

## Kierkegaard on Inwardness and Subjective Willing

### 1 Introduction

It is well known that Kierkegaard's authorship places an enormous emphasis on the importance of something called 'ethical inwardness'. It is far less clear, however, what such inwardness amounts to. Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of the second volume of *Either/Or* writes:

The individual acts, but this action enters into the order of things that maintains the whole of existence. What is going to come of his action, the one who acts does not really know. . . . If I am contemplating a world-historical individuality, I can then distinguish between the deeds of which Scripture says “they follow him” and the deeds by which he belongs to history. Philosophy has nothing at all to do with what could be called the inner deed, but the inner deed is the true life of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

It is ordinarily taken for granted that in passages such as this, in which one of his pseudonymous authors speak of 'the inner deed,' Kierkegaard is relying on an analysis of action that seeks to factorize action into an 'inner' component and an 'outer' component. Such an analysis involves a reliance on what I will call the 'two-stage conception of action' according to which there is first an inner act of will that unfolds purely in the 'subjectivity' of the individual, that then is followed (if all goes well) by 'objective' results in the world. On the standard reading of these passages, the Kierkegaardian stress on inwardness amounts to the thought that what is important, ethically speaking, is the first stage of action—the willing that precedes whatever takes place in the world. On this view, the first stage of action is a matter of a purely 'interior' willing or a purely 'subjective' movement—it has no visible, outward manifestation until the second stage of action when, if all goes well, the inner act of will makes some difference in the world.

Both such passages in Kierkegaard's corpus (about the ethical importance of an inner movement of the will) and such a two-stage construal of them should not sound unfamiliar. Indeed, these passages

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<sup>1</sup> Judge William [Søren Kierkegaard], *Either/Or II*, translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 174.

are reminiscent, for example, of Kant's remarks about the value of the good will in opening of the first section of the *Groundwork*:

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself, and regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination. . . . Even if, by a special disfavor of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose—if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left (not, of course, as a mere wish, but as the summoning of all the means insofar as they are in our control)--then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself.<sup>2</sup>

From here forward, I will refer to this as 'the jewel passage.'

Corresponding to the standard reading of Kierkegaard, commentators put forward a standard reading of Kant that attributes to him, equally, a two-stage conception of action. In fact, Ronald Green argues on the basis of such parallel passages that this emphasis on the purely inward character of the first stage of action constitutes a significant point of contact between Kierkegaardian and Kantian ethics:

We encounter another important parallel between Kant and Kierkegaard in the idea that the moral worth of person resides in their inner intentions, not in their deeds or the outer consequences of their acts. In this respect, Kierkegaard effects a dramatic movement "back to Kant" by rejecting the Hegelian focus on individuals' "world-historical" significance or their contribution to the unfolding of "spirit" on the stage of history.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:394. Translation from *Practical Philosophy*, edited by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

3 Ronald Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992) 107. C. Stephen Evans makes a similar point: 'Johannes Climacus claims that the moral significance of an action lies wholly in what is intended by the agent. In the final analysis all a person can do is will what is right; the results are really in God's hands. This Kantian depreciation of the consequences of action actually leads Climacus to assert that a truly ethical personality would choose, if it were possible, to be ignorant about the consequence of his actions.' 'Where There's a Will There's a Way: Kierkegaard's Theory of Action,' in his *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self, Collected Essays*, Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2006) 317-318. Evans claims that Climacus' discussion of these points 'sheds light on Kierkegaard's general view of action.' (319). M.G. Piety writes: 'According to Kierkegaard, however, ethical and religious prescriptions are actualized by an individual, not in the sense that his "historical externality" (CUP 482) is made to correspond to them, but in the sense that he has truly willed such correspondence. To agree with the substance of ethical and religious prescriptions is to make a conscious, or inward, effort to bring one's existence into conformity with them.' 'The Epistemology of the *Postscript*,' in *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 199. In a footnote to this passage Piety approves of the thought that external actuality 'is not under the control of the individual' and that 'only the intention, the will, remains as a candidate for ethical action.'

I am skeptical of the adequacy of such an account of the suggested parallel between Kant and Kierkegaard and of the two-stage view of action that he and others who champion such a reading implicitly attribute to Kant and Kierkegaard—both as a reading of each of these figures and as an account of the nature of action. I do, however, think that Green is right that the striking way in which such passages in Kierkegaard echo their counterparts in Kant is a sign of a deep parallel in their respective conceptions of moral agency. Rather than argue here for an alternative conception of action, in this paper I will limit myself to the more modest task of sketching an alternative interpretation of the parallel. My approach to these texts will be, in a way, the exact opposite of Green's. Rather than assuming that we have a good understanding of the jewel passage in Kant and proceeding to read Kierkegaard's texts in light of this understanding, I will marshal Kierkegaardian materials to suggest first an alternative interpretation of such passages in Kierkegaard, which, in turn, will provide an alternative interpretation of the jewel passage itself. This paper, therefore, can be seen as part of a broader strategy of seeking to situate Kant's thought with respect to its inheritance among his immediate 19<sup>th</sup> century successors, some of whom, I suspect, were more sensitive to and had a deeper appreciation of nuances in his practical philosophy that have since been lost to us.

There are some compelling reasons to be suspicious of the view that Green attributes to Kierkegaard and Kant as a philosophical position in its own right. Insofar as this is so, the principle of charity will be one strong mark in favor of the alternative interpretation that I develop here. The standard way of construing the parallel between Kant and Kierkegaard ends up attributing to each of these thinkers a particular substantive view about the nature of moral responsibility. This view, in turn, has figured as the central target in much of the recent literature on moral luck. Many philosophers have, consequently, concluded that if there is such a thing as moral luck, then that very fact constitutes a profound criticism of the views of both Kant and Kierkegaard. More specifically, the standard reading

of both Kant and Kierkegaard attributes to them, in effect, the position that there can be no such thing as resultant moral luck—luck in how things turn out. Bernard Williams sees Kant as interested in establishing a realm of moral evaluation that is both especially important and entirely within the control of the individual. According to Williams' narrative, the very philosophical implausibility of such a conception at once serves to generate its appeal. A conception of morality that denies luck is a fantasy—both in the sense of failing to correspond to reality and in the sense of corresponding instead to what we *wish* were true. Williams diagnoses the allure of such a conception of morality by saying that it 'has an ultimate form of justice at its heart. . . .Kantianism is only superficially repulsive—despite appearances, it offers an inducement, solace to a sense of the world's unfairness.'<sup>4</sup> One can sense the two-edgedness of such praise when a more mature, and by the sound of it grumpier, Williams later reflects that this conception of morality is evidence of 'the tireless aim of moral philosophy to make the world safe for well-disposed people'<sup>5</sup> by distracting us from 'the very plain fact that everything that an agent most cares about typically comes from, and can be ruined by, uncontrollable necessity and chance.'<sup>6</sup>

My aim in this paper will be to offer an alternative understanding of Kant and Kierkegaard according to which they are not liable to such a complaint that their ethical project subjects the individual to a fantasy of insulation—a retreat from the world to an inner sphere where he exercises complete control over his ultimate fate. On my suggested interpretation, they are, instead, interested in the way in which ethical projects have a distinctive temporal structure—and a proper understanding of that structure will reveal it to have an ineliminably worldly dimension of which even its so called 'inner' aspect must partake.

In Section Two, I contrast the two-stage view of action with what I call the 'unitary conception

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4 'Moral Luck' in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1972-1980*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 21.

5 'The Women of *Trachis*' in his *The Sense of the Past*, ed. Miles Burnyeat (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 59.

