

Kierkegaard, Shaftesbury, and the “Vis Comica”: Mood and the comic from The Concept of Anxiety to The Book on Adler
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Abstract

Kierkegaard suggests in *The Concept of Anxiety* that the comic is the “enemy” of “the absence or falsification of mood [*Stemning*]”—a capacity that, one year later, in *Stages on Life’s Way*, Kierkegaard will call “*vis comica*,” or comic power. In this article, I clarify what Kierkegaard means by this in light of theories of some of Kierkegaard’s Danish contemporaries and in relation to Shaftesbury’s early-eighteenth-century writings on humor and mood. I argue that this helps us to make sense not only of what Kierkegaard says about the comic but also of what he *does* with the comic, particularly in the period between *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Book on Adler*, one of Kierkegaard’s most satirical texts. By interpreting this text as an expression of the relationship between the comic and mood that he suggested in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Stages on Life’s Way*, we can see Kierkegaard using the comic propaedeutically as he attempts to lead the reader to embrace the tragic with joy.

Key Words: Kierkegaard, Shaftesbury, Adler, humor, comic, mood, emotion, enthusiasm, idealism

Introduction

While it is tempting to regard Kierkegaard as either a critic of reason in the name of passion and the absurd, or else as a denouncer of the role of mood within philosophy in the name of ethical earnestness, neither of these caricatures is accurate. A careful look at Kierkegaard’s writings from *The Concept of Anxiety* to *The Book on Adler* shows that one of Kierkegaard’s central concerns is to uphold the value of mood while disciplining it with the *vis comica*, using the comic as a way of embracing the tragic with joy.

Kierkegaard uses the term “*vis comica*” to refer to the capacity for the comic to purify “the pathos-filled emotions” and the capacity for these pathos-filled emotions to “give substance to the comic” (Kierkegaard 1988, p. 366 [vol. 6, p. 340]).² The comic purifies pathos by helping one to view suffering in light of the ideal, thus keeping one from getting mired in tragic suffering, while the heaviness of tragic pathos gives enough gravity to the comic to keep it from floating adrift in the clouds. Thus the comic perspective can make one’s own suffering light without making light *of* suffering.

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² All citations of Kierkegaard’s works will include a reference to both the English translation and the Danish text. Unless otherwise noted, the reference to the parallel Danish text will appear in brackets and refers to *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (1997-2013).

This mutually beneficial relationship between the pathetic and the comic expresses Kierkegaard's conception of the unity of the tragic and the comic. Objectively, the comic and the tragic are indistinct. Both are the result of the contradiction between ideality and actuality. What separates them, for Kierkegaard, is how this contradiction is experienced and viewed subjectively. If the contradiction is experienced from the point of view of "the way out" (the precise meaning of which is highly ambiguous in Kierkegaard's text and will be discussed in the course of this paper) then the contradiction is experienced as "painless," and thus as comic. If the contradiction is experienced without an exit in view, then the contradiction is experienced as tragic suffering. Within this unity, however, Kierkegaard views the tragic as that which gives the comic legitimacy.

In contrast to the tragicomic philosophies of his contemporaries, such as Heiberg and Martensen, Kierkegaard prioritizes the tragic and associates it with religiousness. The religious life—the highest life for Kierkegaard—begins with a choice for the tragic, an embrace of the suffering that attends actuality's distance from the ideal, while nevertheless keeping the comic within sight. Significantly, this comitragic view relates to suffering otherwise than does the tragicomic view of Kierkegaard's contemporaries. Whereas the tragicomic view *tolerates* suffering in light of a belief in the inevitability of history's happy ending, Kierkegaard's comitragic view *receives* suffering joyfully as an ultimately positive gift.

This can be seen in Kierkegaard's drafts for a work he never published on the Hegel scholar Adolph Peter Adler, who experienced what he described as a dramatic conversion from Hegelianism. While applauding Adler's emotional enthrallment (*Grebethed*), Kierkegaard points out that Adler expresses this enthrallment comically as an undisciplined mood of religious enthusiasm within which a latent Hegelian, tragicomic perspective can be detected. Employing the *vis comica*, Kierkegaard exposes the comedy of Adler's undisciplined comic perspective and tempers its excited mood as he guides the reader into a comitragic view of ethical-religious earnestness. Simultaneously, however, Kierkegaard was writing in other works about the "joy" to be found in suffering. Evidently, then, the religious suffering of comitragedy does not exclude the possibility of a life characterized by the mood of joy. In this article I elaborate on that possibility as we see the *vis comica* in action.

1. Humor and mood

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, published under the last-minute pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis,³ Kierkegaard writes that the comic is the “enemy” of “the absence or falsification of mood [*Stemning*]” (1980a, p. 14 n. [vol. 4, p. 322 n.]—a capacity that Kierkegaard will later call the *vis comica*, or comic power (1988, p. 47 [vol. 6, p. 50]; 1988, pp. 366-367 [vol. 6, p. 340]). What it means for a mood to be “absent” is clear enough, but what does it mean for a mood to be falsified? A mood might be uncomfortable or unhealthy, but *made* false? Since we are not accustomed to speaking about mood in a veridical sense, let us take a moment to understand what Haufniensis means. For Haufniensis, a mood is false if it is supposed to express a concept for which it is ill-suited. We are familiar with this in everyday life: relatives of the deceased display too much merriment in front of the somber widower, thus not expressing their condolences appropriately. People tell off-color jokes, treat serious matters with flippancy or trivial matters with the utmost gravity, and so forth. In these cases the mood is not false in itself but is *made* false by virtue of that with which it is associated. They are falsified by virtue of their inadequate correspondence to the content they are meant to express. The consequence of Haufniensis’ correspondence theory of mood is that a mood can be false in exactly the same way a concept can be false. Scholarship is an art insofar as, like the fine arts, it “presupposes a mood in the creator as well as in the observer” (1980a, p. 14 n. [vol. 4, p. 322 n.]). Thus “an error in the modulation is just as disturbing as an error in the development of thought,” but this is something that “has been completely forgotten” in Denmark’s Golden Age (1980a, p. 14 n. [vol. 4, p. 322 n.]).

