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On the Limitations of Lao Sze Kwang's "Trichotomy of the Self" in His Interpretation of Kierkegaard

Abstract: In 1959, Lao Sze-Kwang (1927–2012), a well-known Chinese Kantian philosopher and author of the *New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy*, published *On Existentialist Philosophy* introducing existential philosophers to Chinese readers. This paper argues that Lao misinterpreted Kierkegaard's ultimate philosophical quest of "how to become a Christian" as a question of 'virtue completion,' because he failed to recognize and acknowledge Kierkegaard's distinction between aesthetic, moral and religious passion. By describing and clarifying Lao's misinterpretation, the paper then argues that Lao's trichotomy of the self fails to give due credit to the independence of religiousness from morality and aesthetics in Kierkegaard's thought.

I Introduction

Lao Sze-Kwang (1927–2012), author of the well-known multi-volume *History of Chinese Philosophy*, tried to reformulate Chinese philosophy with the help of Continental philosophy. While Lao seemed to have little research interest in Kierkegaard, he was one of the major Chinese philosophers who introduced existentialism to the Chinese readers in the 1950s. In 1959, Lao published the first edition of *On Existentialist Philosophy* (which was later edited and reprinted in 1998 as *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*). In this book, Lao applied his

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“postulates of the distinctions of the realms of the self”¹ and diagnosed Kierkegaard’s primary philosophical concern as a Western version of the Confucian question of “virtue completion” (成德 *cheng de*). In 1971, Li Da-sheng edited and published a textbook for existentialism called *Existentialism and the Problems of Living*. The co-authors of the book included Lao Sze-Kwang, Mou Zong-san and Tang Jun-yi. For this book, Lao wrote the article “The Miserableness of Life and the Positive Meaning of Existentialism,” and introduced Kierkegaard to his readers. The same article was subsequently reprinted in his book *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence* in 1998, together with his new articles “An Existentialist Christian: Kierkegaard,” “Existentialism and the Modern World,” “Existentialism and the Aesthetic Self,” and “On Existentialism.”²

Lao declared that he aimed at providing an introduction to existentialism to Chinese readers as an outsider, recognizing that there were few Chinese texts introducing existentialism in the 1950s. As Lao indicates at the start of *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, his discussions on existentialism mostly follow F.H. Heinemann’s *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, published in 1953.³ According to Lao, given that he is not an existentialist when analyzing the “holistic philosophical problems” of existentialism, he employs his “own theory for reconstruction” with which existentialists may disagree.⁴ However, as we shall see in this paper, Lao’s interpretation of Kierkegaard is inaccurate and shows the limitations of his theoretical framework. This is because Lao fails to acknowledge the fundamental distinctions among aesthetics, morality and religion in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

This paper⁵ argues that Lao’s misinterpretation of Kierkegaard’s fundamental question of “how to become a Christian” reveals a significant

1 Sze-Kwang Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press 2001, p. 4. All translations from Chinese, including book titles, are the author’s.

2 Sze-Kwang Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press 2012, p. 14.

3 *Ibid.*, p. xvi. See also P.H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, London: Adam & Charles Black 1953.

4 Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. xvi.

5 While a reviewer suggested that this paper may be regarded as a comparison between Lutheran and Confucian understandings of the concept of transcendence, such a reading would be contrary to Lao’s attempt in my opinion, for Lao is very reluctant to declare himself a Confucian. In fact, he regarded himself as a critic of *all* Chinese philosophies. Instead, my paper tries to show that and in which way Lao confused Kierkegaard’s philosophy with Confucianism. See Sze-Kwang Lao, *Essentials of Chinese Culture*, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press 2009.

theoretical weakness in Lao's trichotomy of the self or the "postulate of the distinctions between realms of the self" (自我境界之劃分的設準): Specifically, that the trichotomy of the aesthetic self, the cognitive self and the moral self fails to acknowledge the realm of the *religious self*. Using Kierkegaard's distinction between aesthetic, moral and religious passions, I argue that this philosopher's fundamental question of "how to become a Christian" is a religious question, which cannot be reduced to a moral question as Lao claims. Given that Lao does not recognize Kierkegaard's concept of religiousness, his trichotomy of the self, which contains only the *aesthetic self*, the *cognitive self* and the *moral self*,⁶ but not the *religious self*, is not applicable when analyzing philosophers whose primary concerns are religious.

II Lao Sze Kwang's Trichotomy of the Self: Aesthetic, Cognitive and Moral

Given space constraints, this paper will not discuss all of Lao's postulates in detail and explain why they are important for Lao's research on the history of Chinese philosophy. Nevertheless, one should be aware that the meaning of the term "postulate" in Lao's context is very different from Kant's. For Kant, a postulate is "a theoretical proposition, though one not demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an *a priori* unconditionally valid practical law."⁷ However, for Lao, postulates refer to "standards established for the convenience of arrangement," as he claims in *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems* (哲學問題源流論): "I have only suggested these postulates and used them to arrange philosophical problems."⁸ According to Kuo Fang-Ru, Lao proposes the idea of postulates because he tries to establish a set of "subjective"⁹ standards to "evaluate" the characteristics of different philosophical schools.¹⁰

6 While the term "ethical self" is more common than the term "moral self" in the Anglophone literature, since Lao himself indicates that the English translation of the term 德性我 is "moral self," this article follows Lao's practices. See Sze-Kwang Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, p. 8.

7 Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 238.

8 Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, p. 5.