6 'The Women of *Trachis*', 54.

of action,' according to which willing unfolds (in time and in the world) as an aspect of action itself. In Section Three, in order to get a better grip on the sort of view which is standardly read into passages from Kant and Kierkegaard such as those quoted above, I will bring out how Thomas Nagel's presentation of the problem of resultant luck implicitly relies on a version of what I have called the two-stage conception of action. In Section Four, I outline the way in which a proponent of the unitary conception of action can respond to the supposed problem of moral luck. This response allows us to see that a unitary conception of action is compatible with one of two core Kantian commitments: that the good will does not have bad effects. (It does so, we will see, by nevertheless admitting the possibility of certain forms of resultant moral luck.) But what are we to make of the second core commitment expressed in the jewel passage—that the good will has its full value in itself and not on account of the results it brings about? In Section Five, I offer a way of understanding this second commitment in light of Kierkegaard's notion of a subjective category. On my view, instead of attempting to secure a failure-free-zone in order to offer themselves, and their readers, cosmic comfort, Kant and Kierkegaard ought to be read as distinguishing between two ways in which the value of an activity can be temporally structured. Kierkegaardian inwardness, on my view, has to do with the temporal structure of what I will call 'subjective projects.' I will suggest not only that the two-stage conception of action is philosophically dubious, but that it has served to obscure altogether the real topic of inwardness for Kierkegaard and has, correspondingly, made invisible a fruitful understanding of Kant's topic in the jewel passage. According to the portrait of Kierkegaardian inwardness presented here, inwardness has nothing to do with ultimate control and everything to do with the temporal structure of certain activities, activities unfolding palpably and visibly in our world. In Section Six, I conclude by addressing the worry that conceiving of projects as having a subjective temporal structure commits one as well to the two-stage conception of action. I reply to this objection by way of reflecting on what sort of movie would best portray someone who is afflicted in the way that Kant describes in the jewel passage.

## 2 Two conceptions of action

The standard view of the Kantian position with respect to moral luck has been developed by unreflectively attributing to Kant a two-stage conception of action.<sup>7</sup> My goal in highlighting this as a non-trivial assumption on the part of commentators is to raise the possibility that some of the dissatisfactions that critics have voiced with regard to the Kantian view of moral luck are better directed at the *theory of action* that these critics *read into* Kant. Recognizing that the two-stage view is only one among a range of action-theoretical positions that we could attribute to Kant, will help clear the ground for allowing the jewel passage to shine in a new, Kierkegaardian, light.

It is fairly uncontroversial that for Kant, the objects of moral assessment are willings, and that these are willed actions.<sup>8</sup> But while we may accept that the Kantian is interested in evaluating willed actions, there is more than one way to understand what this means. We can distinguish between two conceptions of the way in which willing relates to action.

**The Two-stage Conception of Action:** The action consists of two components. First, there is the willing. Then there are the consequences of this willing in the world. The willing itself is not a matter of changes being brought about in the world, but results, in the second stage, in some worldly changes coming about if all goes well.

**The Unitary Conception of Action:** According to the unitary conception of action, willing is not a self-enclosed phase of action, but instead willing unfolds as an aspect of the action, in time and in the world. An action does not consist first of willing followed by consequences. Rather an action is a change that unfolds in the world as the will is realized.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Given the way in which Kant's supposed views about the inner nature of the will have been a central stalking horse for those in the literature who champion moral luck and the standard way of identifying the supposed parallel between Kantian and Kierkegaardian ethics, it is hard to see how it amounts to anything more than a mere accident of scholarly reception that Kierkegaard has not figured equally as a bogey man in this literature.

8 See for example, Barbara Herman, 'What Happens to the Consequences?' in her *The Practice of Moral Judgement*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 94.

9 In making this distinction I am relying on Anton Ford's 'Action and Passion,' (unpublished manuscript). My distinction here roughly corresponds to Ford's distinction between volitionism and materialism. In addition, Ford recognizes a third possible conception of action, corporealism. Volitionism: According to this conception of agency, 'what, if anything, actually happens is nothing but a "consequence" of the spiritual act within. Thus, the real event in time and space is not what I do, and is not my action, except by courtesy, in recognition of a causal chain that links it to the inner act of wishing, wanting, striving or intending, which is all I do, properly speaking.' (4) Materialism: On this conception of agency, 'the province of action and practical knowledge extends out, and past, and through one's body, reaching into the

The first of these has figured as the standard understanding of Kantian, which has, in turn, shaped the debate on moral luck: willings are understood as world-independent entities standing in contrast to what actually happens. For instance, Martha Nussbaum sums up the Kantian view as follows: '*No matter what happens in the world*, the moral value of the good will remains unaffected.'<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum here presupposes that we must saddle Kant with the first theory of action according to which willings are conceived of as independent from the actual goings-on in the world.

On both the two-stage view and the unitary view, it can be true to say of two agents who attempted to  $\phi$  that they willed to  $\phi$ , even if only one of the agents, in the end, managed to  $\phi$ . However, the sense in which we can say this of the two agents will be conceived of in very different ways according to each of the different views. On the two-stage view, to say that both agents will have willed to  $\phi$  is not merely to say that there is some common *description* under which both cases can be said to fall. Rather, it is to say that there is some identical *item* which both cases share—a single common *component* of a two stage process of action. On the two stage view we say that both agents have willed to  $\phi$  in virtue of the fact that each of their actions shared an identical willing component (although the actions had a different world-involving component). On the two-stage view, once we say that the agents willed to  $\phi$ , there is no further question about whether their wills are the same with respect to having  $\phi$ -ed—although one  $\phi$ -ed and one didn't, that difference in the world is not a difference in the will.

On the unitary view, to say of the agents (both of whom attempted to  $\phi$ ) that they willed to  $\phi$ , is to say that they each performed some actions in order to  $\phi$  (as part of their project of  $\phi$ -ing). To say that each of the agents willed to  $\phi$  is not, on the unitary view, to settle the question of whether their wills are

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external matter *with which* and *upon which* one is intentionally acting, stopping nowhere shy of what is being suffered at one's hands. . . ' Corporealism: 'On this view the quintessential agentive act is not an inner striving, but instead a bodily movement. Thus, "the first attribution of agency on which the rest depend" is the agent's intentional movement of herself. The corporealism holds that, in the first and definitive instance, what I really *do*, as an agent, is to change the position of my body, and what I really *know*, as agent, is how the position of my body is changed.' (5)

<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4. Italics mine.

identical with respect to having  $\phi$ -ed. On the unitary view, differences in what the agents did are differences in the agents' willing. The agent who managed successfully to  $\phi$  performed the willed action of having  $\phi$ -ed, while the agent who willed to  $\phi$  but didn't succeed never performed the willed action of having  $\phi$ -ed. On the unitary conception of action, the difference between an agent who attempted to  $\phi$  but failed and an agent who successfully  $\phi$ -ed is a difference in the wills of the two agents—a difference in how the wills of the agents are realized in the world.

If it were possible to attribute to Kant the unitary conception of action this would suggest that Kant may not be vulnerable to the charges leveled against him by Williams and Nussbaum (charges of orchestrating a fantastical retreat from reality). Of course arguing for this as the correct interpretation of Kant would take me well beyond the scope of this paper. What I want to establish here is that commentators have been remiss in attributing to Kant the two-stage view of action without *themselves* offering an argument for it. But why have commentators found it compulsory to attribute the two-stage conception of action to Kant? One of the passages cited most often in this connection is precisely the jewel passage. In the jewel passage, we see the expression of two core Kantian commitments:

- (1) the good will does not have bad effects,
- (2) and the good will has its full value in itself and not on account of the results it brings about.