The name Vigilius Haufniensis means “watchman of the harbor” (i.e., Copenhagen). We can thus expect that our vigilante of Copenhagen has a concrete offense in mind, a particular forgetfulness of the relationship between mood and concept, that he must have noted on his daily beat around Kierkegaard’s beloved harbor. He turns to the concept of hereditary sin. If the wrong science treats the concept of sin, then “the concept is altered, and thereby the mood that properly corresponds to the correct concept is also disturbed, and instead of the endurance of the true mood there is the fleeting phantom of false moods” (1980a, p. 14 [vol. 4, p. 322]). By way of a pointed example, Haufniensis considers aesthetic treatments of sin. When sin is considered aesthetically, it is merely a contradiction and thus an appropriate subject for the genres of tragedy or comedy, which rely on contradictions that are either experienced painfully (tragedy) or ultimately pleurably (comedy). But when sin is seen through these aesthetic lenses it becomes either tragedy’s enduring cause for sorrow or the comic’s object of merriment in light of an inevitably happy ending. The concept is altered. Sin becomes only “a bogeyman at which one either weeps or laughs” (1980a, p. 15 [vol. 4, p. 322]). The mood, too, is changed. Rather than the appropriate mood for sin—earnestness—the mood becomes either whimsical or despondent.

³ Kierkegaard wrote *The Concept of Anxiety* under his own name. He decided to publish it under a pseudonym only just before he delivered the copy to the printer. The decision was made in such haste that Kierkegaard even forgot to omit a biographical detail (see Garff 2005, p. 268).

I called this a pointed example, because behind these comments lies Kierkegaard's familiarity with the apocalyptic, comic dramas of Johan Ludvig Heiberg and their enthusiastic reception by Hans Lassen Martensen.⁴ Kierkegaard was familiar with the speculative comedies of Heiberg and with Martensen's appreciation for them well before he commenced his authorship in 1843 (see Söderquist 2003). In fact, he chose to conclude his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, with a flattering reference to Heiberg's and Martensen's treatments of humor: "if anyone should wish food for thought, I recommend Prof. Martensen's review of Heiberg's *Nye Digte* [*New Poems*]," in which one will find that humor's skepticism is "far more profound" than irony's skepticism. This is because, whereas irony's skepticism arises from a consciousness of finitude, humor's skepticism arises from a consciousness of sin. From the perspective of humor, the world is not merely empty or meaningless; it is *guilty*. But from this greater skepticism comes a deeper, transformative positivity, because humor "moves not in human but in the anthropological categories; it finds rest not by making man man but by making man God-man" (1989, p. 329 [vol. 1, p. 357]).⁵ Humor is therefore portrayed as belonging to a decidedly religious conception of the world in a way that irony does not.

Whereas Kierkegaard stops just short of saying in this passage that humor is an *exclusively* Christian concept, Martensen is more explicit. In the review to which Kierkegaard refers, Martensen focuses on an apocalyptic drama in Heiberg's *New Poems*: namely, *A Soul after Death*, a humorous portrayal of the comforts of Copenhagen as hell on earth. Hell, a cozy place where the protagonist feels right at home, turns out to be a mirror image of Copenhagen (including its writers and philosophers), replete with the trivialities comprising the life of the average Copenhagen citizen. Implicit in Heiberg's comedies, as Martensen interpreted them, was the promise of redemption. "The 'humorous' belongs exclusively to Christianity," for Martensen, because it not only rebels against the world, as irony does, but includes "the fullness of love and reconciliation. It comprises the pain of the whole world, but *overcome* in a rich depth of joy" (Martensen 1841). Needless to say, Martensen's claim that humor is only found in Christianity is short-sighted, but for the purpose of the present study let us simply take note of the fact that Martensen associated humor with Christianity because humor views the world in light of the *already present* victory over the pain of sin, yielding a mood of joy. Sin is already "overcome,"

⁴ A draft for a later section of *The Concept of Anxiety*, in which Kierkegaard refers to Martensen's review of Heiberg's *Fata Morgana*, suggests that Martensen and Heiberg are in the background. He writes, "Some teach that eternity is comic, or more correctly, that in eternity a person will preserve a comic consciousness about the temporal. This wisdom we owe especially to the last three or four paragraphs of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Here it has been presented in one of the newspapers by Professor Martensen. ... The comic is a category that belongs specifically to the temporal. The comic always lies in *Widerspruch* [contradiction]. But in eternity all contradictions are canceled, and the comic is consequently excluded" (CA, Supplement, p. 207 / Pap. V B 60). For the review to which Kierkegaard refers, see Hans Lassen Martensen 1838.

⁵ Here Kierkegaard is referring to Martensen 1841.

already past tense. Humor therefore takes the perspective of the eternal, the view *sub specie aeterni* (see Martensen 1838, p. 371).⁶

This is what Vigilius Haufniensis identifies as a false mood. Between his dissertation (1841) and *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) Kierkegaard has refined his thinking on the relationship between humor and sin. “According to its true concept,” sin is not to be treated as something already overcome, as it is for Martensen, but something “to be overcome” (1980a, p. 15 [vol. 4, p. 322]). Haufniensis thus resists the triumphalism of Martensen’s humorous joy in favor of a more militant approach.

