Kierkegaard on Variation and Thought Experiment

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Abstract

Do thought experiments provide “evidence” or just new mental frameworks? Current accounts of thought experiment turn to theories of reason and explanation rather than perception to explain how thought experiments work. I offer Kierkegaard’s own view of thought experiment, which is influenced by Kantian idealism rather than scientific empiricism. Drawing on philosophical research in aesthetics, I show how all perception is a hybrid of sensory content and conceptual structures. On this Kantian-Kierkegaardian account, thought experiments help us see differently and gain new evidence through new kinds of experiences. My project retrieves the original Danish context of the term “thought experiment” [Tankeexperiment] and offers a new understanding of thought experiments as both sensory and conceptual, like perception itself.

I. Thought Experiments in Philosophy and Science

Much significant work in philosophy depends on a vivid imagination. Recall Frank Jackson’s well-known thought experiment involving Mary the scientist, in which Mary has access to every kind of scientific information about color (its wavelengths, its effects on the brain, the sound of the lungs exhaling in speaking about color) but not the experience of color itself. If she leaves her laboratory and experiences color first-hand, does she gain any new “knowledge” of color?

A thought experiment is not intended to be treated as a real possibility (e.g., whether anyone could build Mary’s room). Rather, such an experiment is enacted in the imagination in order to clarify a concept or component of experience that is otherwise hard to identify and for

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which there may be no physical evidence. It aims to distinguish two elements that may be in fact always co-present but are nevertheless logically distinct—in this case, different types of knowledge. Philosophers use thought experiments often, especially in the Anglo-analytic tradition. Thought experiments have also played an influential role in natural science, including Galileo’s falling objects, Newton’s spinning spheres, and Schrödinger’s cat. Yet when Kierkegaard invents characters and scenarios or tells stories, interpreters are quick to emphasize the poetic aspects of his writing, describing him as working at the boundary of philosophy, perhaps not a philosopher at all. While there are some differences between Kierkegaard’s thought experiments and those of Frank Jackson and Derek Parfit, for example, I will show that Kierkegaard is engaged in a project that is no less philosophically rigorous than theirs. I will argue that, like contemporary philosophers, Kierkegaard uses thought experiments to clarify and distinguish between essential and non-essential relationships.

One difficulty in showing that Kierkegaard is engaged in producing philosophical thought experiments is that there is disagreement among philosophers about what thought experiments show and how they are intended to work. Some philosophers and scientists who use thought experiments may of course be unreflective about their use.

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4 Readers who argue that Kierkegaard is not a philosopher in an ordinary sense include Louis Mackey (see Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) and Jacob Golomb (see “Camus’s Ideal of Authentic Life,” Philosophy Today, vol. 38, no. 3, 1994, pp. 268-277.

5 Some philosophers and scientists who use thought experiments may of course be unreflective about their use.
reasoning. James R. Brown argues the opposite: thought experiments provide new (non-sensory) evidence in the form of intellectual intuitions into eternal (Platonic) logical relationships. Rachel Cooper proposes that thought experiments model hypotheticals (“what ifs”) and test for consistency. There are other accounts as well, including the view that thought experiments are simply experiments, not different in any important way from those performed in the physical world. So whether Kierkegaard is employing thought experiments in a philosophical sense depends in part on what thought experiments really are and how they are intended to work.

It is important, I suggest, that introduction of the term “thought experiment” to scientific and philosophical discussions, though usually credited to Ernst Mach in German [Gedankenexperiment, 1897], was already in use in Danish [Tankeexperiment] in 1811 by Hans Christian Ørsted, a contemporary of Kierkegaard, in commentary on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This point is of more than just historical interest, because the view of thought experiments...
experiments held by Kant and Ørsted (as well as Kierkegaard, I suggest), differs significantly from the view put forward by Mach. Kant and Ørsted held views of nature and perception that can be broadly described as transcendental, while Mach held a positivist, Humean view according to which only sensory data counts as knowledge. For Mach, mathematical and scientific laws are justified only as economic ways of remembering and organizing memories and sensations.\textsuperscript{11} Their views of thought experiments likewise differ along predictable lines. Mach argues that thought experiments provide no new evidence but merely arrange existing sensory inputs for ease of organization and recall. Ørsted, by contrast, appeals to discoveries in geometry, calculus, and physics, emphasizing the role of thought experiments in analyzing concepts.\textsuperscript{12} The passages he refers to in Kant emphasize the role of reason — not just evidence — for scientific progress.

I propose that Edmund Husserl’s imaginative variation, as a development of Kantian transcendental idealism, offers a way of understanding thought experiments that is more consistent with the view we find in Kierkegaard (likely influenced by Ørsted).\textsuperscript{13} The ground for this comparison has been somewhat prepared, as scholars have contrasted Mach’s view with Husserl’s on several points, including on the question of thought experiments.\textsuperscript{14} I will argue here

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\textsuperscript{13} See Witt-Hansen’s general account of Kierkegaard and his contemporaries in “H.C. Ørsted: Immanuel Kant and the Thought Experiment,” 2003.