If the unitary conception of action is to be a possible Kantian position, it must be able to square with these two commitments, and this might seem, on the face of it, to be very difficult. I will proceed by showing the way in which it is the two-stage conception of action that is the source of the difficulties attributed to Kant in the moral luck literature. Next I will sketch a the way in which a proponent of the unitary conception of action can respond to the problem of moral luck, avoiding the usual criticisms of Kantianism while at the same time holding onto the first core Kantian commitment (that the good will does not have bad effects). Then I turn to Kierkegaard for an understanding of the second core Kantian commitment that is compatible with the unitary conception of action.



### 3 Trouble for the Two-Stage Conception: The Problem of Resultant Moral Luck

Nagel begins his canonical presentation of the problem of moral luck with a discussion of Kant and the jewel passage: 'Kant believed that good or bad luck should influence neither our moral judgment of a person and his actions, nor his moral assessment of himself.'<sup>11</sup> My aim in this section is both to present briefly the way in which, on Nagel's view, moral luck arises as a problem for Kant, and the way in which Nagel's formulation of the problem relies on the (unquestioned) assumption that Kant must hold a two-stage conception of action. Nagel discusses four types of moral luck (constitutive, causal, circumstantial and resultant). Since I am concerned with the Kantian view of action, I will limit myself here to a discussion of resultant luck.

According to Nagel, moral luck is involved whenever 'a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment.'<sup>12</sup> When this occurs it violates what Nagel calls the 'condition of control': 'People cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control.'<sup>13</sup> For Nagel, moral luck is a *problem* because we are stuck with two competing sets of intuitions, neither of which we can fully rid ourselves of. On the one hand we find ourselves committed to the condition of control, that people cannot be morally assessed for what is due to factors beyond their control. On the other hand, many of our intuitive moral judgments do assess people for things that are beyond their control. For instance, 'the penalty for attempted murder is less than that for successful murder—however similar the intentions and motives of the assailant may be in the two cases. His degree of culpability can depend, it would seem, on whether the victim happened to be wearing a bullet-proof vest, or whether a bird flew into the path of the bullet—matters beyond his control.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck' in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 24.

<sup>12</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 26.

<sup>13</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 25.

<sup>14</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 29.

If the condition of control were supposed to be merely a general principle designed to organize what are, in fact, our moral judgments, then Nagel's examples of moral luck would simply show that the condition of control is an inadequate general principle, since it doesn't properly capture the way we judge. But Nagel insists that, 'The condition of control does not suggest itself merely as a generalization from certain clear cases. It seems *correct* in the further cases to which it is extended beyond the original set.'<sup>15</sup> Nagel's thought is that when we consider particular intuitions in light of the condition of control (for instance, the judgment that there is a moral difference between the murderer and the attempted murderer who had a bird fly in the way of his bullet), we find that it may be more fitting to revise our moral judgment in light of the principle than to revise the principle in light of our (unreflective) moral judgment. The plausibility of the condition of control suggest to us that rather than give up on this condition, it would be rational to narrow the range of our moral judgments to cover only that which is within the agent's control: 'The result of such a line of thought is to pare down each act to its *morally essential core, an inner act of pure will* assessed by motive and intention.'<sup>16</sup> For our purposes, it is important to note that the rational strategy that Nagel proposes here, on behalf of Kant, relies on the assumption that there is an inner act of pure will that can be isolated from whatever happens in the world, an assumption that the proponent of the unitary conception of action would deny.

For Nagel there are two problems with this approach. The first is that, when it is applied consistently, it undermines most of our moral judgments and even our very conception of ourselves as agents. The result of such a ruthless application of the condition of control is, according to Nagel, that 'The area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point. Everything seems to result from the combined influence of factors, antecedent and posterior to action, that are not within the agent's control.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 27.

<sup>16</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 31. Italics added.

<sup>17</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 35.

One might think that this is simply a grim consequence of coming to grips with our condition, but Nagel suggests that there is a second problem with merely resting with this view of ourselves as disappearing points of agency. Although we may be persuaded that our ordinary judgments and our views about our agency (judgments that ascribe moral importance to actual goings-on in the world) are irrational 'they reappear involuntarily as soon as the argument is over.'<sup>18</sup> In this way, as Nagel himself notes, applying the condition of control consistently seems to produce a skeptical argument about our own agency and ordinary moral judgments, and like other skeptical arguments, this one too loses its grip on us as soon as we leave the armchair and go about leading our lives. So for Nagel, moral luck is a problem because we can abandon neither our ordinary moral judgments nor the condition of control. According to the narrative Nagel sketches, it is precisely Kant's insistence on isolating the inner act of will as the sole object of moral assessment that eventually results in agency seeming to disappear from the world altogether.

#### **4 The Unitary Conception of Action: Responding to the Problem of Moral Luck**

In the last section I claimed that Nagel generated the problem of moral luck by implicitly relying on the two-stage conception of action. In this section, I will argue that the problem of moral luck does not arise in the same way if we assume the unitary conception of action. The argument will proceed by working with a particular case—that of the two assassins—and showing the way in which the unitary conception of action blocks the crucial move that generates the problem of moral luck.

In this section I am also concerned to make room for a possible interpretation of Kant according to which he subscribes to the unitary conception of action. I will do this by demonstrating that a unitary conception of action is compatible with the first of the two core Kantian commitments that I identified above, namely that the good will does not have bad effects. On the standard interpretation of Kant,

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<sup>18</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 33.

commentators accommodate this point, as Nagel did above, by isolating the inner act of will and categorically denying the existence of any sort of resultant moral luck. We will see, however, that the unitary conception of action allows one to hold, on the one hand, that the good will does not have bad effects, while admitting, on the other hand, that there are certain legitimate (and unproblematic) forms of resultant moral luck. This strategy involves recognizing two crucial asymmetries:

- (3) the asymmetry between intentional action and unintended consequences
- (4) and the asymmetry between a good will and a will that is in some way flawed.

As for (3), on a unitary conception of action that we ought not understand action as essentially involving an internal movement of the will *plus* (if all goes well) some effect (hard to parse sentence: why 'that?'). Rather, we understand the action (willing) itself as situated in and as bringing about actual changes in the world around us. While we may still want to talk about the effects or the consequences of our actions, this category of events is not operative in an analysis of intentional action itself. As for (4), Kant's claims in the jewel passage concern the good will and leave open the possibility that one of the dangers of having a will that is in some way flawed is that it opens ones to the vagaries of luck.<sup>19</sup>

In demonstrating the way in which the problem of moral luck does not arise for a proponent of the unitary conception of action, I will, therefore, first turn to a case involving intentional action. I will argue that in the case of intentional action, the unitary conception of action at once vindicates our ordinary intuitions (e.g. that murder is morally worse than attempted murder) while at the same time allowing for a *reinterpretation* of Nagel's condition of control.

Consider again the two skilled assassins, each of whom is engaged in the project of murdering an innocent man. Each man arms himself, situates himself appropriately, takes aim and fires his weapon. One assassin murders his victim, while in the case of the second, a bird flies in front of the

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<sup>19</sup> Nagel denies this when, noticing that the jewel passage speaks only of the good will, he extrapolates that Kant 'would presumably have said the same about a bad will: whether it accomplishes its evil purposes is morally irrelevant.' ('Moral Luck,' 24.)

bullet and the target is immediately shuffled to safety. The first man has committed murder, while the second has only attempted murder. Is this a morally salient difference?

According to Nagel, although our ordinary moral judgments suggest that there is an important difference between the murderer and the man who has merely attempted murder, as we reflect on the condition of control, we will be inclined to see that there is not. Nagel claims that as we begin to reflect on the way in which, as far as their own contributions to the proceedings are concerned, the two men are identical, we will be inclined to think that they ought to be subjected to the same moral judgment. As we saw above, the thought is that the two men should be treated the same morally speaking because the willing component of their action (the first stage) is the same in each case, while it is only the resulting changes in the world (the second stage) that is different. If the wills of the two agents are the same, we may wonder: Why should we blame the murderer for the fact that a bird did not fly in the way of his bullet? Or we may think: Why should we let the man who attempted murder off the hook just because a bird flew in the way?