9 Fang-Ru Kuo, "On Mr. Lao Sze-Kwang's Fundamental Question Method," *Xuedeng*, vol. 31, 2014, p. 15.

10 In *History of Chinese Philosophy* Lao indicates that there are three tasks of research regarding the history of philosophy: (1) the "facticity of factual account," (2) the "systematicity of

Postulates are subjective because they are merely “based upon the author’s philosophical understandings.”¹¹ Different philosophers may have different postulates to evaluate the same philosophical school. Lao proposes four postulates to evaluate philosophies: 1) the postulate of the origin of value: either an “absolute subject” (e.g. mind nature, 心性 in Confucianism), a “metaphysical nature” (e.g. God or Heaven) or a “physical self”;¹² 2) the postulate of the distinction between the realms of the self; 3) the postulate of the dichotomy of the value of self-consciousness: whether the self-consciousness of an individual is driven by “an internal transcendence” (e.g. mind nature) or “an external transcendence” (e.g. the Christian God)¹³; 4) the postulate of the meaning of the world: a “positive attitude” (a self-manifestation by affirming the external world, e.g. Confucianism) or a “negative attitude” (a self-manifestation by denying the external world, e.g. Buddhism).¹⁴

Since this paper primarily aims to explore the insufficiency of “the postulate of the distinction between realms of the self” in evaluating Kierkegaard’s philosophy, I will only discuss the second postulate. The postulate of the distinction between the realms of the self is determined by a self-conscious individual subject: “The realm of self refers to the self-consciousness of [the question] ‘what am I?’ ... All self-conscious activities are rooted in an acting subject which is generally called as the ‘self.’”¹⁵ Lao argues that there are three kinds of self-activities, namely the aesthetic self (情意), moral self (道德) and cognitive self (認知). “What I am becoming” is determined by “how I am acting,” while self-activities are determined by the self-consciousness of an individual self that is “free from all external conditions.”¹⁶ Therefore, Lao does not divide an individual self into three independent substances; instead, the aesthetic self, the moral self and the cognitive self belong to the same individual self, which is manifested in different self-activities.¹⁷

theoretical interpretation,” and (3) the “unity of holistic judgment”; while first two can be achieved by his fundamental question method, the last one requires “subjective” standards of judgement, namely, postulates. See Sze-Kwang Lao, *History of Chinese Philosophy. New Edition*, Taipei: San Min Book Co. 1995, p. 14.

11 Kuo, “On Mr. Lao Sze-Kwang’s Fundamental Question Method,” p. 15.

12 Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, p. 6.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

17 However, it should be noticed that Lao’s trichotomy is not the only way of dividing an individual self in terms of self-conscious activities. As Lao indicates, an individual self is

As a result, there are three kinds of authentic self: the aesthetic self (情意我), the moral self (道德我) and the cognitive self (認知我). The cognitive self is divided into two sub-categories: the "logical self" (邏輯的我) which only speculates and reflects, and the empirical or perceiving self, which knows and acts.¹⁸ Unlike the aesthetic self and the moral self, the cognitive self undertakes epistemic judgments according to logical principles or empirical facts and involves no value judgment. By contrast, the moral self assumes the "self-consciousness of ought-ness" (應然的自覺),¹⁹ namely to judge whether something is morally right or wrong. The moral self therefore necessarily involves moral judgment. However, the aesthetic self does not undertake any "self-consciousness of ought-ness," for its value judgement involves no universal moral principles. All cognitive and moral judgments involve universal principles. For example, the cognitive judgment of " $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ " involves the Pythagorean theorem, while the moral judgment of "Thou shalt not kill" involves the (universality of the) Ten Commandments. However, there is no universal law supporting the aesthetic judgment "steamed fish is delicious." Indeed, deliciousness as a judgment of taste is subjective and varies with people's preferences.²⁰

III Lao Sze Kwang's Diagnosis and Criticism of Kierkegaard

A The Aesthetic Self as the Concrete Self

Knowing the meanings of the three selves in Lao's philosophy, one may understand how Lao reinterprets (or misinterprets) Kierkegaard's philosophy. This part argues that according to Lao, like other existentialists, Kierkegaard only acknowledges the aesthetic self as the concrete self but rejects the moral

"free from external conditions" and therefore can manifest himself/herself in different kinds of activities. See *ibid.*, p. 9.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 Although Lao indicates that his distinction among the moral, cognitive and aesthetic selves "is similar to Kant's trichotomy of 'truthfulness, goodness and beauty,'" he does not use Kant's term "judgment of taste" in his *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, because his concept of aesthetic judgment seems to differ; see *ibid.*, p. 11. Unlike Lao, Kant argues that judgment of taste still claims a "universal validity," although it is subjective: see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 98.

self and the cognitive self. In doing so, one must understand how Lao applies his trichotomy of the self in his discussion of existentialism in *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*.

As mentioned above, Lao does not define the self as a substance; instead, the aesthetic self, the cognitive self and the moral self are merely self-activities, which belong to the same individual self. In order to explain the concept of subjective freedom, Lao later introduces the concept of the “physical self” in his article “Existentialism and the Aesthetic Self” (存在主義與情意我) published in 1956 and reprinted in his *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence* in 2001. According to Lao, the physical self is “the self-activity of the self as body,” which “is determined by a series of conditions.”²¹ The same term is also mentioned in volume one of his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, published in 1966.²² Unlike other selves, however, the physical self is merely an “existence of experience,” which is “an existent determined by a series of conditions” instead of being determined by one’s will.²³ As a physical object, the physical self is not an authentic self and has no “sense of transcendence.” Therefore, when the aesthetic self, the cognitive self and the moral self try to manifest themselves, they must undertake a “self-negation” of the physical self.²⁴ Here the ‘self-negation’ is limited to the denial of the body but not the entire self, for *the body is denied for the sake of self-actualization—aesthetic, moral or cognitive*. Nevertheless, as we shall see in section IV, in Kierkegaard’s sense, self-negation refers to the denial of the entire self instead of only the body.

Since Lao’s concept of self-negation involves the concept of transcendence, one should clarify the meaning of the term before moving onwards. In *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems* Lao distinguishes the “internal transcendence” from the “external transcendence”: the former is represented by the Confucian idea of mind nature while the latter is represented by the Christian idea of God.²⁵

21 Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, p. 142.

22 Rui-Quan Li, “The Remembering Collection for the Anniversary of Professor Lao Sze-Kwang’s Death: Lao Sze-Kwang and Chinese Philosophy,” *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy*, vol. 23, 2013, p. 14.

23 Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 142.