\textsuperscript{14} Comparisons of Husserl and Mach include McGinn, “Mach and Husserl,” 1972; Kujundzic, “Thought Experiments,” 1995; and Denis Fisette, “Phenomenology and Phenomenalism: Ernst Mach and the Genesis of
that Kierkegaard’s use and view of “thought experiment” [Tankeexperiment] and “imaginary construction” [Experiment] remain within the transcendental idealist tradition, having more in common with Husserl’s phenomenological view than with Mach’s empiricist approach.\textsuperscript{15} In thought experiments, I argue, the imagination does not merely organize existing data but reveals essential relationships.

\textit{II. Husserl’s Imaginative Variation and Kierkegaard’s Experiments}

In Husserl’s formalized method of thought experiment, imaginative variation, Husserl aims to “determine what must necessarily belong to an object in order that it can be an object of this kind.”\textsuperscript{16} I will argue that Kierkegaard is engaged in exactly this project of clarifying what is essential, where his object of inquiry is Christian faith.\textsuperscript{17} For some, Kierkegaard and Husserl make an uneasy pairing. Kierkegaard seeks subjective, actual truth and personal knowledge; Husserl seeks objective, transcendental truth and ideal knowledge. Kierkegaard communicates indirectly through stories and parables; Husserl communicates academically and didactically

\textsuperscript{15} Howard and Edna Hong note as translators that \textit{Tanke-Experiment} is an “unusual” word, but they consistently translate it “imaginary construction in thought.” It was used by Kierkegaard at least in 1839 (SKS 18, 39, EE:71 / KJN 2, [needed**]). And Poul Marten Møller used it at least by 1825, including in the volumes owned by Kierkegaard (see translators’ note, \textit{CUP1}, 114n128). See also translators’ “Historical Introduction” to \textit{Stages on Life’s Way} (SLW, xin22) and W. Glyn Jones, “Søren Kierkegaard and Poul Marten Møller,” \textit{Modern Language Review}, vol. 60, 1965, pp. 73-82, which details the close relationship between Kierkegaard and Møller.


\textsuperscript{17} In the end, Husserl’s view has much in common with analytic and scientific approaches: like contemporary analytic philosophers, he recommends and employs imaginative variation as a tool for clarifying essences (that is, again, essential and non-essential relationships). On the other hand, Husserl offers an alternative view of thought experiment that is not reducible to the main contemporary options (namely, strict rationalism or strict empiricism).
with technical language. And yet they share the goal of clarifying the essence or “eidos” of difficult, meaning-rich objects, and they pursue it, I will argue, by remarkably similar means.¹⁸

A. Husserl’s Imaginative Variation and the Eidetic Reduction

In order to set forward the similarities between Husserl’s imaginative variation and Kierkegaard’s imaginary construction more clearly, I will briefly describe Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, showing that emphasizing existence (Kierkegaard) and turning attention to appearances (Husserl) are not necessarily opposed. First, anticipating one possible objection, I would like to clarify that in Husserl’s phenomenological reduction “existence” in general, including one’s own, is not bracketed; rather, what is set aside or “neutralizes” is our implicit background belief that the world and objects exist independently of our experience of them. It is this statement of belief (Husserl calls it the “general thesis”) that is bracketed in the phenomenological reduction. One’s own perspective, situation, and lived experience are not bracketed; rather, one sets aside preoccupation with the existence of objects in the external world to turn attention to how we are located in it (that is, to perspective, situation, and lived experience). Husserl’s view here is consistent with Kierkegaard’s insistence that all experience includes an implicit sense of self, as recently argued by Patrick Stokes.¹⁹ Sebastian Luft puts this point well concerning Husserl:

¹⁸ It is worth emphasizing that no contributor to Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist is willing to claim as strongly that Kierkegaard is doing phenomenology in the traditional, Husserlian sense. See Jeffrey Hanson, “Introduction,” Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist: An Experiment, ed. by Jeffrey Hanson, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 2010, p. xi.
The natural attitude consists in viewing the world as “nature,” as existing independent of an experiencing agent. This belief Husserl calls the general thesis of the natural attitude, and it is a constant anonymous “stating as existing,” for it is so fundamental that it is never actually uttered. It is comparable to a constant sound that the ear blocks out. In Husserl’s words: “It is, after all, something that lasts continuously throughout the whole duration of the [natural] attitude, i.e., throughout natural waking life.” Thus, the epoché, as putting the general thesis out of action, can be seen as making explicit this constant base line “below” the “natural” hearing level. The epoché does in no way devaluate or negate it, but rather puts it out of action momentarily in order to pay attention to that which remains unbracketed.20

The phenomenological reduction does not ignore existence in favor of pure, abstract reflection, as it might initially seem, but rather sets aside one feature of our default attitude toward our world (our belief in its existence independent of experience) in order to clarify how the world appears, including the origins of this belief.21 How the world appears includes a variety of features we are used to associating with concreteness and existence, including emotion, ethical responsibility, and embodiment. Phenomenologists have not hesitated to examine such concrete experiences phenomenologically.22

Beyond the phenomenological reduction, the similarities between Kierkegaard’s method and Husserl’s are clearest in considering Husserl’s eidetic reduction, which is performed through

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imaginative variation as a means of distilling an essential identity. Richard Tieszen describes four steps for Husserl’s imaginative variation, which he sees also at work in geometry:

The method of ideation is composed of the following moments: (1) one starts with an example or ‘model’; (2) one actively produces and runs through a multiplicity of variations of the example; (3) one finds that an overlapping coincidence occurs as a ‘synthetic unity’ through the formation of the variants; and (4) one actively identifies this synthetic unity as an invariant through the variations.\(^{23}\)