However, the proponent of the unitary conception of action will claim that the appeal of such a line of thought is not the way in which ordinary moral judgment is corrected by rational reflection. Instead, such reasoning relies on the questionable assumption that there is some, to use Nagel's own words, 'essential core,' some 'inner act of pure will,' that obtains in each situation so that we can perform the intellectual operation of taking the goings on as a whole and subtracting 'the effects of occurrences subsequent to the choice' and arrive at the sheer act of will itself.<sup>20</sup> But why think that such subtraction is possible? Recall that it is just this sort of abstraction that the proponent of the unitary conception of action will deny. On this conception of action, action is not composed of willing in the first stage combined with results at the second stage. If it were, then there would be no problem with taking the two happenings, subtracting the varying results (the second stage) and arriving at the act of

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<sup>20</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 31.

will (the first stage). But if willing is itself an aspect of the action that unfolds in time with the events occurring in the world (as the unitary conception holds), then to say that both assassins willed to killed the innocent man is not to isolate an identical willing component of the actions of each of the men. Rather, as we saw in Section Two, on the unitary conception of action to say that both assassins willed to kill the man is to say that each of them engaged in some actions in order to kill the innocent man, as part of the project of assassinating him. But this is not to settle the question of whether their wills are identical with respect to having killed an innocent man. In one case, the man engaged in the willed action (the willing) of killing the man, while in the other case he did not. According to the unitary conception of action, there will be no identical inner component of action that the two assassins share.<sup>21</sup>

Responding to the problem of moral luck this way places an emphasis on what Nagel himself notes: that these ordinary judgments (e.g. that murder is morally worse than attempted murder) recur. Reflecting on the condition of control cannot fully loosen their grip on us. The unitary conception of action can give these ordinary judgments their proper weight while reinterpreting the control principle.

As we saw, the murderer is a skilled marksman who has armed himself, situated himself appropriately, taken aim and fired. At what point in the proceedings were the events not within his control? At no point—since through the exercise of his capacities as an assassin he controlled the situation perfectly. Through the exercise of his capacities as an assassin, he killed a man. Why should we be forced to say that what he *really* did was anything less? It seems to me wrong to say, 'Properly speaking, he didn't really *kill the man*, he pulled the trigger which in this case had the unfortunate effect

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21 The unitary conception of action can concede that there is a sense in which we can say that the two assassins have something in common—that they both willed to kill an innocent man. But what this amounts to is that we can say of each of them that he engaged in some actions in order to assassinate the man. And in the case of the man who fails to bring off the murder, we can say of him that it was in virtue of this unifying aim of killing the innocent man (in the service of which he bought the gun, situated himself, took aim, pulled the trigger, etc.) that his actions amounted attempted murder—rather than, say, dove hunting. One might insist that the problem of moral luck arises again here, because we can say of both assassins that they willed to kill an innocent man. But if we allow that the differences in outcome is nevertheless reflected in the wills of the two agents, then this point only raises the question of whether attempts have the same moral significance as successfully completed doings. This, it seems to me, is an open question, and (on the unitary conception of agency) *we are not forced to close it* by reflecting on the way in which the willing component of the actions of the two agents are the same.

of . . . ' or 'Properly speaking, he didn't really *kill the man*, he just willed to kill him, which in this case had the unfortunate effect. . . .' These responses fail to come to grips with the way in which when we act, we change the world, not just our bodies, and not just our wills. This is, I take it, what our ordinary moral judgment says and why it won't go away in light of reflecting on the condition of control. However, it is worth noting, that although this judgment does not conform to the condition of the control as Nagel applies it, there is another, perfectly ordinary sense in which when we blame the successful assassin *for murder*, he is not blamed for anything that is outside of his control.

But what are we to make of the idea that in the case of the murderer too, a bird *could have* flown the way of his bullet? Does this reflection force us into accepting the idea of an essential inner core of the action shared by the murderer and the man who attempts murder? Does the fact that a bird could have flown in the way of the bullet undermine the thought that the murderer is not blamed for anything outside of his control? It would do so only if we believed that *whatever is within our control is infallibly within our control*. This suggestion relies on the thought that the possibility of the loss of control is enough itself to undermine control. The proponent of the unitary conception of action will, however, deny this claim, since our capacities to act in the world are fallible capacities.

(5) The murderer is in control of the situation.

(6) A bird could have flown in the way of the bullet.

If we begin with the thought that 5 is true, 6 need not cast doubt on 5. 6 may be read as implying only:

(7) It is possible that the murderer could have lost control of the situation.

(7) would cast doubt on (5) only if we are committed to the further claim that:

(8) In order to be in control of a situation, it must be impossible that one can lose control of it.

But 8 is false.<sup>22</sup> What's more, the proponent of the unitary conception of action has principled

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22 This statement might have some ring of truth to it, insofar as it is part of the exercise of a skill to account for and to control precisely those aspects of a situation that could lead to one's losing control. Nevertheless, even for the most expert practitioners of any skill, (8) is still false. Even in these cases, the very possibility of his losing control, however remote it may be, does not itself undermine that control. Thanks to Will Small for helping me to see this point.

reasons for rejecting 8, since she believes that our agency is at once thoroughly world-involving and fallible. The way in which Nagel's reflections on moral luck lead him worry that the agent gradually shrinks to an extensionless point is no more than the inevitable consequence of the two-stage conception action with which Nagel begins.

But what are we to say about the assassin who fails to kill his target? He failed to do what he was trying to do—he failed to perform the action he was aiming at. And perhaps there is some luck in that. If one is bad enough, after all, it might be lucky that one is not in control, that the world squelches one's agency and prevents one from doing the things that one would otherwise have done. This doesn't mean that the man who attempts murder is let off the hook morally—after all, it is not as if he didn't do anything. Everything that *he actually did* in our scenario was very bad, and attempted murder is, morally speaking, a serious offense. I think that all this, too, fits well with our considered opinions. Imagine, for instance, that this man is captured and imprisoned for attempted murder. During his time there he undergoes a moral conversion. We can imagine him justified in, on the one hand, repenting of the plot and, on the other hand, thanking God that it was unsuccessful, that in addition to all of his other wickedness, he didn't have that man's life on his conscience. This same point applies equally to the person with the good will who fails to bring off his projects. It seems to me that Aristotle is right when he remarks that, 'at the Olympic Games it is not the finest and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for the winners come from among these), so too in life it is the doers that become achievers of fine and good things—and rightly so.'<sup>23</sup>

But the account so far cannot be the whole story about the way in which the proponent of the unitary conception of action responds to the problem of moral luck. This is because the ordinary judgments of moral luck concern not just what a person does, where this is a matter of intentional action, but much that a person does without intending to do it. Suppose that one drunk driver hits a man

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1099a3-7.



and kills him, while another drunk driver makes it home safely. It will not do to say, as we said of the marksman, that the situation is under the control of either driver—what is wrong with drunk driving is that it is putting others at risk by driving when one is not fully in control of one's faculties or the vehicle. What's more, there seem to be cases of moral luck (in which we judge one person more harshly than another) where the question is not one of the agents *doing* anything different (intentionally or unintentionally) at all. To borrow an example from Susan Wolf, imagine that two men have affairs with married women, and in only one case the spouse ends up committing suicide.<sup>24</sup>

Nagel's presentation of the problem, which has been highly influential on the moral luck literature, does not make a principled distinction be made between intentional doings, on the one hand, the unintended consequences of ones intentional actions, on the other. For Nagel, there is simply resultant luck, luck in the way things turn out. On the two stage conception, *every* action can be resolved into the inner act of will and its consequences in the world. In this respect, intended consequences and unintended consequences of an inner act of will are, for the two-stage theorist, conceptually on a par. But if one sees intentional action as primarily a matter of changing the world, then the consequences of one's actions will require a different treatment than actions in the proper sense. In what follows, I will not be able to offer an argument for the treatment of unintended consequences that I will suggest. But, in order to get the whole picture on the table before turning to Kierkegaard's subjective categories, I will sketch one reply on behalf of the unitary conception of action to the remaining cases of resultant moral luck.