24 Ibid.

25 Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, p. 11. However, Lao claims that ‘external transcendence’ is also found in so-called ‘Confucian heretics’ like Dong Zhongshu. In *History of Chinese Philosophy* Lao argues that Heaven in Confucianism has three meanings: Heaven as a ‘metaphysical’ or ‘ontological’ entity, as a ‘cosmological’ principle and as an ‘anthropomorphic god.’ The idea of Heaven as an anthropomorphic god dominates the Confucian *Book of Odes* (詩經) and the *Books of Documents* (尚書), but is rejected by Confucius and Mencius, who identify Heaven merely as an ontological source of human’s moral capacity. However, Dong Zhongshu and

According to Lao, 'transcendence' means overcoming a series of 'conditions' or 'limitations.' The Christian Almighty God is an external transcendent Being because it is outside of an individual self. By contrast, mind-nature²⁶ is an internal transcendent Being because it is within an individual self. Since moral value judgement is unconditional, Lao claims that mind-nature undertaking moral value judgement transcends the body, which is determined by physical limitations.

Given that the moral self and the cognitive self necessarily involve the negation of the physical self, abstraction from the physical world is inevitable. As mentioned in section II, both moral and cognitive judgments involve universal principles, which are abstracted from particular situations. The maxim of "Thou shalt not kill" and the Pythagorean theorem are applicable to all situations. By contrast, aesthetic judgment does not involve any universal principle, for it is determined by the subjective *preference* to *particular objects*, for example, food and lovers. Based upon the necessary attachment between aesthetic judgment and particular objects, Lao argues that, according to Kierkegaard, only the *aesthetic self is the concrete self*. "The self in [an] existentialist's sense is a concrete self ... The 'concrete self' contrasts with an 'abstract self.' Existentialists like Kierkegaard consider all pure thinking selves as abstract selves, which are to be distinguished from a cognitive subject."²⁷

Lao indicates that Kierkegaard's philosophy begins with the concept of existence, which inevitably leads to his rejection of Hegelian philosophy. Lao indicates that while Kierkegaard also studied Hegelianism which was popular in his time, he argued that Hegel misinterpreted Christian faith as a rational system. "Kierkegaard departs from the tradition of Western culture ... [H]e emphasizes the practical life and disdains speculation."²⁸ Lao adopts Heinemann's term and describes Kierkegaard as an "existential Christian."²⁹ Kierkegaard "introduced the term 'existence' with a new meaning into European

other cosmologists 'distort' the concept of Heaven by introducing Yin-Yang cosmology in their reinterpretations of Confucian classics. See Lao, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 80–84 and pp. 91–95.

²⁶ Mind-nature (心性) refers to the innate moral capacity of human beings. According to the Lu Wang School of Confucianism, mind is equivalent to human's nature which is granted by the Heavenly way. Since the Heavenly way is morally good, mind and nature are also morally good. Therefore, one does not need to learn to live morally, for one is born to be moral. Following the Lu Wang School, New Confucians believe that the task of Confucianism is to awaken the people's moral consciousness rather than imposing external laws.

²⁷ Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 152.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

thought. He was an *existential theologian-philosopher, an existential religious philosopher, or rather an existential Christian*.³⁰ Indeed, he rejected “abstract consciousness and abstract thought for the sake of the concrete spiritual individual, with his ‘inwardness’ and ‘subjectivity.’”³¹ According to Heinemann,

Kierkegaard protested against Hegel’s all-comprehensive World-Mind in which the individual disappeared like a wave in the sea. He introduced existence as a specifically religious category ... ‘Existence’ here refers, in a religious sense, to the Self of man who grasps eternity in an instant (*Augenblick*) and falls into utter despair if he loses eternity and overrates the temporal. It opens a new way to the Transcendent; a man stands again before God; but he remains the single one, the person who is separated from his fellow-men and from the Universe.³²

Given that “Kierkegaard defends the Particular against the Universal,”³³ Kierkegaard’s concept of *particular* subjectivity cannot refer to the moral self or the cognitive self involving universal principles; instead, it can only refer to the aesthetic self, which is necessarily attached to particular preferred objects. “Therefore, the ‘self’ in existentialism refers to the subject of aesthetic activities. Existentialists only talk about an ‘aesthetic self.’”³⁴ Lao quotes *Two Ages* and argues that Kierkegaard explicitly rejects the universal abstractions from particular situations (known as “levelling”) to demonstrate how Kierkegaard rejects the cognitive self and the moral self. As Lao quotes from Kierkegaard, “particular individuals may contribute to levelling, each in his own little group, but levelling is an abstract power and is abstraction’s victory over individuals.”³⁵ In section IV we shall examine Kierkegaard’s writings and see if there is sufficient textual evidence supporting Lao’s interpretation.

30 Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, p. 32.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

34 Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 153. However, it should be recognized that Lao does not provide sufficient textual evidence to demonstrate his familiarity with Kierkegaard’s concepts of inwardness, passion and subjectivity, which are developed in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Lao’s reading of Kierkegaard largely relies on Heinemann’s interpretation, and we shall see how Lao’s interpretation of Kierkegaard contradicts the latter’s intentions.

35 SKS 8, 81 / TA, 84.

B The Miserableness of Life as the Fundamental Question of Existentialism

In order to explain the "attachment" of the aesthetic self to particular *physical* objects, Lao introduces the Buddhist concept of *cling* (執, *ātma-grāha*). As he notes,

Early Buddhism reduces every kind existence into the aesthetic self and criticizes the latter by three dharma-mudra (三法印), which begin from the universal sufferings (every unsatisfied being is suffering), while the four noble truths begin with the *dukkha* (苦諦). Suffering is a feeling. Reducing phenomena to suffering is equivalent to reducing all existence into passionate receiving.³⁶

Lao uses the example of love to elaborate on the concept of *cling*. "Supposing a man loves a woman purely, even though he was initially attracted by her beauty or other features, as long as there is true love, he will still *cling* to love her when the woman loses all her features."³⁷ Given that an aesthetic judgment assumes particular physical objects, the transcendence of the aesthetic self from physical limitations is *limited*. On the one hand, such desire for satisfaction must begin with and end with a particular object desired. On the other hand, in order to satisfy one's desire for a particular satisfaction, one must overcome other difficulties and sacrifice the satisfaction of other desires.