In Tieszen’s example of a translation along a number line \((P_x' = P_x + a)\), distance between the points and direction remain invariant. He describes these invariants as “necessities through all the changes.” He goes on to say, “The essence is that which all of the variations have in common. It is that which remains invariant through all of the variations. The method is supposed to bring about an awareness of something that one might not have had otherwise or it will at least make us explicitly aware of something that may have been only implicit in our experience.”\(^{24}\)

Recognizing an invariant, importantly, requires a “higher level” understanding that is not available “within” one of the other layers: at the simplest level, all the points vary with any change: no one of them is constant. The recognition that nevertheless something has remained the same is what Husserl calls an “identity synthesis”: it occurs across different mental activities occurring at different times.\(^ {25}\) This invariant feature can then be taken as singular (i.e., treated as a unity). Tieszen puts it rather poetically: “The idea is that in the midst of all of our free variations we will come up against certain constraints, as though we have a swirling sea of changes around some islands of permanence.”\(^ {26}\)


\(^{24}\) Tieszen, 156.

\(^{25}\) Tieszen, 156.

\(^{26}\) Tieszen, 156.
Kierkegaard’s method fits the first two steps of Tieszen’s account well: (1) begin with a model, and (2) vary it.27 Johannes de Silentio obviously does this with the story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, correlating to the different ways in which a mother can wean a child in the “Exordium” I-IV. Climacus does it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with characters such as Socrates, the wise and simple wise person, the humorist, the poet, the robber in the wig, and others who embody different spheres and border territories. For each character or type, Climacus leaves some key component of faith in place while varying others (e.g., the dependence on inwardness for Socrates). In *Stages on Life’s Way*, which I discuss in more detail below, Frater Taciturnus (the imaginary constructor) performs this kind of variation with the characters of his imaginary construction (Quidam and his fiancée). Frater Taciturnus clearly wants readers to accomplish the last step of Tieszen’s method—that is, to actively identify a unity, present but implicit, that is likely invisible from “within” (i.e., to the characters, as is the case with a Greek tragedy (as Taciturnus discusses at length).28 But what kind of implicit “overlapping coincidence” are we seeking for the third step?

Tieszen’s description of synthetic unity perpetuates a common misunderstanding about essence and identity in Husserl. For Husserl, as for Kant, a synthetic unity need not be an “overlapping coincidence,” or something that straightforwardly remains the same at all levels.

27 See for example the subtitle in *Stages*: “What is Unhappy Love, What is the Variant in the Imaginary Construction?” (*SKS* 6, 375 / *SLW*, 404).
Tieszen here notes that the point in common may be *teleological*—something aimed-for—rather than present “in” any one of variations, let alone common to all of them. In the example of translation along a line, all the numbers change, but the relation between them (the distance between each number) remains the same. That distance is not contained or represented in any specific number or set of numbers. In different kinds of translations, we have to look higher—that is, more abstractly—for the invariant (e.g. translations involving multiplication, where even the distance between numbers is not constant but the direction of increase or decrease remains the same). Such translations require more capacity for ideality to spot the invariant since it is not “in” any example.29 Tieszen acknowledges this teleological option in describing geometric figures such as a perfectly straight line. He writes: “Our technical abilities to create a perfectly straight line, a perfectly flat surface, and so on, reach certain limits. The ideal of perfection, however, can be pushed beyond that, even further. . .Here we obtain an exactness that is denied to us in the intuitively given surrounding world.”30 Such a teleological pole is nowhere present but rather held in mind, as with a Kantian regulative ideal. Tieszen seems to offer teleological unity as a special case, but for some Husserl scholars, identity is always like this: not something present merely in many examples but “constituted,” he would say, *through* them, in the activity of variation itself.31 An eidos is attained through teleological thinking not as a direct intuition.

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29 “. . .what remains invariant is a function of the kinds of transformations or variations we make” (Tieszen, 158). “We should therefore distinguish different levels of invariants in relation to different groups of variations” (158). This example fits well, and perhaps serves as an elaboration of, the example in *Concept of Anxiety*, where Haufniensis writes that some people are only able to recognize how to do a geometry problem when the angles are labeled ABC but not when they are DEF (SKS 4, 440 / CA, 139-140). Such a character appears to be missing exactly a tolerance for variation.

30 Tieszen writes, “Out of the praxis of perfecting we can understand that in pressing toward the horizons of conceivable perfecting certain ‘limit shapes’ emerge toward which the series of perfecting tends, toward invariant and never attainable poles. As a further, less quantitative example, we can think of the designation of an object as “tall” (Tieszen, 167). Two tall objects (e.g., a tall person and a tall mountain) may have no physical features in common, including their height. And yet in context we can meaningfully describe each as “tall.”

(some kind of magical or mystical insight) but as a reflective, critical grasp of that toward which the activity of variation aims.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition to being a more coherent and defensible interpretation of Husserl, this second view is also more Kierkegaardian. In \textit{Stages}, Frater Taciturnus describes his imaginary construction as teleological, with a synthetic unity he cannot himself grasp but supposes must be there. He encounters many aspects, but the center remains inaccessible to him. He writes: “I have now very briefly made the rounds of my imaginary construction. I am continually circling it, for I certainly do grasp the unity of the comic and the tragic, but I do not understand from where he has the higher passion, which is religious.”\textsuperscript{33} He circles it, he says, through variations. He writes: “Thus a task emerges that every poet must reject but that still has its significance, a task that can be varied in many ways, and one of these variations I have chosen in my imaginary psychological construction.”\textsuperscript{34} The character of Quidam is constructed just as Husserl would propose: by beginning with an example and modifying a key element with a view toward illuminating its core essence. In this case, Frater Taciturnus begins with poetic unity (an ideal synthesis grasped by the audience but invisible to the hero) and varies it. Quidam’s obstacle is internal rather than external, so not only the solution but the problem is hidden.