When Haufniensis writes that “the absence or falsification of mood has the comical as its enemy,” he is claiming that Martensen’s use of “the comic” is in fact a misuse, because it falsifies the mood that corresponds to sin. The opponent of Martensen’s false comedy is thus the truly comic, with which a person can arrive at the proper mood for the task at hand.

2. Mood, emotion, and idealism

Before clarifying further the relationship between the comic and the tragic for Kierkegaard, let me explain my emphasis on *mood* in Kierkegaard. A distinction is sometimes made between mood and emotion in contemporary philosophy of emotions. Kierkegaard makes a similar distinction (see 1980a, pp. 41-42 [vol. 4, pp. 347-348]). Emotions are generally short-lived and related to a definite event or state of affairs. For example, I might feel despondent over yet another bill in the mail, or I might feel elated that my child reached a new milestone. Moods, by contrast, tend to be conceived as more persistent. A mood can persist through the various comings and goings of emotions. Additionally, moods, unlike emotions, are very often indefinite with regard to their cause. Whereas emotions are about something—I am fearful, for example, that the panther I have just encountered on the hiking trail might pounce on me—moods are hazier. As Nussbaum writes, “Emotions always have an object, even if it is a vague object; they always invest the object with value, and involve the acceptance of beliefs about the object.” By contrast, “Moods...lack these characteristics” (Nussbaum 2001, p. 133). Moods might not be evidently “about” anything specific. They can have “causes”—for example, a bad mood might be the result of a lack of sleep, an overdose of stress, or an absence of dopamine—but they lack “reasons” (see Roberts 2003, p. 112).

But we must be wary of putting too fine a point on this distinction. It is better to see mood and emotion as two ends of a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum is the objectlessness of mood, on the other end is the determinateness of emotion, and between them lies a range wherein many, if not most, of our affective experiences are located. Three factors account for this vast middle range. First, prolonged or oft-repeated emotional states can give way to mood. A person experiencing prolonged grief over the loss of a child or a person who suffers multiple lesser

⁶ Amir points out that this is a common theme in post-Hegelian views of humor. See Amir 2014, p. 215.

losses with little time to recover can easily slip into a generalized mood of grief, which then influences the way in which the person relates to other experiences.

This suggests a second way in which the distinction between mood and emotion is softened. Moods color our experience—as when we feel “blue”—in such a way as to influence the emotions we feel. Moods function as a backdrop against which events and states of affairs appear to give reasons for positive or negative emotions. A person feeling “blue,” for example, is more likely to become agitated by the facile chirpiness of the happy-go-lucky. In this sense, moods are more basic than emotions. They are the canvas on which experiences are painted as reasons for emotions.

This is similar to the description of mood in one of the most important sources in the background of *The Concept of Anxiety*: J. Karl Rosenkranz’s *Psychologie*. Rosenkranz defines mood (*Stimmung*) as “a condition of the *whole* person who gives to all particular feelings and thoughts a specific coloring” (Rosenkranz 1837, pp. 11-12), as when someone might say he is feeling “blue,” or the way a young person might be said to see the world “through rose-colored glasses.” Rosenkranz then observes that this makes the relationship between mood and feeling ambiguous. “Mood is therefore more and less than feeling; more, due to the totality with which it takes the person over; less, because it is more abstract, indefinite” (Rosenkranz 1837, p. 12). What is helpful in this quote is the active role it gives a person over mood. It is a coloring or shade that one *gives* to one’s thoughts and feelings. Mood is not a pre-existent atmosphere over which one has no control, even if the conditions for mood pre-exist the person. □ On the other hand, the final element of this definition of mood would seem to make mood something that eludes one’s grasp. Mood is abstract and indefinite. Unlike a feeling that one can identify, mood seems to come from nowhere, seems to float free from concrete reality. And this indefinite abstraction takes a person over *totally*. Nothing will escape the shading of its lens.

The third factor accounting for the soft distinction between mood and emotion is that in the messiness of life, the object of emotions can be so vague that it is difficult to differentiate emotion from mood. For example, I might feel cheerful that my life is going well enough, but this is a vague object. Alternatively, what appears to be a mood might in fact be a definite something that lies beyond my perception, as in Kierkegaard’s description of the person who wishes but does not know for what, yielding a generalized mood of wonder without a recognized definite object, for “wonder...is an ambivalent passion that in itself contains fear and blessedness” (1993a, p. 24 [vol. 5, p. 404]). Even if wonder is specified as a religious wonder directed toward God, then its object is no less vague: “If the wonder defines itself, then its highest expression is that God is the inexplicable all of existence as this is intimated to the power of the imagination everywhere in the least and the greatest” (1993a, p. 19 [vol. 5, p. 400]).⁷ So,

⁷ Here, when the person who wonders learns the vague object of wonder, the wonder becomes “striving” (1993a, p. 20 [vol. 4, pp. 400-401]). But this striving, too, is mood-like insofar as it “is directed toward

while we can draw some distinctions between mood and emotion, the border between them is fuzzy. The distinction nevertheless has a heuristic value.

This fuzziness is not a weakness in my account. A weakness would be an unjustifiably firm distinction where none exists. As Kierkegaard writes in the introduction to his dissertation, the observer of phenomena must not force them to conform to predetermined concepts. Rather, with the faithfulness of a lover, a “philosophical knight” must be an “amorist” of the phenomena, treating them with “deferential propriety” (1989, p. 9 [vol. 1, p. 71]). But besides this noble intention, there is a practical purpose in observing this fuzzy border between emotion and mood, for it highlights the relationship between Kierkegaard’s thoughts on mood and his relationship to German Idealism.