In the case of intentional action, the strategy that I suggested on behalf of the proponent of the unitary conception of action was to reject Nagel's *interpretation* of the condition of control while nevertheless granting the legitimacy of the condition once it is has been reinterpreted. When it comes to things the unintended consequences of ones actions, the proponent of the unitary conception should

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Wolf, 'The Moral of Moral Luck, *Philosophic Exchange*, 31 (2001),

admit that the condition of control is not true of these sorts of cases. Part of the risk that one runs when one's activity of willing is in some way flawed is that one may be morally responsible for the unintended consequences of one's actions. This is especially evident if we simply consider the concept of negligence—the very notion of which involves the thought that by behaving irresponsibly, one leaves it up to chance whether something terrible might result from such behavior. Consider the case of the drunk driver who ends up killing someone. On the one hand, we ought to recognize that drunk driving is, morally speaking, incredibly problematic. But this doesn't imply that the drunk driver who takes a life should in any way console himself with the fact that many people drive while drunk and never bring about such consequences, and that he is after all, only as bad as they are.<sup>25</sup> What's more, I believe, *neither should we* console him with this thought.

Susan Wolf considers a similar case of two truck drivers who fail to get their brakes checked:

I earlier suggested that we would expect the truckdriver who runs over a child to feel very bad about what he has done, much worse than we would expect or want an equally reckless but much luckier driver to feel. Yet, as the drivers' friends, or even sympathetic observers, it would be appropriate to try to make the first driver feel less bad, to emphasize how limited was his faultiness and how large the element of luck. In other words, it would be appropriate for third parties to bring out the equal faultiness in the two drivers - this, despite our sense that the two drivers themselves ought not, at least to begin with, feel equally bad.<sup>26</sup>

To return to the case we were discussing, that of drunk driving, I would not be inclined to console a friend who had taken the life of another while driving drunk in the way that Wolf suggests. I doubt I would try to convince him that his fault was limited and that bad luck played into it. I think that I would be more inclined to sit with him in silence and to reflect on the the loss that he brought about, certainly not because he aimed to bring it about, but because he acted in ways that were risky and that disregarded the well being of others.

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25 Nor does it seem to me irrational that one should be (deeply troubled but also) relieved, morally speaking, if one drives home drunk without having harmed anyone.

26 Wolf, 'The Moral of Moral Luck', 10.

There is a time for consoling our friends with the thought that what happened was just bad luck. But the time for such consolation is *when what happened wasn't their fault*—not, as in the case of a drunk driver who takes a life, when their irresponsible behavior has resulted in loss and grief for others. But this is simply to return us to the condition of control and the role it plays in ordinary moral discourse, before it is given its philosophical articulation (through a two-stage conception of action) that led to skeptical arguments. As Nagel says, 'a clear absence of control, produced by involuntary movement, physical force, or ignorance of the circumstances excuses what is done from moral judgment.'<sup>27</sup> And this ordinary enough, minimal point is all that the Kantian needs for the first core Kantian commitment: that the good will doesn't issue in bad results.<sup>28</sup>

#### *The Unitary Conception of Action and Moral Luck*

	Intentional Action	Morally Relevant Unintended Consequences
Good will	No moral luck when one acts unimpeded. Can have bad moral luck through failing to do what one intends to do through an exercise of a fallible capacity.	No moral luck: the good will has no bad consequences.
Flawed will	No moral luck when one acts unimpeded. Can have good moral luck through failing to do what one intends to do through an exercise of a fallible capacity	Moral luck: the flawed will opens itself to moral liability for bad consequences.

<sup>27</sup> Nagel, 'Moral Luck,' 25.

<sup>28</sup> It would take more argument to establish conclusively that the good will does not have bad results. There are certainly cases where the good will results in something unfortunate (and, in that sense, bad) occurring. For instance, I may act benevolently in an attempt to help an old lady across the street, and in doing so she may be hit by a car. Suppose that were I not to have acted benevolently, she would have taken longer to cross and would not have been hit by the car. What is important for us with respect to moral luck is the question of *morally bad results*. The intuition that I appeal to above is that if we don't find a flaw in my will, I am not morally to blame for such consequences. The point of marking a distinction between a good will and a flawed will is to show that arguments from negligence, culpable ignorance, etc. (that establish that in some cases unfortunate results can also be morally bad results) do not show that in cases where there is only good will (no negligence, culpable ignorance, etc.) that such a will has morally bad results.

## 5 Kant, Kierkegaard and the Temporality of Subjective Projects

So far I have been arguing that we needn't ascribe to Kant and Kierkegaard a two-stage conception of action that factorizes action into a willing component and a world-involving component. If Kant and Kierkegaard are interpreted as holding a unitary conception of action, then their position with respect to moral luck will have to be radically re-evaluated. They will not be subject to the criticism of ignoring what happens in the world as part of a fantastical attempt to isolate what is most important to the individual from the impact of chance. On the unitary conception of action, willed actions are happenings in the world. Willings are not inner acts that bring about changes in the world if all goes well, rather willings *are* certain changes in the world.

But if willings are not purely inner movements, as imagined by the proponent of the two stage conception of action, how are we, then, to understand the Kantian emphasis on the way in which the good will is 'good in itself' apart from what it achieves and the corresponding Kierkegaardian stress on the importance of ethical inwardness and the 'inner deed'? We began by considering a passage in Kierkegaard, echoing a passage in Kant, where it has been assumed by commentators that both thinkers are straightforwardly espousing a two-stage conception of action. If it is to be possible to understand Kant and Kierkegaard as holding a unitary conception of action, then we must be able to make sense of these passages in some other way. The question is one of how to reconcile the unitary conception of action with what I have been calling the second core Kantian commitment, that the good will has its full value in itself and not on account of the results it brings about. My aim in this section will be to marshall Kierkegaardian materials in order to offer a new understanding of Kierkegaardian inwardness that can, in turn, shed light on Kant's jewel passage.

I will make my case for this alternative understanding of inwardness by attending to the details of several of Kierkegaard's texts. The picture that I will ultimately develop is one according to which

there are two sorts of projects: objective projects and subjective projects. These projects differ from one another according to the way in which the activity involved in engaging in these projects is temporally structured with respect to the aim of the project. When it comes to objective projects, the activity involved in bringing about the aim is external to the aim itself; when it comes to subjective projects, the activity involved in bringing about the aim is internal to the aim of the project. In the case of objective projects, bringing about the aim is a result of the activity. In the case of a subjective project, there is no result that is separable from the activity itself. I will suggest a reading of the jewel passage according to which willing is a subjective project, and to say that good willing has its full value in itself is to highlight this temporal relationship between the activity and the aim.

Recall that in the passage with which we began, Judge William writes, 'If I am contemplating a world-historical individuality, I can then distinguish between the deeds of which Scripture says "they follow him" and the deeds by which he belongs to history.'<sup>29</sup> On the standard understanding of this passage, the deeds that follow a man are his purely inner acts of will, while the deeds 'by which he belongs to history' are any actual occurrences in the external world. However, this standard understanding does not square easily with other things that Judge William says about what it means for an individual or a relationship to have a history and the different sorts of history that such an entity might have. So in developing my alternative understanding of passages such as this, it will be helpful to consider what Judge William has to say about history.