In these examples, Kierkegaard’s imaginary constructions anticipate Husserl’s method of imaginative variation. More encompassing even than irony, imaginary construction is found in both signed and pseudonymous works, though in different ways, as I show below. The images in

\textsuperscript{32} My view differs from Stokes’ in that he puts the focus on first-person consciousness. While consciousness is required to synthesize similarity among variations (e.g., my awareness that Descartes’ wax is the same over time) it is the \textit{wax} that is identical.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{SKS} 6, 406 / \textit{SLW}, 435.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{SKS} 6, 385 / \textit{SLW}, 413.
each case are not merely metaphorical but dialectical, directed at discovering “islands of permanence” in a “swirling sea of changes.”

C. Imaginative Variation in Stages on Life’s Way

In Stages on Life’s Way, imaginative variation works at multiple levels: (1) within a given section, and (2) in the full work as bound together by “Hilarius Bookbinder.” In the single section “In Vino Veritas,” for example, one invariant through the contradictory speeches on love is the relation of the individual to the universal (here, an individual woman to womanhood and reality to an ideal type). Ideality is stipulated from the beginning, certainly in the quest for a perfect banquet but also in the call for speeches: “love affairs, however, should not be related, but indeed they might very well be the basis of the point of view.”35 We can then compare the set of speeches as a unit with reality (within the limits of the work), as occurs on the guests’ journey home when they encounter the Judge and his wife over breakfast in their garden. In their happiness in their marriage, they show themselves at ease in the universal, but also in their topic of conversation, which is their long-term goals (or goals the Judge’s wife imagines he has) in comparison to their actual lives. At the end of this conversation, the narrator includes a comment about a ballad playing in the background: “The words of the ballad were momentarily audible; just as the pattern in the fabric in a loom becomes visible and disappears again, so the words faded away again into the humming of the melody of the ballad. . .”36 The Judge’s journal stolen by Victor Eremita, “Some Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections by a Married Man,”

35 SKS 6, 35 / SLW, 31.
36 SKS 6, 83 / SLW, 84.
adds to the earlier conversation as an abstract discussion of love, marriage, and their virtues, but
as spoken by an individual who has a teleological ideal: “I am continually aiming at marriage.”

“‘Guilty?’ / ‘Not Guilty?’” requires a still higher level of ideality, as the topic (goal) being varied
is no longer ideality on its own but secrecy, where even explanation becomes deception.

Ideality must be understood and aimed at by each individual. How can it then be the basis for a
marriage, or what they have in common? In “Letter to the Reader,” Frater Taciturnus makes
clear that he has been seeking to clarify the religious by lingering with some of its elements,
particularly repentance, because “a composer of imaginary constructions can afford the time.”

These are not filled-out fictional characters but representative types, elements in a dialectic, and
the fiancée especially is described in such a way as to bring out certain feature of Quidam and to
exacerbate the problem of communication (that is, of ideality that cannot be communicated).

But why can it not be communicated? Phenomenologists would describe the universal,
ideal components that must be recognized by individual minds as the “categorial” elements of
experience, following Kant. Categoriality cannot be pointed to because it is not an object but the
structure or pattern of an object; yet it must be understood and performed by each person
individually in order for them to understand one another. Terms like “edible” and “useful” only
make sense within a context (as Heidegger would say, in a world held together by projects).

This phenomenological perspective lends a new hue to Kierkegaard’s familiar language: it is not
“concreteness” or “individuality” or even “existence” that are of interest to Kierkegaard.
Concrete objects are easy to express intersubjectively and objectively (e.g., by pointing). They

37 SKS 6, 160 / SLW, 172.
38 SKS 6, 321 / SLW, 345.
39 SKS 6, 413 / SLW, 447.
40 SKS 6, 371 / SLW, 400.
become difficult to talk about when not merely referred to as individuals by when mediated through universals, as exemplifying an ideal or as part of a wider whole.

Frater Taciturnus continually praises imaginary construction for being able to unify the tragic and comic, which he celebrates Socrates for achieving in his own life:

Socrates, on the other hand, was the most unpopular man in Greece because he said the same thing as the simplest person but meant infinitely much by it. To be able to stick to one thought, to stick to it with ethical passion and undauntedness of spirit, to see the intrinsic duplexity of this one thought with the same impartiality, and at one and the same time to see the most profound earnestness and the greatest jest, the deepest tragedy and highest comedy—this is unpopular in any age for anyone who has not realized that immediacy is over.  

This “intrinsic duplexity” is the reason for the outward invisibility of person like Socrates: he could say outwardly the same as everyone else but mean something entirely different. That difference would only be discernible internally, through an awareness of the dialectical process that could bring someone back to the same place in an entirely new way, with a radically different goal. These variations set the stage for the different directions that are explored in other works: the ironist, who sits sadly outside of life and is unable to join it, and the teleological progressions (through humor, for example) toward the religious, where the religious person would be so hidden as to be indistinguishable from everyone else, outwardly the same and yet absolutely different for having a different telos.