Thanks to the structure of *cling*, the satisfaction of the aesthetic self is *limited by external conditions*. Lao acknowledges aesthetic activities as sensory activities (感官活動). When one passively perceives a sensory stimulus, one reacts with feelings of "adoration" or "detestation."³⁸ "Every object corresponds to a particular passionate feeling, of which the network is our real life."³⁹ According to Buddhist teaching, given that desire is unlimited while preferred objects are limited, one always suffers from dissatisfactions (*dukkha*).⁴⁰ Lao argues that because existentialists, including Kierkegaard, acknowledge only the aesthetic self as the concrete self, they encounter the problem of *dukkha*, which is known as "the miserableness of life" in Lao's words.⁴¹ To examine Kierkegaard's

³⁶ Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 168.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ For the relationship between *dukkha* (suffering) and *Āsrava* (mental inclination to pleasure), see *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*, ed. by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Boston: Wisdom Publications 2005.

⁴¹ Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 167.

solution to the miserableness of life, Lao reconstructs Kierkegaard's philosophical task of "how to become a Christian" as "virtue completion."

C Becoming Christian as Virtue Completion

Having clarified Lao's understanding of existentialism, it is appropriate to discuss Lao's reconstruction of Kierkegaard's answer to the problem of miserableness. According to Lao, Kierkegaard criticizes all kinds of system or theory that abstract an individual self from reality. Lao quotes Climacus that "only the systematicians and the objectivists have ceased to be human beings and have become speculative thought, which dwells in pure being."⁴² Climacus argues that the real existence of a human being is an individual existence. Everyone exists as an *individual subject*. An objective system, however, abstracts from individuals. Only subjective existence is concrete. Therefore, the aesthetic self that pursues "subjective truth" is more concrete than the moral self and the cognitive self that pursue "objective truth."

As we have seen in section II.A, according to Lao, moral judgments and cognitive judgments are objective, since they are determined by universal principles that are external to an individual self, while aesthetic judgment is determined internally by one's subjective preferences. Therefore, the objective truth in moral and cognitive judgments "departs" from an individual self. As Climacus says, "the solid, sensible subject only stings himself when he wants to grasp it summarily this way, or rather (since it is a spiritual relationship, the stinging can be understood only in a figurative sense) he does not grasp it at all; he grasps its objective truth so objectively that he himself remains outside."⁴³

In order to explain how an individual self is ignored in objective thoughts like moral and cognitive reasoning, Lao refers to the concept of leveling in Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*. He quotes,

Levelling is not the action of one individual but a reflection-game in the hand of abstract power ... While the individual egotistically thinks he knows what he is doing, it must be said that they all know not what they do, for just as inspired enthusiastic unanimity results in something more that is not the individual's, a something more emerges here also.⁴⁴

⁴² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 5; cf. *SKS* 7, 91 / *CUPI*, 184.

⁴³ *SKS* 7, 52 / *CUPI*, 86.

⁴⁴ *SKS* 8, 82 / *TA*, 86.

Levelling cancels the differences among individual selves. As a result, a person loses his/her concrete self, as Lao quotes from Heinemann's interpretation.⁴⁵ Finally, Lao adopts the "seven main points of Kierkegaard's philosophy" from Heinemann's *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*: (1) all essential knowledge is related to existence; (2) all knowledge irrelevant to existence is not important; (3) objective reflection and knowledge are different from subjective reflection and knowledge; (4) objective truth is not important; (5) truth becomes inwardness and subjectivity in subjective reflection; (6) only moral and religious knowledge is essential knowledge; and (7) truth is subjectivity.⁴⁶ Based upon Heinemann's list of the seven main points of Kierkegaard's philosophy, Lao concludes that Kierkegaard's philosophy is merely a "re-evaluation of knowledge" and a "reaction to science." Lao says,

[Kierkegaard] suggests the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity so as to return back to the internal from the external and to the subjectivity from the objectivity ... [H]e denies knowledge and speculation so as to regain the transparency of the subjectivity. In Chinese terminology, he only concerns himself with the question of virtue completion (成德, *cheng de*). However, because the virtues he understands concretely are represented by Christianity, so he emphasizes not to depart from Christianity. His [philosophical] question is actually a question of virtue completion.⁴⁷

While Lao adopts Heinemann's summary of Kierkegaard's philosophy, his criticism of Kierkegaard is slightly different. Heinemann's comment on Kierkegaard is quite negative:

The anti-intellectualism and irrationalism which are implied in Kierkegaard's transition to choice and decision can hardly be counted as positive assets. The opening up of a way from the individual to the Transcendent is valuable; but here the interrelations with other persons and with the world, so vital for the life of the person, are neglected.⁴⁸

Although Heinemann's criticism of Kierkegaard focuses on the absence of objectivity and sociality, Lao focuses on Kierkegaard's lack of a "formal solution" to his own philosophical question. "Kierkegaard does not answer where is the end for such a lamentable and miserable life. However, at least his cries have

⁴⁵ Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, p. 35. See also Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, pp. 39–40. Quoted in Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

broken down the dreams of the peace pretenders. This is the positive meaning of the efforts by the existentialist in the history of philosophy.”⁴⁹ While Lao does not clarify the reasons why Kierkegaard fails to provide a “formal solution” to his own philosophical question, one may reconstruct Lao’s criticism of Kierkegaard as follows: 1) Kierkegaard rejects the moral self and the cognitive self, acknowledging only the aesthetic self. 2) The answer to Kierkegaard’s question of “how to become a Christian” is equivalent to the achievement of virtue completion. 3) Virtue completion can only be achieved by the moral self, not the aesthetic self. 4) Therefore, Kierkegaard cannot answer his question of “how to become a Christian.”

While proposition (1) has already been demonstrated in section III.A, propositions (2) and (3) need to be verified. To this end, one should clarify the Confucian term “virtue completion” (成德, *cheng de*). In Confucianism, virtue completion is the ultimate goal of moral practices. As Zhuxi claims, ‘the superior man [君子] is famous for his virtue completion.’⁵⁰ Wang Yang-ming even claims that “each of you has received the truth from Heaven, so you need to consult no one. The achievement of virtue completion depends solely upon your conscience, while reading old books simply waste your energy.”⁵¹ Wang’s argument agrees with Mengzi, who argues that “Humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not drilled into us from outside. We originally have them with us ... The *Book of Odes* says, ‘Heaven produces the teeming multitude. As there are things, there are their specific principles. When the people keep their normal nature [秉夷], they will love excellent virtue [懿德].’”⁵² Therefore, in the Confucian tradition, virtue completion centers on the manifestation of one’s moral capacity rather than following external instructions.