In Judge William's letters to the esthete one of the main topics is marriage, the central example of an ethical undertaking. Perhaps surprisingly, Judge William uses his reflections on love and marriage as a springboard for his analysis of the temporal structure of the ethical life. Judge William says that what he will argue for is that 'it is the essential nature of first love to become historical, that the condition for that is precisely marriage, also that the romantic first love is unhistorical, even though one

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<sup>29</sup> Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 174.

could fill folios with the knight's exploits.<sup>130</sup> When Judge William speaks of romantic love, he has in mind love as it is portrayed in certain poems and dramas involving, for instance, 'a knight who has slain five wild boars, four dwarfs, has freed three princes from a spell, brothers of the princess he adores.'<sup>131</sup> As we saw, Judge William claims that such a love is 'unhistorical.' Now, on the standard view of inwardness, this should be perplexing, since inwardness contrasts with history, where history is a matter of what actually happens in the world. But in the case of such a romantic love, a great deal has happened in the world, as Judge William himself notes ('one could fill folios with the knight's exploits'), and yet the love is unhistorical. A further feature of the discussion that is difficult to make sense of on the standard view of inwardness is that marriage itself (a paradigmatic ethical task) is praised by Judge William precisely for being *historical*. If ethical inwardness is supposed to contrast with what happens in the world, then why would the ethical be understood as the historical?<sup>32</sup>

Later in the same letter, Judge William explains his views on history further in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

With respect to individual life, there are two kinds of history—the outer and the inner. It has two currents that flow in opposite directions. The first, in turn, has two sides. The individual does not have that for which he strives, and history is the struggle in which he acquires it. Or the individual has it but nevertheless cannot take possession of it, because there is continually something external that prevents him. History, then, is the struggle in which he overcomes these obstacles. The other kind of history begins with possession, and history is the process by which he acquires it. Since in the first case the history is external and what it strives for lies outside, history does not have true reality [*Realitet*], and the poetic and artistic representation consists altogether properly in foreshortening it and hastening on to the intensive moment.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 47.

31 Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 134.

32 The fact that what the Judge says seems, on the face of it, contradictory has not gone unnoticed. For instance, Stephen Dunning, after noting that many of the ways in which the Judge talks about the inner and the outer seem contradictory concludes that, 'Marital love has the strength to internalize first love, but that very internalization also results in the aesthetic externalization of love. When marriage conquers the immediacy of first love by internalizing it, it also submits itself to the transfigured aesthetic and thus to the process of externalization.' (Stephen N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 90.) On my view, however, we needn't attribute to the Judge inconsistencies, not even ones that are to be reconciled through a dialectic of reciprocity (as on Dunning's view).

33 Judge William, *Either/Or II*, XXX

Here Judge William expresses the idea that there are two sorts of history, internal and external, and that it is internal history that should be understood as having true reality. An external history is the account of an individual who lacks what he is striving for and is struggling to attain it. An internal history is an account of an individual who possesses what it is that he is striving for, and yet must go on in time struggling to acquire it. To take the example of love acquiring a history, the external history is the account of the way in which the knight overcomes various obstacles (all of which are external to the possession of his beloved) in order to be with the beloved. This gives us an account of the activity through which the relationship came to be, but not an account of the relationship itself as it endures through time. It is in this sense that an external history of a love affair does not give us the true history of that love. It is the history *leading up to* the love, but it is not the history of the love itself as it moves through time. This is why Judge William says of romantic love both that it is unhistorical and that it has a merely external history.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the Judge's account of internal history is the question: how and why would a person struggle to acquire that which he already possesses? If he already possesses it, isn't the struggle, after all, over? On my reading of these passages, is not as if an aim can have both an internal and an external history. Rather, the potential for an internal or an external history divides aims into two categories. With respect to some aims, an external history is totally appropriate and there will be no internal history. For instance, if I aim to build a house, the history of my endeavor will be an external history: it will give an account of the obstacles that I overcame to bring the house into being. Once this house is built, I can live in it without continuing with the struggles of building. With respect to some aims, it would distort the aim itself to conceive of it as having an external history. For some aims, such as engaging in a loving relationship, an internal history is appropriate to the aim. According to Judge William, the problem with romantic poetry is that it conceives of love as having an external history in the way that housebuilding does. But even if getting the girl has the same temporal structure

as building a house, having a wife hardly has the same temporal structure as having a house. (In fact, although we can say that one has both a house and a wife, there is something offensive even in the grammatical parallel.) As any married couple knows, the wedding is not the event that ends all struggles for the relationship, but it is where the struggling begins.<sup>34</sup> Humility, patience, marital love, friendship and vocation are Judge William's examples of ethical aims that require an inner history. As Judge William says, 'When it is a matter of inner history, every single little moment is of utmost importance. Inner history is the only true history, but the *true history struggles with that which is the life principle in history—with time*—but when one struggles with time, the temporal and every single little moment thereby has great reality.'<sup>35</sup>

Although he uses more abstract language, the same understanding of the temporality of the ethical is crucial to Climacus' account of subjectivity. The touchstone of Climacus' understanding of the individual considered ethically and religiously is that he exists in time and is in the process of becoming. For instance, Climacus complains that, 'Precisely because abstract thinking is *sub specie aeterni*, it disregards the concrete, the temporal, the becoming of existence, and the difficult situation of the existing person because of his being composed of the eternal and the temporal situated in existence.'<sup>36</sup> Climacus uses the term 'subjective' as a generic category that includes both the ethical and the religious. In his discussion of becoming subjective, he echoes Judge William's language to do with struggling with time itself. He writes,

When in a written examination young people are given four hours to write the paper, it

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<sup>34</sup> Consider for instance, what Stanley Cavell says in the course of his interpretation of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*: 'The form the marriage charade takes is yet more significant. The pair mean the routine to convince hardened, suspicious observers on the spot that they are a seasoned couple, and their knock-down proof is to bicker and scream at each other. This laugh over the misery of a squalid, routine marriage poses at the same time a puzzle over the almost incessant bickering the pair have engaged in on their own from the instant they meet and dispute a seat on the bus. As if there may be bickering that is itself a mark, not of bliss exactly, but say of caring. As if a willingness for marriage entails a certain willingness for bickering. . . .' (Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 86).

<sup>35</sup> Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 134. Italics added.

<sup>36</sup> Climacus, Johannes [Søren Kierkegaard], *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 301.



makes no difference whether the individual finishes ahead of time or uses the whole time. Here, then, the task is one thing and time something else. *But when time itself is the task*, it is a defect to finish ahead of time. Suppose a person is given the task of entertaining himself for one day and by noon is already finished with the entertainment—then the speed with be of no merit. So it is also when life is the task. To be finished with life before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all.<sup>37</sup>

We can organize these reflections on the the temporality of inner and outer history by distinguishing between two different sorts of projects. I will borrow Climacus' language of 'subjective' and 'objective' to mark this distinction.

### ***Objective projects***

A project like building a house, has a beginning, a middle and an end, and these phases are each different from one another. The aim of the phases of the activity leading up to the end is to bring the end into being. All of the house building is for the sake of there being a house that is built. This kind of project has two features that are important for our purposes:

(a) *The activity involved in such a project is valuable because of the result that it brings about.* The activities involved in the phases leading up to there being a house are given their value in light of the existence of the house. This is evident if we imagine that, for whatever reason, the builders are not able to finish the house. Those who were trying to build the house don't say, 'Well, at least we got some good building in, even if we never finished the house.' Instead, they are inclined to think that they wasted time and resources on a project that never came to fruition.

