was shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual, implying a moral gap between the demand on us and our natural capacities to live by it. Therefore, his second ethics,¹⁵ i.e. *Works of Love*, cannot be based on the same principle but presupposes Christian dogmatics, human failure, forgiveness and being edified by God's creative love. Human virtuousness is, of course, not excluded but seen in the light of God's grace that enables us to fulfill the love commandment. This view, however, challenges not only the aesthetic/ethical concept of moral integrity in *Either/Or*

12. KW 16, 302, 223. For an interpretation in terms of virtue see Robert C. Roberts, 'Existence, emotion, and virtue: Classical themes in Kierkegaard,' in: A. Hannay/G. Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge 1998, 177–206, 184, 193; D.J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, Cambridge 1996.

13. For a more Kantian interpretation see A. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, London/New York 1982, 241ff; F. Hauschildt, *Die Ethik Sören Kierkegaards*, Gütersloh 1982, 153ff.166–168; B.H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, Bloomington, Ind. 1990, 308ff. For a position that includes but transcends the aspect of duty and focuses on the lifeworld context of actions see H. Deuser, 'Die Taten der Liebe: Kierkegaards *wirkliche* Ethik,' in: W. Härle/R. Preul, *Gute Werke* (Marburger theologische Studien 34), Marburg 1993, 117–132, esp. 117, 120f.

14. For recent discussions in Danish, English and German research see the collection of essays in I.U. Dalferth (ed.), *Ethik der Liebe. Studien zu Kierkegaards „Taten der Liebe“* (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 4), Tübingen 2002; for the position described above cf. U. Lincoln, 'Christliche Ethik als expressive Theorie humaner Praxis. Zur Methode in Kierkegaards *Die Taten der Liebe*', 1–18, esp. 2, 14, 16; I.U. Dalferth, '„... der Christ muss alles anders verstehen als der Nicht-Christ. ...“ Kierkegaards Ethik des Unterscheidens', 19–46, esp. 21f.

15. Cf. Arne Grøn, 'Kierkegaards „zweite“ Ethik,' in: *Kierkegaard Studies. Yearbook 1998*, 358–368; Philip L. Quinn, 'Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics,' in: A. Hannay/G. Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge 1998, 349–375, 349 with reference to John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance*, Oxford 1996, 1.

but also Furtak's attempt to incorporate Kierkegaard's late ethics into the early scheme of stages. The relation between virtues in the classical sense of habits we acquire and in the theological sense of divine infusion should be reconsidered anyway.

[26] Thirdly, to what extent is it justified to speak of 'emotional truth' that is conceptualized as *adaequatio passionis et rei*, which means that subjectivity is in accordance with objectivity and the inner with the outer world?

[27] In contrast to non-realistic accounts,¹⁶ Furtak maintains that it makes sense to talk about whether our emotions 'correspond to external states of affairs' (xii) and argues that truthful emotional response displays right attunement to other persons and things. He opts against a community consensus theory (cf. 174 n.26) but for 'something like' (cf. 172 n.3) a coherence and correspondence theory of emotional truth, which seems to imply that only a limited range of emotions truly responds to a certain situation. Provided that nobody has 'objective' access to the situation 'as such', what could serve as a criterion? Besides, it is questionable whether the concept of intentionality underlying Furtak's theory of emotion still allows for a strict inner/outer distinction.

[28] This distinction is also questioned by Kierkegaard's concept of reduplication: in itself, love goes out of itself.¹⁷ Kierkegaard's spiritual understanding of love does not only concern an 'inner' mental or psychological world that possibly contradicts an 'outer' reality; rather, love is the reality of their relation. Therefore, it is worth discussing whether Furtak rightly modifies the translation of 'aandeligt forstaaet er Kjerligheden Aands-Livets dybeste Grund'¹⁸: While the Hongs translate 'in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground of spiritual life',¹⁹ Furtak changes spiritual into 'mental life' (97; 176 n.46).

[29] Kierkegaard points to an additional problem regarding the ideal of subject-object-correspondence: It might prompt us to look for a lovable object, while the task is to find the once given or chosen 'objects,' i.e. the people we can see – lovable.²⁰ True love is neither verifiable nor dependent on the behavior of the beloved.²¹

[30] But, as Furtak finally remarks: 'At the end of any progress of thought, there is always something else that remains to be said.' (141) His rich and inspiring book raises a lot of important questions and will certainly stimulate further discussion.

16. Cf. Robert S. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1993, 143: 'What we have been calling the "object" of an emotion is in fact only its focus [...] The status of an object as an object of fear or reverence, love or anger, hatred or envy, depends upon its role and its relations in *surreality* as a whole.' [my emphasis].

17. Cf. KW 16, 280.

18. See the new edition: *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter 9: Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*, ed. by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, Copenhagen 2004, 218.

19. KW 16, 215.

20. Cf. KW 16, 159.

21. Cf. KW 16, 13, 16.

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