Such a telos must be actively constituted. It is part of the phenomenological realization that a world does not simply exist but is constituted by a subject. The unity of the disparate components of, and pseudonyms within, Stages on Life’s Way likewise depends on constituting it

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42 SKS 6, 385 / SLW, 415.
43 This effect of dialectic, and a risk of mediation, is a main theme in Postscript. There is a danger that people will skip right to the end, bypassing the “absolute disjunction” (SKS 7, 380-81/ CUP, 418-419).
a certain way, as contributing to an overarching whole. A reader may, of course, fail to constitute that unity. Kierkegaard represents such an alternative in the preface through the bookbinder, who binds together the pages loosely (in a merely physical, outward sense) and has his children use the words for practice in reading and handwriting. In such an exercise, no one activates the words or constitutes any meaning with their guidance. They lack any arc or direction.

**D. Imaginative Variation in Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses**

In addition to works like *Stages on Life’s Way* which discuss imaginary construction explicitly, Kierkegaard uses imaginary construction or variation in signed religious writings. Various signed works make use of images, of course (cf. *The Lily of the Field and the Birds of the Air*, the water imagery in *Purity of Heart*, and the tree with deep roots in *Works of Love*). But even works that include less concrete imagery exemplify the kind of imaginative variation Husserl describes. For example, “Every Good and Perfect Gift is From Above,” in *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (1843), traces the changing understanding of those words in a hypothetical reader and then adds: “But how do you read this? Are not the words still the same; have they ever said anything other than what you now think you have discerned, because of which you forget what they add?” Faith attains a different understanding, beyond such changes:

First of all, the apostle pulls away the veil of darkness, removes the shadows of variation, breaks through the shifting of change, and turns the believer’s eyes up toward heaven so that he may set his eyes on that which is above (Colossians 3:1-2), for that which is above certainly must appear in all its eternal glory as

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44 SKS 6, 12 // SLW, 4.
45 SKS 5, 136 // EUD, 133.
raised above all doubt, the Father of lights, whose clarity no shadow changes, no shifting varies, no envy
eclipses, no cloud snatches away from the believer’s eyes. If this is not firmly set, if in this regard you want
to put your trust in doubt’s false friendship, then very soon doubt will repeatedly change everything for you
with its shadows, confuse it with its variations, obscure it with the fogs of night, take everything away from
you as if it had not been. This is why the apostle declares: Every good gift and every perfect gift is from
above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shadow of variation.46

By proceeding from a childlike understanding (that God gives good gifts) through an adult
realization (that “you who are evil” includes all humans), the hypothetical reader is able to attain
a view of what is unchanging: the goodness of God.47 The ordinary, concrete situation of giving
gifts to one’s children takes on new (and darker) meaning in light of the apostolic
pronouncement that only God’s gifts are truly good. The conclusion is arrived at through
dialectical variations that create a new context for the comparison between God and earthly
fathers. Everything seen in relation to its source becomes good through that relation. But that
relation only comes to be recognized as the central one through a series of variations, each
building on the other, until what is essentially “good” about a good and perfect gift becomes
clear. While Kierkegaard does not use the term “imaginary construction” [Experiment] to
describe this dialectical progression, it clearly fits the same phenomenological structure: begin
with a concrete situation and vary it to find what is essentially unchangeable.

III. Traditional Interpretations

47 “The need itself is a good and perfect gift from God, and the prayer about it is a good and perfect gift through
God, and the communication of it is a good and perfect gift from above, which comes down from the Father of
lights, with whom there is no change or shadow of variation” (SKS 5, 142 / EUD, 139).
The far-reaching similarity between Kierkegaard’s method and Husserl’s has been overlooked for two different reasons, I suggest. The first is that many readers of Kierkegaard have engaged only indirectly with phenomenology through the work of later thinkers who are critical of Husserl, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. These later thinkers tend to be critical of classical phenomenology, emphasizing its limits for gaining knowledge of God and inability to substitute for divine revelation. Reading through Marion, Levinas, and Derrida can lead to the impression that classical phenomenology claims more than it actually does. For example, George Pattison emphasizes Kierkegaard’s “repeated protest against the claims of human reason—whether purely philosophical or theological—to understand or offer insight into either the existence or the meaning of God.” 48 He goes on to explain that, if faith is a relationship to God, who is “incognito,” then faith “will itself be concealed from the eye of philosophical discernment.” 49 He concludes:

[O]n the Kierkegaardian view of religion, there would seem to be no form of religion that can offer guarantees on its own behalf or that could vouch for the ontological status of the God-relationship on which it rested. . .To put it in phenomenological terms, the intentional structure of the religious consciousness resists fundamental clarification, and both the ontological and epistemological claims implied by the phenomenon of religious belief are, on the believer’s own terms, undecidable.50

This declaration in context implies that phenomenology would, in comparison, aim to offer some proof of God’s existence.51 Pattison then adds, “It is hard to see how phenomenology might