(b) *The result can go on existing apart from the process that brought it into being.* Once the house is built, the project is over, and one can enjoy the fruits of the labor from the early stages without having to go on engaging in the same sort of activity. Although, of course, the house could be destroyed, so long as it stands, one has what is of value in this sort of project without continually engaging in building.

### ***Subjective projects***

Friendship (like marriage or vocation) isn't structured in the same way with respect to time. No doubt, friendships get started at some point, but once one is engaged in the project of being a friend, this isn't aiming at some result that is external to the friendship itself, to finally be brought about at some later phase in the proceedings. A project like friendship stands in a complicated relationship to projects of the first sort. For one thing, a friendship sets one off on projects of the first sort that one might not have otherwise engaged in—to build her a house, to make her a meal, to write her a poem. The friendship, we could say, inheres in the doing of things like this, because the person is a friend. So although what exactly a friend is doing at any moment may have the structure of the first sort of project (preparing a cup of tea), at each moment, with respect to the project of friendship, what one is up to is being a friend.<sup>38</sup> We'll call

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37 Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 164.

38 It is not implausible to think that what one is up to at any moment that one is engaged in such a subjective project not only may but *must* also have the structure of an objective project. When one acts as, say, a friend, one undertakes all

a project that has a temporal structure like this a subjective project. Friendship is unlike building in the two respects discussed above:

(c) *The activity involved in such a project is not valuable because of an independent result that it brings about, but because of the activity itself.* The value of being a friend is not given in light of some concluding phase—a final friendship consummation—that would give value to the preceding activities. We can see this in light of the fact that if a friendship is interrupted, the friends will say, 'But at least during all that time we were true friends.' And will not say, as did the builders, that it was all rendered a waste of time, effort and materials because there was some final stage that did not come off.

(d) *There is no result apart from the activity that continually brings the project itself into being.* The project of being friends does not issue in something external to the friendship that the friends enjoy once they've ceased to engage in the project of being friends.

With respect to a project like building a house, there is a period where the house is incomplete, and then there is a period following this where the house is complete. When it comes to friendship we could say that in each moment it is at once complete and incomplete. Being friends is complete if we compare it to the building phase when a building is coming into being, since when the friends are being friends, there is nothing that they are lacking, no end external to the friendship that they must reach in order to give their activity of being friends value. But being friends is incomplete if we compare it to the phase when the house has been built, since being friends requires, in each moment, that the friends go on being friends. Being friends is never a result that is finished, as the house is finished, but requires the friends to keep striving—keep up the activity of relating to one another as friends. When Judge William speaks of the beauty of marriage, he says that it 'has a similarity to music, which is only because it is continually repeated, is only in the moment of being performed.'<sup>39</sup> We could say the same for the value of friendship.

In light of our analysis of Judge William on history, we can now say that it is of the nature of objective projects to acquire an external history (striving through which the thing was brought into

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sorts of projects that have an objective structure (e.g. making dinner), and it is not as if being a friend is something that one does in *addition* to all of these. Rather, being a friend is an activity one engages in *through* engaging in these other projects.

<sup>39</sup> Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 137.

being), while it is of the nature of subjective projects to acquire an internal history (striving through which the aim that is, in one way, already completely attained, must at each moment be maintained through the process of becoming).<sup>40</sup>

Let us first turn to the passages in Kierkegaard's authorship to see how this distinction between objective and subjective projects can help us to understand the 'inner deed,' before turning to the way in which this distinction can illuminate the jewel passage. To say of the ethical life that it is concerned with the 'inner deed' is to say that it is concerned with activity (in the world) that is internally related to the realization of ethical aims. Subjective projects involve inner deeds, in the sense that the deeds are not external to the aim for the sake of which they are undertaken. On this reading, the problem that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors have with world history in relation to ethics is not that it is occupied with the world (where this is understood as opposed to a sphere of purely inner movements) nor that it is concerned with history (where this is understood as a matter of what actually takes place in the world). Rather, the problem that these authors find with world history is that it is an account of an *external* history, and to conceive of an ethical project as having an external history is fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of such a project.<sup>41</sup>

This division between objective and subjective projects is a division between two sorts of human activities, each of which unfolds in the actual world. When it comes to subjective projects, it doesn't matter from the point of view of that project, as Judge William says, 'what is going to come of

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40 We can also say, then, that Judge William's criticism of romantic love amounts to the claim that it conceives of a subjective project as if it were an objective project—conceives of the struggles of love as a matter of getting the girl rather than as a matter of engaging in a relationship.

41 At one point, Climacus makes a criticism of the purported ethical significance of world-history that is very close to Judge William's criticism of romantic love. Judge William says of the poet that 'he has no interest in punctiliously describing what happened in the slaying of each particular wild boar. He hastens on to the moment. Perhaps he curtails the number, focuses the hardships and dangers in poetic intensity and speeds on to the moment, the moment of possession.' (Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 134). Judge William thinks that this is apt insofar as what is being portrayed is romantic love which has an external history. Climacus thinks that by the lights of the proponent of world-history, it is perplexing that God does not behave more like the poet in foreshortening the obstacles. He writes, 'The world-historical drama proceeds extremely slowly. Why does God not make haste if that is all he wants? What undramatic forbearance or, more correctly, what a prosaic and boring spinning out process!' (Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 158). It is because world-history has the temporal structure of an objective project that Climacus claims, for instance, that 'the system lacks an ethics.' (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 307)

his action' in the following sense: the value of the activity value has already been established, it does not wait upon some further result. According to Judge William if one has been engaged in the project of being a husband or a friend, or of pursuing one's vocation, then one has been engaged in valuable activity, regardless of what happens next.

Let's now turn to Kant's jewel passage. So far I have been drawing on Kierkegaard's authorship in order to analyze the temporal structure of subjective projects such as friendship. But what does this have to do with the good will? My suggestion is that we understand having a good will on the model of having a friend, a wife or a vocation. Good willing has the temporal structure of a subjective project. On this reading, Kant is claiming that the activity of the good will, like the activity of friendship, has its value 'in itself' in the sense that at each moment it has its full value. Good willing, like being a friend, but unlike building a house, has its value in virtue of its own ongoing activity, not in virtue of a final phase (some result or further purpose that it brings about). Good willing is like being a friend in the further respect that it too sets us off on projects that have the temporal structure of objective projects. The activity of being a friend or the activity of good willing may inhere in literally building someone a house. But the value of such activity is not reflected back from the value of the house itself, in the way that it is when what is at stake is housebuilding *qua* housebuilding.

It is in this sense that 'its usefulness or fruitlessness can neither augment nor diminish this value.' On the view I have been sketching, Kant is not imagining a purely inner movement of the will that would bear fruit on the condition that it could make its way out into worldly goings on. Rather, Kant is identifying a way in which the worldly goings on that constitute the good will have value apart from whether or not the objective projects in which such a good will inheres bear fruit by reaching their final stages.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the unitary conception of action is compatible with the second core Kantian

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<sup>42</sup> It is a familiar enough point that a friendship can give meaning and value to goings on that would otherwise be meaningless or in some way arbitrary. It is the friendship that makes the glance, the thoughtful gift, the favorite meal, meaningful. Friendship sets us off on engaging in such projects as making dinner, and also provides the context in which such a dinner is valuable. Things are not the other way around: being friends is not valuable because it means that

commitment that the good will has its full value in itself and not on account of the results it brings about.