3. Mood in the context of idealism

As Rorty argues, theories of emotions (and, by extension, moods) are dependent on the historical contexts and metaphysical presuppositions with which they are formed (see Rorty 2004, p. 270; Rorty 1984). The background against which the role of mood in Kierkegaard’s thought must be placed is German Idealism. The background against which the role of mood in Kierkegaard’s thought must be placed is German Idealism (see Kangas 2008, pp. 380-385; see also Kangas 2003). Kierkegaard interpreted this philosophical movement as an effort to establish the sovereignty of absolutely autonomous subjectivity by conceiving of the subject not merely as self-positing but as self-grounding, such that subjectivity becomes “the sole omnipotence” (1989, p. 275 [vol. 1, p. 311]). The subject’s self-relation is thus prioritized over a relation to an other, whether God or neighbor.

To be sure, the project of self-formation is essential for Kierkegaard. He would not dispute Fichte’s claim that “I am...to shape my own way of thinking for myself” (Fichte 1987, p. 73). Such self-formation is essential to his treatment of Adler, for example. But it is crucial for Kierkegaard that the task of self-formation take place within the limits of the self one has *received*. In order to develop one’s subjectivity, subjectivity “must let itself be born” (1989, p. 274 [vol. 1, p. 310]). This line from Kierkegaard’s dissertation foreshadows the conclusion of the infamous first section of *Sickness unto Death*: “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that posited [*satte*] it” (1980b, p. 14 [vol. 11, p. 130], trans. modified). The self that forms or posits itself by relating itself to itself must become “transparent” to itself—that is, the self-positing self must humble itself, becoming as nothing—so that it can recognize itself as having been posited by an inassimilable other.

the unknown” and thus “directed toward God. That it is directed toward the unknown means that it is infinite.”

What Kierkegaard sees in Fichte is an unwillingness to allow the self to be born from another. Self-formation relies upon my ability to posit myself, or to see myself as an other with whom I can be in dialogue and upon whom I can act. This sounds as though there is an *I* that pre-exists the act of self-positing, a ceaselessly creative “naked subjectivity” that hides behind the self it always weaves to cover its nudity (see Stokes 2010). But Fichte proscribes this possibility, moving from self-positing to the “absolutely independent” self that grounds itself (Fichte 1987, p. 73). He asks rhetorically, “In order for the I to act upon itself, must it not already be present for itself in advance?” “By no means!” he answers. “The I originally comes into being for itself by means of this act, and *it is only in this way that the I comes into being at all*, i.e., by means of an acting that is itself directed at acting” (Fichte 1994, p. 42, emphasis mine). The *I* is only as autopoetic. Self-positing is merged with self-grounding.

For Kierkegaard, however, the self-formation involved in positing oneself cannot be blurred together with one’s being-positied: “It is indeed one thing to compose oneself poetically; it is something else to be composed poetically. ... the person who in the Greek sense poetically composes himself recognizes that he has been given a task. Therefore it is very urgent for him to become conscious of what is original in him, and this originality is the boundary within which he poetically composes, within which he is poetically free” (1989, p. 281 [vol. 1, p. 316]). The “power that posited [*satte*]” the self is the condition upon which all further self-formation is based, and the self that is originally posited is the template with which one can form oneself (1980b, p. 14 [vol. 11, p. 130], trans. modified). There thus comes to be a symbiosis of self-possession and self-dispossession. “The *highest enjoyment* [*Nydelse*], the true bliss [*Salighed*],” Kierkegaard writes, is when “the subject...possesses himself in infinite clarity” but is also “absolutely transparent to himself, which is possible only for the religious individual” (1989, p. 298 [vol. 1, p. 331]).⁸ To possess oneself “in infinite clarity,” to be “absolutely transparent” to oneself, is to recognize that self-possession is conditioned by a more fundamental indebtedness (1989, p. 298 [vol. 1, p. 331]).

Because Kierkegaard’s critique of German Idealism was focused less on this movement than on its adoption by aestheticians and Danish philosophers of religion,⁹ I will not pursue here the reliability of Kierkegaard’s portrayal. It is more important to see why observing the fuzzy border between mood and emotion might be a helpful way to frame Kierkegaard’s relationship to German Idealism. To give our attention to what can roughly be called *mood* is to pay attention to what we cannot assimilate, and thus to what escapes the ego’s efforts to establish absolute autonomy. To humble ourselves under mood, as Kierkegaard recommends in *The Concept of Irony*, is to open ourselves to what lies forever beyond us. And insofar as the comic is a tool for

⁸ I have retained the italics present in the Danish but rescinded in the Hong translation.

⁹ On *Danish* Idealism as the principal backdrop for interpreting Kierkegaard’s writing, see Stewart 2003. Of special importance is Martensen. Locations for Kierkegaard’s polemics against Martensen are legion. On the personal and intellectual relationship between Martensen and Kierkegaard, see Curtis L. Thompson’s introduction in Martensen 1997, pp. 40-70.

the proper attunement of mood, or for the proper attunement of our affective responses to our non-autonomous being, the comic too is a fruitful avenue for clarifying Kierkegaard's relationship to German Idealism.