49 Pattison, p. 192.
50 Pattison, p. 193.
51 Westphal makes the same kind of rhetorical move when he argues that for Kierkegaard and Levinas, an experiencer is open to meanings that do not match her presuppositions. For Husserl, the only non-negotiable presuppositions are transcendental and irrelevant for the kinds of moral shifts Westphal emphasizes; everything else for Husserl, as established through experience, can be changed by experience as well. For a discussion of Husserl’s potential contributions to theology, see Steven W. Laycock and James G. Hart, eds., Essays in Phenomenological Theology (Albany: SUNY, 1986), pp. 89-169.
decide whether such a person was authentically fulfilling human possibilities or falling into a particularly contorted version of bad faith.”52 Given phenomenology’s focus on universal structures, this is obviously not the kind of question phenomenology, or philosophy, would claim to answer (any more than philosophy of perception can tell me whether what I am looking at is really a cat). Moreover, Kierkegaard himself (in pseudonymous and signed works) certainly does expend effort toward clarifying the “intentional structure of religious consciousness,” most obviously in psychological works like *Sickness unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, where religious consciousness is contrasted with types of despair. Focusing on what phenomenology cannot do distracts from the ways in which Kierkegaard is engaged in the straightforwardly phenomenological task of clarifying the essence of faith.

A second reason that affinities between Husserl and Kierkegaard may be overlooked is that Kierkegaard’s images and characters are often associated with literary fiction, the Romantic imagination, and aesthetics in general, as suggested above. But Kierkegaard, as I will show, does not always or even usually describe “imaginary construction” [*Experiment*] as poetic or literary. The pseudonymous authors of thought experiments treat them instead as intensely philosophical. Johannes Climacus, a speculative philosopher, engages in the sustained “thought project” [*Tanke-Projekt*] of *Philosophical Fragments*.53 Frater Taciturnus, a metaphysician, puts forward the “imaginary psychological construction” [*psychologiske Experiment*] in *Stages on Life’s Way*.54 There is no obvious reason to apply literary rather than epistemological concepts to make sense of such experiments.55 Without denying the literary and aesthetic value of Kierkegaard’s

52 Pattison, p. 205.
53 *SKS* 4, 218 / *PF*, 9.
54 *SKS* 6, 173 / *SLW*, 185.
55 Frater Taciturnus does emphasize his imaginary construction as pointing toward the unity of the comic and the tragic, which are certainly aesthetic categories. On the other hand, Taciturnus is not himself an artist or a literary author but instead someone who, like Hegel, sets out dialectical progression in plain view.
writing, it is important to recognize ways in which they are also systematic and philosophically rigorous.

IV. Hypothetical and Actual Experiments: Anticipating Objections

A possible objection to taking imaginative variation to be Kierkegaard’s overarching philosophical method is that imaginary construction often has negative connotations in Kierkegaard’s own writings. It can be a cheap way of experimenting with life while avoiding the passionate commitment of actuality. Discussing Socrates and Hegel in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard writes that “all such virtues have reality for the individual only as imaginary constructions. He stands freely above them, can dispense with them when he wants to, and insofar as he does not do so, it is because he does not want to, but that he does not want to is again because he does not want to—he never feels a deeper commitment to them than that.” He goes on to describe such virtue, insofar as it is a mere imaginary construction, as failing to involve the “individual’s earnestness” and an “arbitrary exercise” that, as such, “essentially lacks earnestness and is nothing other than Sophistry in the realm of action.”56 It seems the road to passionate commitment leads away from imaginary construction, not through it. Similarly, in a discussion of death in *Phaedo* in the same text, Kierkegaard critiques irony for proposing everything as a mere “hypothesis,” using the same Danish word *Experiment* that was earlier translated as “imaginary construction.” He writes, “But what expressly characterizes irony is the abstract standard by which it levels everything, by which it controls every inordinate emotion,

56 *SKS* 1, 272n / *CI*, 230n.
thus does not set the pathos of enthusiasm against the fear of death but finds that it is a curious hypothesis [Experiment] to surmise total extinction in this way."

There are no surprises here so far, except to English speakers on finding that one term in Danish, Experiment, commonly translated as “imaginary construction,” is the same one translated as “hypothesis.” It is elsewhere translated by the Hongs as “test,” “venture,” and (perhaps not so surprisingly) “experiment.” Why not standardly translate it back the same way? The single instance where the Hongs translate the Experiment as “experiment” is a critique of A in Either/Or, where Judge William writes, “But basically this is an outrageous lie, for you do not want to act at all; you want to experiment, and you regard everything from this point of view, with the utmost effrontery.” In this scene A overhears a woman exclaim, “If I only had five rix-dollars!” Then A appears, walking toward her with the money held out. The Judge complains, “If I had had five rix-dollars, I perhaps would also have given them to her, but I would also have been conscious that I was not involved in an experiment.” Despite the inconsistent translations, the results so far point the same direction: “experiments,” “hypotheses,” and “imaginary constructions” are opposed to earnest involvement.

Yet other passages in Either/Or, Postscript, and elsewhere characterize imaginary construction more neutrally. According to Climacus, imaginary construction is harmless as long as it does not attempt to substitute for reality. He explains that he is always careful not to become “guilty of the paralogism of inferring from the hypothetical to being. . .My imaginary construction is as innocent and as far removed from offending anyone as possible, because it

57 SKS 1, 137 / CI, 275.
58 Adding the term “imaginary,” for example to the subtitle of Stages on Life’s Way, is quite condescending to English speakers, as if Danish speakers would recognize that Frater Taciturnus’ “Psychological Experiment” did not involve real people but British and American readers need to be told this.
59 SKS 3, 24 / EO2, 15.
60 SKS 3, 22 / EO2, 13.
does not come too close [for near] to anyone by saying of him that he is the religious person and does not offend [fornaerme] anyone by denying that he is.\textsuperscript{61} When it does not displace reality, imaginary construction is a useful tool.