Given that virtue completion refers to the complete manifestation of one’s moral capacity, it can only be achieved by a moral self (instead of an aesthetic self or a cognitive self) undertaking moral activities. As Lao argues, “if ... Confucius’ spiritual direction is based upon a ‘moral self,’ one should not blame Confucius’ teaching of being uncertain because of his disregard of

49 Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 173.

50 Zhuxi, *Words of Zhuxi*, ed. by Wei-Zheng Chu and Guo-Jun Li, Haikou: Nanfang Publishing House 1995, p. 245.

51 The original text was a Classical Chinese poem: “爾身各各自天真，不用求人更問人。但致良知成德業，謾從故紙費精神。” See Wang Yang-ming, *The Complete Collection of Wang Yang-ming*, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing 1992, p. 1722.

52 *Mencius* 6 A:6; cf. *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Wing-tsit Chan, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963, p. 54.

cognitive regulations [認知規律].”⁵³ “Confucius defines ‘learning’ [學] in terms of ‘achieving virtues’ [進德], so he does not establish any objective reasoning for teaching, but directly helps his students to change the states of their wills so as to achieve virtues.”⁵⁴ Similarly, neo-Confucian Lu Jiu-yuan emphasizes that since “virtue completion requires no knowledge ... his teaching reveals the main theme of ‘subjectivity’ development from the direct lineage of Mencius’ Confucianism.”⁵⁵

As the ways of virtue completion vary with individuals, virtue completion is subjective and requires no objective theory of knowledge. As Chen Jen-Kuen indicates, for Lao, the moral subjectivity in virtue completion is manifested in three aspects: (1) the “explicit dominance of the moral will” (道德意志之主宰性的透顯), that is, moral values are subjectively determined by an individual’s “original mind” (本心); (2) the “rationalization of the moral will” (道德意志的合理化), that is, an individual’s moral self-consciousness is regarded as a moral ‘reason’; and (3) “the harmony between autonomy and sociality” (自主性存在與社會性存在的安立), that is, the reduction of socio-political life into moral life.⁵⁶ Therefore, proposition (3)—virtue completion can only be achieved by the moral self—is true. Moreover, given that Kierkegaard only acknowledges the aesthetic self, according to Lao, Kierkegaard can hardly achieve the task of virtue completion, and therefore he provides no sufficient solution to the philosophical question he proposes.⁵⁷

However, Lao’s argument above is problematic. First, he does not provide any textual evidence supporting his claim for statement (2), that the answer to Kierkegaard’s question of “how to become a Christian” is equivalent to the achievement of virtue completion. Lao overlooks the essential differences between morality and religiousness in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Second, statement (1), that Kierkegaard rejects the moral self and the cognitive self and acknowledges only the aesthetic self, is inconsistent with Kierkegaard’s writings. As we shall see in the following section, Kierkegaard acknowledges the spheres of morality and religiousness, which are independent of aesthetics.

53 Lao, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, p. 154.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

55 Sze-Kwang Lao, *Essentials of Chinese Culture*, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press 2009, p. 27.

56 Jen-Kuen Chen, “The Remembering Collection for the Anniversary of Professor Lao Sze-Kwang’s Death: Lao Sze-Kwang’s Theories of Virtue,” *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy*, vol. 23, 2013, p. 25.

57 Lao, *Introduction to Philosophies of Existence*, p. 173.

By contrast, Lao fails to acknowledge Kierkegaard's idea of religiousness A and B, resulting in his misinterpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy.

IV Evidence against Lao's Interpretation of Kierkegaard

This section argues that Lao's trichotomy of the self overlooks Kierkegaard's argument for the independence of the sphere of religiousness. First, I argue that in *Either/Or* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard acknowledges three kinds of spheres of existence, namely the aesthetic, the moral or the ethical, and the religious. Second, I argue that according to Kierkegaard, the religious is different from the aesthetic and the moral, for religiousness involves existential passion (which is distinguished from aesthetic passion) and dialectical passion (which is distinguished from moral passion). Therefore, Lao fails to allocate religiousness in his trichotomy of the self, where the religious self is absent.

A The Three Spheres of Existence: the Aesthetic, the Moral and the Religious

One should clarify Kierkegaard's concept of passions in order to understand his distinctions among the spheres of aesthetics, morality and religiousness. As George Pattison says, "Kierkegaard distinguished three fundamental modes in which people exist, which he called the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Sometimes he referred to these as different 'life-views,' sometimes as 'stages' of human existence."⁵⁸ One can find textual evidence supporting Pattison's claim in *Stages on Life's Way*:

There are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. The metaphysical is abstraction, and there is no human being who exists metaphysically. The metaphysical, the ontological, is [er], but it does not exist [er ikke til], for when it exists it does so in the esthetic, in the ethical, in the religious, and when it is, it is the abstraction from or a *prius* [something prior] to the esthetic, the ethical, the religious.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ George Pattison, "Søren Kierkegaard: A Theater Critic of the Heiberg School," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 23, 1983, pp. 25.

⁵⁹ SKS 6, 439 / SL, 476–477.

The sphere of the aesthetic is determined by aesthetic passion, which is also known as "the passion of immediacy" or "immediate passion" because it is an unreflected passion; it arises as an immediate response to the impulse. As Barrett states, in *Two Ages*, "the inwardness of Claudine and Marianne is 'immediate' in that it is not a function of any decision to actualize an ideal form of life presented to them by reflection."⁶⁰ Claudine does not have any reflection on her passionate action. Her "decision is stamped by the impetus of a passion, but this again supports her. Her πληροφορία εις πάθος [fullness of pathos] makes her fall, but it also strengthens her again."⁶¹ Given that aesthetes like Claudine and Marianne do not reflect morally, Heerden describes them as "romantic ironists": "they are detached both from the world of immediate (traditional, received) morality as well as from the world of considered (reflected) moral commitment."⁶²

Similarly, in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard further divides the aesthetic sphere into three stages represented by three different Mozart operas: the Page in *Figaro*, Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, and Don Juan in *Don Giovanni*. While Lao does not mention these characters when he discusses Kierkegaard's aesthetic self, in fact Don Juan's endless dissatisfactions of his sexual urges reveal the problem of the "limited freedom of [the] aesthetic self," as Lao indicates. As Léon argues, according to Kierkegaard, "Don Juan can conquer, but he cannot possess, cannot have his object, and he readily sets it aside as soon as natural impulse arises again in him."⁶³ In short, aesthetic passion is the passion of immediacy and results in the problem of dissatisfaction of the self, in agreement with Lao's interpretation of Kierkegaard.