4. The Comic and the tragic

So far I have elaborated on the background to Haufniensis's claim that the comic is the "enemy" for "the absence or falsification of mood" (1980a, p. 14 n. [vol. 4, p. 322 n.]), and I have shown why mood is important for Kierkegaard. It remains for us to see *how* Kierkegaard uses the comic as a corrective for mood, particularly when the mood it attempts to correct is the falsely comic where the mood of earnestness should be. Earnestness is a strange bedfellow for the comic. They seem as far apart as the east is from the west—earnestness, a no-nonsense perspective on existence, indifferent to one's own sufferings that inevitably result from the conflict between willing the good and the multifarious desires that inhabit temporal existence; and the comic, a temporary relief from this suffering effected by taking a perspective beyond the suffering of temporality, thus framing the suffering as something tolerable. And yet for Kierkegaard true earnestness exists in a unity with jest, in keeping with his esteem for Socrates, who was himself "the unity of the comic and the tragic" (1988, pp. 365-366 [vol. 6, p. 339]).¹⁰ But how can these opposites—earnestness and jest, the tragic and the comic—exist in a unity? And how do they relate to the question of mood?

Objectively, the tragic and the comic are identical: they are experiences of contradiction. Where they differ is in the quality of the experience. If the contradiction results in suffering, it is tragic; if it is painless, it is comic. "The tragic and the comic are the same inasmuch as both are contradiction," Climacus writes, "but *the tragic is suffering contradiction, and the comic is painless contradiction*" (1982a, p. 514 [vol. 7, pp. 465-466]). Of course, there are countless examples of situations in which we do not know whether to laugh or to cry, in which we cannot identify whether the contradiction is simply painful or simply painless, because it is not simple at all. For example, in "'Guilty?' / 'Not Guilty?'" we are shown two lovers, Quidam and Quaedam, whose engagement is broken off by Quidam because he believes they will never understand each other. The comic element in their relationship is that they love each other; the tragic element is that they misunderstand each other (1988, p. 421 [vol. 6, p. 390]).

But what can account for why one person will experience a contradiction as suffering when another person will experience the same contradiction painlessly? Climacus explains this with reference to how a person views the contradiction in relation to "the idea." "The comic interpretation," he writes, "produces the contradiction or allows it to become apparent by having *in mente* [in mind] the way out; therefore the contradiction is painless. The tragic interpretation sees the contradiction and despairs over the way out" (1982a, pp. 515-516 [vol. 7, pp. 468-469]).

¹⁰ On the unity of the comic and the tragic, see also Kierkegaard 1988, pp. 416-494, *passim* (vol. 6, pp. 385-404, *passim*); 1982a, p. 290 (vol. 7, pp. 264-265).

We can say that the comic's hermeneutic ("the comic interpretation") looks *back* upon the contradiction as illuminated by the exit sign leading toward "the idea." The tragic hermeneutic ("the tragic interpretation") has no idea about this exit.

From this description, it sounds as though Kierkegaard thinks of the comic as a "higher" perspective than the tragic, since the comic sees "the way out" where the tragic does not. This is the case for Martensen and Heiberg, for whom the comic is a metaphysical perspective that reconciles the tensions of existence. But for Kierkegaard, the predominant role that Martensen and Heiberg give the comic is itself comical, because their "metaphysical disinterestedness" is in contradiction to the "interest of actuality," which Climacus identifies as the tragic (1988, p. 446 [vol. 6, p. 412]). The comic can thus bring this contradiction to light as it directs the person stuck in this contradiction toward "the way out." But insofar as this exit illuminates the "interest of actuality," or the suffering that attends earnestness, "the way out" of the comic contradiction leads to an embrace of the tragic. And to choose the tragic even while seeing the comic is the beginning of religiousness (1988, p. 422 [vol. 6, p. 391]).

To be led out of the comic contradiction is to be taken out of the frying pan and into the fire. But this contradiction—the tragic beginning of religiousness—does not preclude the mood of joy. Indeed, religiousness demands it, for "the religious contradiction [is] simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet to be joyful" (1988, p. 477 [vol. 6, p. 439]). Or, even more directly:

A religious person is always joyful. ... he who truthfully and simultaneously can say that he is always in danger and always joyful is saying simultaneously the most disheartening and the most high-minded words spoken. ... There is many a man who has been *immer lustig* [always merry] and yet stands so low that even aesthetics regards him as comic. The question is whether one has not become joyful in the wrong place; and where is the right place? It is—in danger. To be joyful out on 70,000 fathoms of water, many, many miles from all human help—yes, that is something great! To swim in the shallows in the company of waders is not the religious. (1988, p. 470 [vol. 6, p. 433])

Few situations are more earnest than swimming in the middle of a practically bottomless ocean where one's grounding is absent. A joy that can be experienced in such a helpless situation is clearly not the prosaic feeling of "joy" that accompanies the morning cup of coffee. It is something deeper, something steadier that can survive the earnest situation of having the ground pulled out from under you. But the most important thing to observe now is that Haufniensis' reference to the comic as the "enemy" of the "falsification of mood" points toward the mood of *earnestness*, because earnestness confronts head-on the difficulties of actuality rather than resolving them comically. And mood is important to Kierkegaard because it is a gauge of one's

openness to what forever eludes one's control. To have the mood of joy even amidst earnestness thus communicates something about how the person relates to what cannot be domesticated.

Now, then, I want to show how Kierkegaard uses the comic on a *particular* falsification of mood in a work that receives little attention from Kierkegaard scholars: namely, *The Book on Adler*.