The inconsistent renderings of \textit{Experiment} may make it harder for readers of English translations (myself included) to understand characterizations of imaginary construction as an escape from reality together with examples where it engaged with actuality. The above street “experiment” in which A delivers money to a surprised woman in some sense makes a plaything out of her request, but it is nevertheless an experiment that occurs in actuality, with observable results. In other words, it is not merely a conceptual hypothesis but the \textit{result of testing} such a hypothesis in the real world. Johannes the Seducer uses “experiment” in this observational, scientific way in \textit{Either/Or} when he describes a test he performs on Cordelia. “Last evening,” he writes, “by means of a test [\textit{Experiment}], I wanted to assure myself of the resilience of her soul.”\textsuperscript{62} In the experiment, he gives Edward books to leave with Cordelia and then later selects passages to read aloud in her presence, apparently spontaneously. Cordelia’s visible response is not a hypothesis in possibility but an observation in actuality, the results of the test. Elsewhere in \textit{Either/Or}, A again uses “experiment” to mean as an intrusion on actuality. He writes: “I do not actually exist for her, not in the sense of a negative relationship but in the sense of no relationship at all. As yet I have risked no venture [\textit{Experiment}].”\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Experiment} does not signify

\textsuperscript{61} SKS 7, 464 / CUP1, 511-12.
\textsuperscript{62} SKS 2, 353 / EO1, 364.
\textsuperscript{63} SKS 2, 314 / EO1, 344. It is especially awkward to translate \textit{Experiment} as “venture” since in \textit{Postscript} Climacus writes, “Let us venture an imaginary construction in thought” [\textit{Lad os endogsaa vove et Tankeexperiment}] (SKS 7, 110 / CUP1, 114). Hannay’s translation is as follows: “Let us go to the length of risking a thought-experiment” (Hannay, 2009, p. 97). For the Hongs, having added “imaginary” ordinary uses of \textit{Experiment}, any translation of \textit{Tankeexperiment} implies oddly that there might be “imaginary constructions” not in thought and, oddly and unnecessarily, ruling out that Kierkegaard might want to talk about “experiments” that are not merely imaginary.
mere possibility but an observable event: a risk in actuality. “Imaginary construction” implies mere possibility, but *Experiment* can encompass both.

The Hong translation of *Experiment* as “imaginary construction” may also incline readers in English to view imaginary constructions, including thought experiments (“imaginary constructions in thought”), aesthetically or poetically rather than philosophically. Yet “‘Guilty?’ / ‘Not Guilty?’” as an imaginary construction is produced by Frater Taciturnus, a self-described metaphysician, and is aesthetically quite boring, as Frater Taciturnus readily admits. The fine-tuned portrayal is demanded by dialectics, not poetics.\(^6\) Philosophically, it adds important nuance to interpretations of *Fear and Trembling*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *Either/Or*—namely, that it is the *ideal* in this case (the ethical and religious demand) felt by Quidam that he cannot communicate to his fiancée. Each individual’s inner life is invisible to others, and there are no universals or ideals without an inner life in which we form concepts. In contrast with *Fear and Trembling*, there is no trouble communicating the concrete or immediate between lovers, including passion; it is the abstract and universal that cannot, in this case, be shared.\(^6\)

And yet, *Stages on Life’s Way* reveals them. Quidam’s journal is constructed by Frater Taciturnus in such a way as to reveal and clarify the interior, dialectical movements of consciousness.\(^6\) He writes that imaginary construction stretches the conceptual movements in space and time. The aesthetic, he claims, is just the ethical stage at a slower speed. “With the aid of opera glasses,” he writes, “it can be shown and seen even by the myopic that the hero

\(^6\) SKS 6, 369 / SLW, 398.

\(^6\) Passion is treated as an observable symptom by Quidam, for example at SKS 6, 325 / SLW 349.

\(^6\) Taciturnus writes: “In my imaginary construction [*Experiment*], I have chosen protestation; in this way the double-movements show up most clearly” (SKS 6, 387 / SLW, 414).
conquers. . .”67 In contrast with Fear and Trembling, as noted above, the ethical is the object that cannot be represented, because justice is demanded at “boundless speed,” not stretched out over five acts.68 And while we might think of the religious as more hidden than the ethical (as in Fear and Trembling, where Abraham cannot communicate his action, and in Postscript, where religiousness is associated with hiddenness, Taciturnus here describes the religious as performing the same task as the aesthetic —that is, of making the ethical visible. Taciturnus states: “The religious then plays the same role as the aesthetic, but as the superior; it spaces out the limitless speed of the ethical, and development takes place. But the scene is in the internal, in thoughts and dispositions that cannot be seen, not even with a night telescope.”69 While a person’s inner life cannot be made visible in the ordinary way, through physical senses, it can be stretched out and presented dialectically in an imaginary construction, and this is what Taciturnus has done through Quidam.