However, the sphere of morality, which is overlooked by Lao's interpretation, is very different. According to Kierkegaard, one enters the sphere of morality and departs from the sphere of aesthetics when one reflects morally and acknowledges the objective uncertainty of moral judgment. Objective uncertainty refers

⁶⁰ Lee Barrett, "Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*: An Immediate Stage on the Way to the Religious Life," in *Two Ages*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer 1984 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 14), p. 61.

⁶¹ SKS 8, 64 / TA, 66.

⁶² Adriaan van Heerden, "Does Love Cure the Tragic? Kierkegaardian Variations on a Platonic Theme," in *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1984 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 11), p. 83.

⁶³ Céline Léon, "The No Woman's Land of Kierkegaardian Seduction," in *Either/Or Part I*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1995 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 3), p. 256.

to the absence of objective evidence, theory or reference for one to follow when making a choice. Kierkegaard notes:

In the moment of the decision of passion, where the road swings off from objective knowledge, it looks as if the infinite decision is thereby finished. However, at the same moment, the existing person is in the temporal realm, and the subjective 'how' is transformed into a striving that is motivated and repeatedly refreshed by the decisive passion of the infinite, but it is nevertheless a striving.⁶⁴

Objective knowledge has no role in moral judgment or ethical choice because it fails to determine the moral self's moral choice. The moral law does not guarantee that a person must follow the universal principle in a particular moral situation. An example would be Mencius' analogy of a child falling into a well: when one sees a child falling into a well, one has a subjective moral feeling of commiseration (惻隱), but this feeling does not necessarily imply any moral action, i. e., saving the child.⁶⁵ Moral actions are determined by an individual's choices. However, as Kierkegaard observes, moral choices assume not only the possibility of choosing right but also of *choosing wrong*. As Sullivan indicates, "Ethical passion simultaneously provides for both the need for continuity and the possibility of the disruption of that continuity, a dual provision that reveals the fractured composition of ethical passion."⁶⁶

Being aware of the possibility of choosing wrong, Kierkegaard encounters a dilemma: On the one hand, one wishes to negate one's own possibility of choosing wrong. On the other hand, however, one cannot make an ethical choice without the possibility of choosing wrong. As Fremstedal states, "ethics demands perfection; anything else implies that one fails completely, that one is infinitely guilty."⁶⁷ The *guilt-consciousness*⁶⁸ arising from one's moral reflection cannot be solved by the moral self since it results from the ontological nature of the individual's existence—the possibility of choosing right and wrong

⁶⁴ SKS 7, 186 / *CUPI*, 433.

⁶⁵ Cf. Mengzi, *Mencius*, ed. and trans. by Philip J. Ivanhoe, New York: Columbia University Press 2009, p. 35 (*Mencius* 2 A:6).

⁶⁶ Shannon Sullivan, "Fractured Passion in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 41, 1997, p. 87.

⁶⁷ Roe Fremstedal, "Original Sin and Radical Evil: Kierkegaard and Kant," *Kantian Review*, vol. 17, 2012, p. 200.

⁶⁸ While this paper cannot cover Kierkegaard's concept of guilt-consciousness in detail, it should be recognized that in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, guilt-consciousness is "the decisive expression for the existential pathos in relation to an eternal happiness" (SKS 7, 484 / *CUPI*, 533).

—which, according to Kierkegaard, can only be overcome in the God-man relationship in the sphere of religiousness.

B Religiousness: Self-Interest in Eternal Happiness and Repentance

Religious passion arises from ethical passion when one realizes that eliminating the possibility of choosing wrong is impossible. Religious passions construct the sphere of religiousness, which can be divided into two kinds: religiousness A, which is the “religiousness of [existential] pathos,”⁶⁹ and religiousness B, which is the “religiousness of the dialectical.”⁷⁰ The former refers to an individual’s self-interest in eternal happiness, while the latter refers to an individual’s self-negation due to repentance and guilt.⁷¹ Kierkegaard argues that only religiousness B is unique to Christianity due to its emphasis on repentance.⁷² As we shall see, because religiousness A and religiousness B are essentially different from aesthetic and moral passions, using Lao’s term, they cannot be manifested by the aesthetic self or the moral self, but a religious self, which is missing in Lao’s trichotomy of the self.

Religiousness A is defined by one’s *existential passion*, namely one’s self-interest in one’s own eternal happiness. “Christianity is spirit; spirit is inwardness; inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion, and at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one’s eternal happiness.”⁷³ It is an “emotion” and is based on passion as interest or concern when Climacus says, “‘a person’s passion [*Lidenskab*] culminates in the pathos-filled relation [*pathetiske Forhold*] to an eternal happiness.”⁷⁴ Come states that “[o]nly in subjectivity is there decision, whereas wanting to become objective is untruth ... In this way the subjective ‘how’ and subjectivity are the

⁶⁹ SKS 7, 352 / CUP1, 387.

⁷⁰ SKS 7, 511 / CUP1, 561.

⁷¹ For the distinction between religiousness A and B, see Robert C. Roberts, “Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith,” in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1997 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 12), pp. 73–94.

⁷² However, Kierkegaard’s view is challenged by Hajime Tanabe who argues that the concept of repentance plays an essential role in Pure Land Buddhism. See Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. by James W. Heisig, Nagoya: Chisokudo 2016, p. 75.

⁷³ SKS 7, 39 / CUP1, 33.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Roberts, “Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith,” p. 82. Cf. SKS 7, 350 / CUP1, 385.

truth.”⁷⁵ Given that religiousness A involves merely subjective interests in one’s eternal happiness while objective knowledge has a minimal role, Kierkegaard claims that subjectivity is truth. However, Kierkegaard believes that religiousness A is insufficient to define Christianity, for all religious belief involves passion in one’s eternal happiness. It is religiousness B that reveals the Christian ideas of *sin*, *offense* and *sympathy* which characterize Christianity.