5. *The Book on Adler*, enthusiasm, and Shaftesbury

The Book on Adler is a peculiar book in several ways. Of all Kierkegaard's works, it is the one on which he worked the longest, though he never published it in any of the forms he imagined for it.¹¹ Because of this, Kierkegaard's argument is not always as clear as the reader would like. The work is also about a peculiar figure: Adolph Peter Adler, a pastor and Hegel scholar whose studies of Hegelian thought were important for Kierkegaard, particularly while he was writing *The Concept of Anxiety*. In 1843, however, Adler experienced what he interpreted as a personal revelation from Jesus telling him to burn his Hegelian manuscripts and to devote himself to the New Testament alone. Jesus also commanded him to write down a revelation concerning the relationship between the body, the spirit, and evil (Adler 1843, pp. 3-4).

Kierkegaard's use of humor in *The Book on Adler* lacks the wit usually associated with Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus. But the reader can more readily appreciate the humor in this work by viewing within the context of the Enlightenment's concern to curb what was perceived to be the socially and religiously disruptive malady known as "enthusiasm." In order to do so, I relate *The Book on Adler* to a text that was highly influential for the conception of humor and enthusiasm in German Romanticism: namely, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (hereafter referred to as Shaftesbury), an anthology of Shaftesbury's writings he compiled in 1711. Particularly relevant are the essays "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm" and its companion essay, "*Sensus Communis*: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," which were known to Kierkegaard through either Herder, Flögel, or both, and to which Climacus refers in the *Postscript*.¹²

By "enthusiasm" I am referring to the English equivalent of the German words *Schwärmerei*, *Begeisterung*, and *Enthusiasmus*, all of which were used interchangeably when translating English texts on enthusiasm, such as Shaftesbury's, in the 18th century (see Hamann 1949-1957, vol. 4, pp. 131-153; Shaftesbury 1776-1779, vol. 1, p. 1; Flögel 1784, vol. 1, pp. 104-128). During the Enlightenment, these terms were used to denote overwrought emotionalism and extremism in both religion and politics (see Heyd 1995; la Vopa 1997). Rhetorically these terms often functioned to designate who or what would be considered beyond the realm of religious,

¹¹ A portion of the text, with all references to Adler removed, was published under the pseudonym H.H. as "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" (1997, pp. 91-108 [vol. 11, pp. 95-111]).

¹² For more detailed treatments of the relationship between Kierkegaard's and Shaftesbury's works, see Amir 2014; Webb 2014b.

political, and social orthodoxy. This applies also to these terms' Danish cognates—*Sværmeri*, *Begeistring*, *Enthusiasme*—in Kierkegaard's time (see Molbech 1833, vol. 2, p. 456; Webb 2014a; Webb 2014b).

But the term “enthusiasm” is ambiguous. Already in the 18th century there were many philosophers who wanted to redeem the term from its pejorative status by using it to refer to a moral drive, a sentiment for the common, or an anti-authoritarian energy. By the late 18th century the signification of the term was so muddled that the German author Christian Garve complained, “What a *Schwärmer* is, and whether this person or that one deserves the name, can be disputed forever” (Garve 1985-1999, vol. 3, p. 337).

Kierkegaard expresses a similar sentiment in *The Book on Adler* when he describes enthusiasm (*Begeistring*) as “vague and indefinite” and an “infinitely nebulous category” (1998, p. 60 [vol. 15, p. 183]; 1998, p. 75 [vol. 15, p. 198]). It was nevertheless a relevant category in light of the *Corsair* affair, which, in addition to being a dispute about the proper use of humor, was about the extent to which Kierkegaard's writings expressed, in Møller's words, the “sick nature” of someone in “the preliminary stages of madness” (Kierkegaard 1982b, Supplement, p. 99 [Møller 1846, p. 174]; Kierkegaard 1982b, Supplement, p. 100 [Møller 1846, p. 176]).¹³ One reason, then, that Kierkegaard might have been so interested in Adler during the *Corsair* affair is that he did not want to be perceived as similarly imbalanced. Enthusiasm might have been a vague category, but it was a potent one, and Kierkegaard follows in the footsteps of several modern philosophers, including Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, in trying to harness the category's rhetorical force.

Adler's behavior fits the description of enthusiasm I provided a moment ago with the exception of how he relates to authority. One hallmark of enthusiasm as it was regarded in modernity is that it tends towards subversiveness of the norm or of ecclesiastical and political authorities. But Adler, in Kierkegaard's analysis, is far from subversive. He's so normal that he is, in fact, *abnormally* normal. He gets singled out by Jesus to receive a revelation that tells him to stick to Christian revelation; he's chosen to be just like everyone else (1998, p. 62 [vol. 15, 185]). This exceptional unexceptionality and the way it manifests itself in Adler's melding of Hegelianism and the category of revelation is what allows Kierkegaard to see Adler as the perfect satire on the cultured Christianity of Golden Age Denmark (1998, pp. 4-5 [1968, VIII-2, B 27]; 1998, pp. 102-103 [vol. 15, pp. 258-259]).

¹³ Meir Goldschmidt, the editor of *The Corsair*, also saw a certain “enthusiasm” in Kierkegaard. Unlike Møller, however, Goldschmidt does not cast this in an unequivocally negative light. At the root of the *Corsair* affair, for Goldschmidt, was Kierkegaard's “finer, purer, higher relation to women. This relation of good fortune or of grace or, as I call it, of nemesis, along with whatever organic peculiarity to which it may have been joined, I regard as the basis of his enthusiasm, his religious enthusiasm as well” (Kierkegaard 1982b, Supplement, p. 144 [Goldschmidt 1877, vol. 1, p. 412]).