While works of art may do this work of making visible (as a play that represents ethical ideals in five acts), it need not be the only method. I suggest that what Kierkegaard —in this and other works —develops a new, more Husserlian (less Hegelian) view of “dialectic.” For Hegel, dialectic is a process that individuals and cultures walk through in history. It is “actual” in a (philosophically) uninteresting sense of empirically occurring. For Kierkegaard, “dialectic” is instead an inner, mental process of logically unpacking, clarifying, and understanding a multi-layered meaningful object, and it can happen for any individual at any moment in history. Like the unfolding of history in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, however, we are dealing with an “object” of inquiry that includes layers of meaning and possibilities that are not simply “there” in

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67 SKS 6, 411 / SLW, 441.
68 SKS 6, 411 / SLW, 441.
69 SKS 6, 409 / SLW, 442.
a physical sense but rather contributed by consciousness, like the perfection of a line or the usefulness of a tool. Language makes such categorial meaning possible and communicable, implying trust in other minds to perform the same (kinds of) mental acts while recognizing that each individual must actually do so.70

Anticipating a second possible objection, I note that the claim that imaginative variation is Kierkegaard’s method as an author does not imply that imaginative variation is equivalent to faith. How could it be, since the pseudonyms are able to do it but do not, they say, have faith? Frater Taciturnus says: “I look at the religious position from all sides, and to that extent I continually have one more side than the sophist, who sees only one side, but what makes me a sophist is that I do not become a religious person.”71 On the other hand, Kierkegaard continually emphasizes that faith is a dialectical attainment (i.e., a second or higher immediacy). It is fairly uncontroversial to describe faith as a new standpoint, and imaginary construction is one way of adjusting one’s point of view or motivating others to do so. He also praises those who are able to sustain identity through variations and frequently mocks those who fail to do such as the robber with the wig in Postscript (a story he tells twice), the math student in Concept of Anxiety who can do the problem when it is marked ABC but not DEF.72 The ability to sustain a grasp of identity through such variations is an important skill, almost a moral virtue.

70 Robert Sokolowski gives the following description, “Besides the act of presentation and the act of reference, Husserl says that there is still another act which is required, an experience of the identity of the object both as referred to and as presented. This synthesizing act is the act of fulfillment or saturation, the act in which we experience the sameness of what we refer to and what we perceive.” See Sokolowski, “Husserl’s Concept of Categorical Intuition,” Phenomenology and the Human Sciences (Supplement to Philosophical Topics), vol. 12, 1981, pp. 134-135. Thanks to Joseph Hill, S.J., for this reference through his paper “Husserl’s Notion of Categorical Intuition in the Logical Investigations,” unpublished. Whether the “same” mental act can be performed is a point of disagreement between Husserl and Derrida.
71 SKS 6, 447 / SLW, 485.
72 SKS 4, 440 / CA, 139-140.
The theme of identity through variation appears throughout Kierkegaard’s writings. David Gouwens discusses this important work of imagination in his study of *Repetition*, where an individual is able to

\[\ldots\] split himself up into every possible variation of himself, and nevertheless in such a way that every variation is still himself. Only the imagination [Phantasi] is awakened to his dream about the personality; everything else is still fast asleep. In such a self-vision of the imagination, the individual is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape is invisibly present and therefore is not satisfied to cast one shadow, but the individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself. And yet the personality is not discerned, and its energy is betokened only in the passion of possibility.\(^73\)

Here Constantin Constantius seems to want it both ways: each possible variation is “still himself,” and yet “the personality is not discerned.” Where contemporary readers like John Davenport might emphasize the need for willed commitment to choose between them, I think what Constantin describes here instead is a need for flexible unity, or a tolerance for — and ability to recognize — stable identity through change: my “actual shape is invisibly present” — hinted at — in *every* shadow. In fact, Gouwens goes on to describe the imagination not just as a multiplicity of possibilities but as what enables a higher unity. Possibility gives the hint of an idea (that is, an ideal essence) that might tie everything together.\(^74\) When we read with this Husserlian teleological model of uncovering identity through change, it begins to look like Kierkegaard is nearly always going about the phenomenological task of identifying essential unities through change as well as praising this ability, or criticizing its lack, in individuals.


I have shown ways in which Kierkegaard’s use and discussion of thought experiment anticipate Husserl’s method of imaginative variation. For both Kierkegaard and Husserl, clarifying an essence, the result of imaginative variation, differs in important ways from arguing for a conclusion. Husserl insists that being presented with something in a certain way is not equivalent to inferring something about it. Thought experiments in contemporary Anglo-analytic philosophy generally do, by contrast, provide evidence for a stated claim; this may be why an account like Norton’s, according to which thought experiments can be written as arguments, sounds plausible (at least initially) in that context. Thought experiments in contemporary analytic philosophy are rarely teleological in the way Taciturnus describes, as pointing toward an unfinished unity. Discussing Mary’s room, Jackson states: “It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false.” Kierkegaardian thought experiments, like the Husserlian process of clarifying an essence, offer a new way of seeing that remains teleological: it can always be further determined and must remain open to revision. Yet even in analytic thought experiments like Jackson’s, the evidence for the truth of the conclusion cannot be directly stated: it depends on enacting the experiment for oneself imaginatively, in the mind of each individual experimenter. Mental enactment is what makes a thought experiment a true

75 Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” p. 130.
experiment rather than just a hypothesis yet to be tested. The evidence occurs inwardly for each person who enacts it in imagination.