Religiousness B is defined by one’s *dialectical passion*, namely one’s repentance, which involves three moments: (1) the consciousness of sin,⁷⁶ for in the God-man relationship one realizes that unlike God, one is sinful; (2) the possibility of offense,⁷⁷ for professing Jesus Christ as the Son of God may be regarded as blasphemy; and (3) the pain of sympathy,⁷⁸ for Jesus teaches one to love everyone, including one’s enemies, which is against one’s own nature. Here consciousness of sin differs from guilt-consciousness. The latter only implies that one is aware of one’s possibility of choosing morally wrong, as Fremstedal suggests: “Sin includes more than moral evil, since it undermines man’s relation to God ... [S]in is disobedience against God, and only in relation to the Christian God can one speak of sin proper ... Whereas evil is the opposite of good, sin is the opposite of faith, not the opposite of virtue.”⁷⁹

Sin-consciousness, which is overlooked by Lao’s investigation of Kierkegaard, *distinguishes religiousness from morality*. One is aware of one’s sin when one establishes the God-man relationship while God is sinless. Climacus notes:

The consciousness of sin ... is a change of the subject himself, which shows that outside the individual there must be the power that makes clear to him that he has become a person other than he was by coming into existence, that he has become a sinner. This power is the god in time.⁸⁰

More importantly, Jesus’ moral teaching of universal love implies the “pain of sympathy” because universal love is against one’s human nature. As Kierkegaard notes:

In erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the

⁷⁵ Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1995, pp. 99–100.

⁷⁶ *SKS* 7, 518–520 / *CUP1*, 583–584.

⁷⁷ *SKS* 7, 521–525 / *CUP1*, 585.

⁷⁸ *SKS* 7, 526–528 / *CUP1*, 585–586.

⁷⁹ Fremstedal, “Original Sin and Radical Evil: Kierkegaard and Kant,” p. 214.

⁸⁰ *SKS* 7, 518 / *CUP1*, 584.

neighbor every human being ... *Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal equality in loving*, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference.⁸¹

It is natural that one loves whom one *prefers* to love. As Kierkegaard states, erotic love and friendship are preferential love. However, Jesus requires Christians to manifest universal love. "To love the neighbor ... is self-denial's love, and self-denial simply drives out all preferential love."⁸² However, here is a dilemma: If one denies oneself, one cannot exist as a loving subject to practice neighbor love. Therefore, one must fully depend on God, as Kierkegaard argues:

[O]nly in self-denial can one effectually praise love, because God is love, and only in self-denial can one hold fast to God. What a human being knows by himself about love is very superficial; he must come to know the deeper love from God—that is, in self-denial he must become what every human being can become (since self-denial is related to the universally human and thus is distinguished from the particular call and election), an instrument for God.⁸³

Here Oppenheim notes that "self-denial does not destroy the uniqueness and meaning of the individual's life ... One lives out her or his individuality through the unique role that is bestowed by the grace of God's governance, or as God's instrument for others."⁸⁴ In other words, the grace of God is the solution to an individual's pain of sympathy.

Religiousness B is *dialectical* in the sense that it involves *self-negation*. Religiousness A involves *self-affirmation*, for it affirms one's interest in one's own eternal happiness and therefore affirms the existence of a religious self who wants to establish a God-man relationship. However, in religiousness B, when one is aware of the fact that one is a sinner, one must undertake *self-negation* so as to be reconciled with God, who is sinless. As the modern Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan indicates, here Kierkegaard's "consciousness of conversion assimilates one's own subjectivity," which is an act of "self-negation" (自我否定) and as such is to be distinguished from Confucianism; for in Confucianism "subjectivities are not commended to

⁸¹ SKS 9, 64 / WL, 57–58.

⁸² SKS 9, 61 / WL, 55.

⁸³ SKS 9, 358 / WL, 364.

⁸⁴ Michael Oppenheim, "Four Narratives on the Interhuman: Kierkegaard, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas," in *Works of Love*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1984 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 16), p. 263.

God.”⁸⁵ While Lao is aware of the differences between Confucian and Christian understandings of the concept of transcendence, as we have seen in section III, Lao does not elaborate on the question of self-negation in the light of the Christian understanding of the God-man relation as Mou does. The Confucian idea of virtue completion involves only self-affirmation while Kierkegaard’s concept of religiousness involves both self-affirmation and self-negation. Therefore, it is inappropriate for Lao to claim that Kierkegaard’s philosophical task is equivalent to the achievement of virtue completion.

One may defend Lao by claiming that Lao’s concept of the moral self covers both Kierkegaard’s spheres of morality and religiousness, so it is appropriate for Lao to claim that Kierkegaard’s philosophical task is equivalent to the achievement of virtue completion. According to Lao, the term “moral self” refers to the autonomous moral judgement according to “self-consciousness of oughtness.”⁸⁶ It seems that self-consciousness of oughtness may also cover Kierkegaard’s religiousness A, which is one’s self-interest in one’s own eternal happiness. From Lao’s perspective, in religiousness A, one has already made a value judgement according to certain universal moral principles. In fact, Lao interprets Christian faith merely as an unconditional commitment to an external moral authority. In his *Collection of Essays on Cultural Problems*, Lao argues that “Jesus’s definition of ‘moral goodness’ is simply following God’s commandments ... but fails to articulate the intrinsic meanings of moral goodness. He insists on believing in God just because God is the highest authority.”⁸⁷ Jesus aims to seek a ‘transcendent origin of all beings,’⁸⁸ but his concept of God—an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God—is different from the gods in Greek mythology who are restrained by bodily pleasures and pains and have limited powers. Since God is the absolute transcendent Being, his commandments are universal moral principles. In other words, God defines morality. When one follows God’s commandment, one is saved. In this sense, Lao might argue that his concept of morality can also cover Kierkegaard’s concept of religiousness A. Similarly, in religiousness B, one denies oneself to establish the God-man relationship for the sake of submitting to God the external moral authority.

But there are several flaws in the argument above. First of all, even if Lao’s definition of morality is broad enough to cover Kierkegaard’s concepts of

⁸⁵ Zongsan Mou, *On the Characteristics of Chinese Philosophy*, Taipei: Student Book Ltd. 1998, pp. 21–22.