There are three layers of humor here. First, there is Adler's quixotic incongruity with his time. Like Don Quixote, who served many modern writers as a satirical figure for enthusiasm (Ziolkowski 2011, pp. 127-181), Adler is a temporal misfit in modernity by virtue of believing himself to have had a revelation (1998, p. 4 [1968, VIII-2 B 27]). Second, what makes Adler satirical is that, despite his being, on one hand, out-of-sync with modernity, he is nevertheless, on the other hand, a transparency through which one can see the confusion of the age. So the second layer of humor is the surprising congruence between the enthusiast (Adler) and the very culture that would label him an incongruent enthusiast. This suggests that modernity is out-of-sync with *itself*. But this surprising congruence is dependent upon a deeper incongruence, the third layer of humor: the contradiction between expectation and what one comes to see through humor as reality—in other words, the expectation that Adler stands in contradiction to his age and the realization that he is actually its consummate representative.

Kierkegaard was not the first to attempt to curb enthusiasm with humor. Though Kierkegaard almost certainly never had any direct exposure to Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus refers to Shaftesbury's thesis that laughter is the touchstone of truth. This reference immediately follows the observation that speculative theologians and religious revivalists or enthusiasts have in common a disavowal of Christianity as inwardness (1982a, p. 512 [vol. 7, p. 464]).

Even though scholarly apparatuses only name as Kierkegaard's reference the second essay of *Characteristics*, "*Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*," it is important to note that, historically, "*Sensus Communis*" has been treated as the second part of a unit with the volume's first essay, "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm." This is the case both with Shaftesbury himself, when he later reflects on these essays (1999, pp. 351-394), as well as with Kierkegaard's probable sources on Shaftesbury: Herder and Flögel (Herder 1827-1830, vol. 11, pp. 175-182; Flögel 1784, vol. 1, pp. 104-113). The essays are treated this way because Shaftesbury wrote "*Sensus Communis*" as a defense for his use of humor with regard to religion in "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm."¹⁴ So Shaftesbury's thesis that laughter is the test of truth—the thesis that Climacus borrows—shouldn't be separated from the context of the broader argument, which is that religious enthusiasm fails that test.

There are two reasons Shaftesbury sees humor as an effective way to handle enthusiasm, both of which rely on comic contradiction. First, Shaftesbury, like many modern authors, links enthusiasm with melancholy. The good-natured use of humor, however, stands in contrast to the melancholy of the enthusiast. As an expression of health rather than sickness, humor might entice

¹⁴ For the pamphlets that criticized Shaftesbury's use of humor, to which "*Sensus Communis*" is a response, see Anon. [Edward Fowler] 1708; Mr. Wotton [Mary Astell] 1709; Anon. 1709. On the debate over the authorship of the latter text, see Heyd 1995, p. 229 n. 61.

the enthusiast to see things differently and, especially important to Shaftesbury, it might at the least keep enthusiasm from spreading throughout society.

The second reason Shaftesbury sees humor as an effective remedy is that humor highlights the contradiction between the divisiveness of enthusiasm and the tolerant, generous, fellow-feeling that characterizes the sense for the common, the “*sensus communis*,” which is the realm of public reason coupled with moral sentiment rather than private revelation. By putting this contradiction on display, not only is the spread of enthusiasm limited but the enthusiast, too, will hopefully see this contradiction. The enthusiast will hopefully “get” the well-intentioned jest and be transformed. It’s in this sense that Shaftesbury even sees in humor a power of conversion. He writes, “the virtue of *good humour* in religion is such that it can even reconcile persons to a belief in which they were never bred, or to which they had conceived a former prejudice” (1999, p. 383). Through the transformative power of humor the enthusiast is reconciled with polite, cultured society. Humor transforms negative enthusiasm into a positive enthusiasm, a rapturous feeling for the inherent goodness and orderliness of the world and of society to which one should conform.

This is what Shaftesbury elsewhere calls “social enthusiasm,” an idea developed in his most influential piece, a philosophical dialogue entitled *The Moralists* (1999, pp. 231-338). In this work, Shaftesbury has the dialogue’s philosophical hero, Theocles, admonish his dialogue partners to seek out a worldly, social kind of enthusiasm and to find happiness by immersing themselves in and studying everyday life. Appropriately, the dialogue leaves off with the conversation partners returning “to the common affairs of life” (1999, p. 338). The opposite of religious enthusiasm for Shaftesbury isn’t cold, hard rationality but a warm, tender affection for the orderliness of nature and for one’s fellow human beings, a tender affection cultivated not in the barren scholasticism of 17th-century English schooling (for which Shaftesbury had a singular dislike), but in the fertile garden of sociality and virtue. Unlike the schismatic, religious enthusiast, then, the social enthusiast will conform to the culture as he revels in the unexceptional happiness of everyday life.

The Book on Adler is consonant with Shaftesbury's texts in three ways. First, as for Shaftesbury and several German philosophers influenced by him, enthusiasm has two sides for Kierkegaard. On one hand, Kierkegaard castigates the immediacy of Adler’s negative enthusiasm, particularly his being so prone to excitability, which he expresses directly in his writings; on the other hand, Kierkegaard sees this as Adler’s “excellence.” Adler rises high in Kierkegaard’s estimation because, unlike most people, he has passion, or enthusiasm (in the positive sense) (1998, Supplement, pp. 295-296 [1968, VII-2 B 235, pp. 170-171]; 1998, Supplement, p. 225 [1968, VII-1 A 440]).¹⁵ Second, *The Book on Adler* shows itself as belonging to this genre that I’ve been

¹⁵ This double-sidedness of enthusiasm is comparable to the first chapter of the *Postscript*, where Climacus brings out the comic aspect of “literalist theology” or “letter-zealotry,” which is comical for

tracing in its suggested antidote to enthusiasm: ethical action (1998, Supplement, pp. 290-291 [vol. 15, p. 237]), although, as we have seen, in Shaftesbury this appears as social morality. And third, the humor of *The Book on Adler*, like Shaftesbury's, is intended to edify and even heal the enthusiast. Thus Kierkegaard describes the work as having "the tinge of ... a clinical treatment" (1998, p. 4 [1968, VIII-2 B 27]).