⁸⁶ Lao, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems*, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Lao, *Collection of Essays on Cultural Problems*, p. 10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

religiousness A and B, he still cannot demonstrate that Kierkegaard's philosophical task is equivalent to the achievement of virtue completion. After all, virtue completion requires only self-affirmation while religiousness B involves self-negation.

Furthermore, in Kierkegaard's context, unlike Lao's assumption, God should not be understood as an external moral authority legislating universal moral principles; instead, in faith, one transcends moral constraints. In *Fear and Trembling*, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering, which can hardly be interpreted as a universal moral principle, which is known as 'ethical' or 'social morality.'⁸⁹ It is not universal because God has only tested Abraham, a single individual, to sacrifice his son, as Johannes de Silentio claims: "Only a person of that kind is put to such a test [*Prøve*]."⁹⁰ Moral principles like "Thou shalt not kill" is "the universal it applies to everyone."⁹¹ However, religiousness is different from morality in terms of the distinction between universality and particularity. "Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal."⁹² Abraham as a single individual had established the God-man relation through faith, which transcends all universal moral principles. "The story of Abraham contains ... a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the single individual, he became higher than the universal. This is the paradox, which cannot be mediated."⁹³ Here Stephen Evans argues that the suspension of the ethical is precisely described by Climacus' words as "a transitory phase which again vanishes, or remains outside life as something altogether irregular,"⁹⁴ although Climacus suggests that the concept of sin has yet to be developed completely in *Fear and Trembling*, because Silentio narrows "the suspension of the ethical" to "a suspension of particular ethical duties" (i.e. Abraham's ethical duties as a father to Isaac), but, according to Climacus, a real suspension refers to the suspension of the "ethical as a total self-sufficient view of life and mode of existence" rather than certain particular moral principles.⁹⁵ Likewise, Lee Seung-Goo explores

⁸⁹ SKS 4, 149 / FT, 55.

⁹⁰ SKS 4, 127 / FT, 31.

⁹¹ SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54.

⁹² SKS 4, 149 / FT, 55.

⁹³ SKS 4, 159 / FT, 66. For a detailed discussion on Kierkegaard's concept of faith as paradox, see *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1993 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 6).

⁹⁴ SKS 7, 242 / CUP1, 267.

⁹⁵ C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality," in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, pp. 22–23.

the meaning of teleological suspensions in the light of the concepts of religiousness A and B in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In *Fear and Trembling*, by a teleological suspension of the ethical, Silentio only means that “the ethical sphere as a whole is suspended for the interests of a higher telos *outside* the ethical sphere. The person who is involved in this teleological suspension of the ethical by accepting a telos outside the ethical is also outside the ethical sphere by the act of faith.”⁹⁶ Therefore, Lee argues that de Silentio fails to acknowledge the concept of religiousness B, which requires the radical negation of the entire ethical sphere and therefore the ethical self.⁹⁷ In other words, Kierkegaard’s concept of faith as paradox is outside the scope of the moral self in Lao’s framework.

From this discussion, it is clear that the religious sphere is distinguished from the aesthetic sphere and the ethical sphere. Religiousness involves both *existential* and *dialectical* passions arising from moral reflections, while the aesthetic involves the passion of immediacy, which is detached from moral reflection. Furthermore, in religiousness B, sin-consciousness and pain of sympathy cannot be reduced to ethical passions because they are revealed only in the *God-man relationship*. In ethical choice, one only encounters the possibilities of choosing right and wrong, but in the God-man relationship, one realizes that one must deny oneself to manifest universal love with the help of God. Given that universal love is against the natural inclination of humans for preferential love, religious passion is also distinguished from aesthetic passion. Claudine and Marianne only love the person they *prefer* to love, while neighbor love requires one to *love everyone*.

V Conclusion: Lao’s Disregard for the Religious Self

Having discussed Kierkegaard’s “three existence-spheres”—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—we can return to Lao’s concluding diagnosis concerning Kierkegaard’s philosophy, which can be summed up in four points: 1) Kierkegaard rejects the moral self and the cognitive self, acknowledging only the aesthetic self. 2) The answer to Kierkegaard’s question of “how to

⁹⁶ Soo-Geung Lee, “The Antithesis between the Religious View of Ethics and the Rationalistic View of Ethics in *Fear and Trembling*,” in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, pp. 118–119.

⁹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 119.

become a Christian" is equivalent to the achievement of virtue completion. 3) Virtue completion can only be achieved by the moral self and not the aesthetic self. 4) Therefore, Kierkegaard cannot answer his question of 'how to become a Christian.'

As we have seen in section IV, statement (1) is false. Kierkegaard acknowledges the aesthetic self, the moral self and the religious self in three existence-spheres. Although Kierkegaard may agree with statement (3), he never tries to manifest morality in the sphere of the aesthetic. Statement (2) is also wrong. "Virtue completion" in Lao's sense only refers to a "complete manifestation of one's moral capacity," which affirms one's moral nature. However, being Christian requires not only *self-affirmation* but also *self-negation*, since Christian teaching of universal love is contrary to human nature. By self-negation, Kierkegaard calls for negating not only the physical body as Lao observes, but also the human nature to love the preferred.

Surprisingly, both Lao's and Heinemann's discussions of Kierkegaard's philosophy overlook the concept of religiousness; neither of them mentions the term. Lao's overlooking of Kierkegaard's concept of religiousness accounts for his significant misinterpretation of the latter's philosophical task. If Lao had realized his disregard of the concept of religiousness, he would have recognized that he cannot situate Kierkegaard's philosophy in his trichotomy of the self, for religiousness cannot be reduced to aesthetic, cognitive or moral activities.

In conclusion we may say that Lao's misinterpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy reveals the weakness of his trichotomy of the self: It fails to situate religious activity without reducing it to aesthetic, moral or cognitive activity. By exploring Lao's misinterpretation of Kierkegaard, this paper reaffirms the uniqueness of religiousness in the latter's thought. Future research may explore not only Lao's misinterpretation of other Christian philosophers (e.g., Karl Jaspers), but the limitations of his trichotomy of the self in his research on Chinese cultures and religions also account for a major portion of his philosophy.