However, the enthusiast Kierkegaard hopes to heal with *The Book on Adler* is not Adler but his contemporary readers. That Adler is not the primary target of the text is suggested by one of Kierkegaard's reasons for not publishing it, namely, his fear that the text might exacerbate Adler's already overly-excitabile condition: "the problem [i.e., with publishing *The Book on Adler*] is that it pains me in A.'s behalf, and that I am almost afraid that it will have too strong an effect on him" (2007-, vol. 4, p. 195 [vol. 20, p. 196]). And yet even if Adler were to retract the claims he made in the preface to *Nogle Prædikener*, Kierkegaard tells himself the book should still be published, because it "truly deserves to be read" (2007-, vol. 4, p. 195 [vol. 20, p. 196]). It makes sense to see the book as worthy of being read even in the event of Adler's retraction only if its true target is not Adler but the reader, who, in reading about how the enthusiast Adler is a transparency for the age, is invited to see herself as similar to Adler. In the introspective act of recognizing one's own evasion of the ethical in the "fantasy-view" of Hegelian dialectic, the reader has come closer to the "ethical sobriety" that is the antidote to enthusiasm (1998, Supplement, p. 288 [vol. 15, p. 235]; 1998, Supplement, p. 293 [vol. 15, p. 240]). The reader's own hitherto concealed enthusiasm is brought to light through Adler.¹⁶ By contrast, Shaftesbury does not intend to diagnose and lead his readers out of enthusiasm. This is the first of three differences between *The Book on Adler* and Shaftesbury's humorous treatment for enthusiasm.

The second difference follows from the first: the scope of Kierkegaard's diagnosis is much broader. It is not only a small sect of displaced French Calvinists, as in Shaftesbury's "Letter Concerning Enthusiasm." It is rather Denmark's entire Christian establishment.

Third, because of this wider scope, Kierkegaard can't direct the convalescent enthusiast neither to the well-mannered happiness of good-breeding and high culture, as Shaftesbury does. Whereas happiness serves Shaftesbury as a point of *arrival*, such that the enthusiast needs to be led out of a state of melancholy enthusiasm into a state of happiness, happiness functions in *The Book on*

being out of touch with its historical setting and for placing its passion on a wrong object. Climacus characterizes it as "enthusiasm," but a "beautiful enthusiasm [*skjønt Sværmeri*]" because it has passion. Climacus compares this to Don Quixote. On the reception of Quixote as a humorous figure for enthusiasm in the Enlightenment and as a model for the passion of enthusiasm in Romanticism, see Ziolkowski 2011, pp. 127-181.

¹⁶ The function of Kierkegaard's satirical humor in *The Book on Adler* would thus be similar to Climacus' use of humor in the *Postscript*, which, in poking fun at the Hegelian speculative thinker, allows the reader to see herself as similarly susceptible to speculative flights of fancy and thereby to make progress in becoming subjective. See Lippitt 2000, pp. 12-26.

Adler as a point of *departure*. The first page of the first chapter describes the happiness from which Adler must be supposed to have departed when he collided with the universal, the happiness of a public official whose talents and training make him perfectly suited to serve in a public capacity (1998, pp. 28-29 [vol. 15, p. 117])—a happiness, however, that Adler in his confused enthusiasm never did actually leave behind, since he never excepted himself from the established order.

I would suggest, though, that, as for Shaftesbury, there is something *like* happiness that serves as a point of arrival from enthusiasm for Kierkegaard – a happiness *beyond* what normally passes for happiness, a happiness beyond the norm, and thus a happiness that will appear to many as unhappiness. To find something like this, we can look to one of the works Kierkegaard was writing while he was thinking about Adler: namely, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, which were, for a time, planned to be published together with *The Book on Adler* in a single volume entitled *Minor Works* (see 1993b, Supplement, p. 365 [1968, VII-1 B 214]).

Reading *The Book on Adler* and *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* for the light they might shed on one another would be a fruitful exercise. Most relevant for the time being, however, is that, in addition to being temporally proximate to *The Book on Adler*, these discourses (particularly in Part Three, *The Gospel of Sufferings*) give voice to the exceptional joy that awaits the person who is excepted from the universal—a joy cultivated even in suffering and self-denial. Shaftesbury leads us to a cultured and well-tended garden of evident happiness. Kierkegaard, however, leads us to the isolated heath where we learn from the wild lilies and birds about the ineffable bliss of being a human being; he then surprises us with joy along the *via dolorosa* of *The Gospel of Sufferings*. And he does so not without a distinctly comic and even humorous tone—a tone that further links these discourses with *The Book on Adler* (2007-, vol. 4, pp. 90-91 [vol. 20, pp. 90-91]). But to embrace suffering, to embrace the tragic, to embrace the situation of being in 70,000 fathoms of water, *with joy*—would this not *appear* to be every bit as “enthusiastic” as Adler? Would this not be an expression of exactly the kind of “sickness” in Kierkegaard’s writings that Møller wrote about in *The Corsair*?

To analyze the difference between these two moods—enthusiasm and joy—is beyond the scope of this article. For now it suffices to have made the preliminary step of explicating the way in which Kierkegaard uses the comic as a corrective of mood—specifically, the false comic—and as a way of attuning the reader to joyful suffering.

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