## 6 Subjective Willing and Moral Luck: Dramatic Reflections

I have been concerned here to sketch a new interpretation of the jewel passage, and similar passages in Kierkegaard's authorship, according to which these passages do not express a two-stage conception of action that attempts to factorize action into a purely inner movement of the will and the results of that inner movement that occur in the world. Rather, on my alternative reading, these passages presuppose both a unitary conception of action and a distinction between objective (world-involving) projects and subjective (world-involving) projects and the way in which each of these are structured with respect to time. On this reading, Kant and Kierkegaard are each making a point about the way in which the activity of engaging in a subjective project is not given value in light of independently conceived results (because it is useful for something else), but is valuable in itself. This strategy, I have argued, can avoid the criticisms made by thinkers such as Nussbaum and Williams who charge the Kantian (standardly understood) with failing to accord any importance to what actually happens in the world and with attempting to fashion a fantastical realm of inner life that is impervious to the onslaughts of chance.

In this section I will consider a worry about this strategy of interpretation. One might object that my reading of the jewel passage does not in fact make room for the unitary conception of action.

According to this objection, although this reading changes the subject to temporality, it nevertheless

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sometimes I get fed, and fed something that I especially like. Kant claims that that there is some activity, good willing, such that all projects temporally structured like housebuilding stand in this relationship of dependence to it. All projects like housebuilding that aim at some *result*, that have some purpose apart from the activity itself, are valuable only on the condition that they are pursued as part of the activity of good willing—are valuable on the condition that the activity of good willing inheres in them at each moment. Things are not the other way around: the activity of good willing isn't valuable because it conduces to independently valuable results (houses, meals or pleasant feelings). To understand what is distinctively Kantian about this claim about good willing in contrast to a similar claim about the way in which friendship can imbue objective projects with meaning and value, we would need to bring into view the purely formal character of good willing.

commits Kant to a two-stage conception of agency, since the activity of good willing that I have emphasized appears to be an activity that is independent of anything that actually happens in the world—good willing remains, on my alternative interpretation, independent of results. And this, so the worry goes, is just to return to the two-stage picture of agency.

In the course of replying to this objection, it will prove helpful to meditate briefly on just what it is that Kant is asking us to imagine in the jewel passage when he proposes the possibility that 'by a special disfavor of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose. . . .' One thing that Kant might be asking us to imagine is something like Aristotle's example of the person who is being tortured on the wheel.<sup>43</sup> We may imagine that although the person is no longer able to move, and perhaps is in such pain that he cannot speak, in his inner sphere he may still, as Nussbaum considers her opponents supposing, lead 'some sort of complex inner life. We might imagine him, for example, as imagining, forming intentions, having appropriate feelings and responses, even reflecting philosophically or proving truths of mathematics.'<sup>44</sup> Or similarly, we might take it that Kant is asking us to imagine someone suffering from locked-in syndrome, a disorder in which damage to the brain results in total or near total paralysis, although most higher level cognitive functioning remains undisturbed. The story of Jean-Dominique Bauby who suffered from locked-in syndrome is the subject matter for Julian Schnabel's film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. In Bauby's case, he learned to communicate by blinking his left eye, but in extreme cases of locked-in syndrome a person's eyes also suffer paralysis. Perhaps in the jewel passage Kant is asking us to imagine a person suffering from locked-in syndrome when he speaks of someone who 'with the greatest effort should yet achieve nothing, and only the good will should remain.'

If we were to understand Kant as dwelling on such an image in the jewel passage this might, I

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43 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1153b16-21.

44 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 325.

think, lead us toward attributing to him the two-stage conception of agency. Although the person can't *do anything in the world* he is still sovereign over an essential inner core of willing and he can still engage in the activity of good willing regardless of the fact that he can't bring about changes in the world around him. The willing component, we might imagine, is intact, although the willing now never issues in the component of action (stage two) that has to do with results in the world.

It is difficult to know what moral judgments we should make in the case of someone suffering from total locked-in syndrome. Still, I think that there is good reason to think even of this case that Kant would reject the two-stage understanding of it that I just presented. In the jewel passage Kant says of the good will that it must remain 'not, to be sure, as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in our power.' Kant could mean by this either that one must summon all the means within one's power even if this is none, or Kant may be marking the distinction between willing and mere wish in such a way that without means to summon, we are dealing with mere wish rather than will. On the latter reading, Kant would say of the person suffering from total locked-in syndrome not that his willing component has been left completely intact, but that just insofar as he can no longer act (insofar as he does not have means within his power to summon) the purview of his will has been diminished. He cannot go on willing many of the things that he could will before—such as making a cup of coffee—since he cannot move his body. The flip-side of this point is that, although the purview of his will may be greatly diminished, whatever he can will is nevertheless in this world. For instance, if he wills to compose a poem and recite it to himself silently, or if he wills to practice a form of meditation that he learned before becoming ill by focusing on his breath, or if he wills to cultivate a compassionate attitude toward those around him—all of these events too will take place *in the world* even if there is another sense in which they take place only 'in his head.'

That we don't will our own wills into existence and that the scope of our own wills can be dramatically reduced by, for instance, a brute blow to the head, is, I take it, a simple but frightening

truth about our own condition. At its extreme, the thought is one of our own mortality—that death comes unexpectedly and that it is not always within our control to prevent it. To recognize this is to recognize, as Climacus says, that 'the illusiveness of the infinite is that the possibility of death is present at every moment.'<sup>45</sup> The very being who can contemplate the starry heavens above him and who is able to give his solemn word, must answer to a dinner invitation, 'I will come, definitely, believe me, except in case a roof tile falls down and kills me, because then I cannot come.'<sup>46</sup>

These reflections on the person suffering from locked-in syndrome show that there is nothing about the nature of the case that is incompatible with a unitary conception of action—such a case does not provide force to the two-stage view. However, I introduced the case as a possible suggestion for what Kant is asking us to imagine in the jewel passage when he describes a will that 'should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose. . . .' These reflections do, however, suggest that the person with locked-in syndrome is not what Kant is asking us to imagine. The person with locked-in syndrome can will very few things. But if he does will to compose a poem and recite it to himself silently, and he does so (if his will is fruitful and achieves its aim), then he has carried out his purpose. A person with locked-in syndrome who does this, it will turn out, does not fit the description that Kant provides at all. We cannot arrive at what Kant is picturing by imagining someone who cannot, in some respect, act at all, since such a person will be capable only of mere wish, not will. In order to have a will, a person must have some means within his power which he can summon. On the other hand, insofar as the person does have some activity that falls within the scope of his will, then it won't do to imagine him as achieving the purpose, since Kant is speaking of someone who does not achieve his purpose.

This suggests that a very different sort of case must be in order for picturing to ourselves what Kant has in mind in the jewel passage. Nussbaum and Williams, rightly I think, make much of the way in which tragedy can be revelatory of the human condition and its vulnerability to chance—of the ways

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<sup>45</sup> Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 88.



in which a gap can open between being a good person and living well. But if there were ever anything to Socrates' position at the end of *Symposium* that 'the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy'<sup>47</sup>, then comedy too ought to be of interest with respect to our vulnerability to luck. If we were cinematically to portray someone afflicted in the way that Kant describes in the jewel passage, the genre would not be a film such as *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, but it might very well be some variety of comedy—a genre of movie involving people who are, no doubt, *doing* all sorts of things, but who are unable, comically, to finally bring about the results that they are aiming at.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that one image of the jewel passage is on display in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*. At the beginning of the movie, Ellie Andrews dives overboard from her wealthy father's yacht. Ellie has married against her father's will and he is keeping her trapped on the ship, all the while attempting to annul her marriage. Once on land, Ellie sets about making her way to be reunited with her husband, King Westley. On a bus, Ellie meets Peter Warne, a reporter who recognizes her and decides to help her return to her husband, in exchange for getting the scoop on her story. Considered in one way, the action of the movie has the structure of an objective project: Ellie is returning to her husband and Peter is getting the scoop. Needless to say, throughout most of the movie the pair encounters obstacles to bringing about their result. And this result is never quite achieved.

Nevertheless what we see, when we see that they are not able to bring about results, is something that inheres in all their doings. As Stanley Cavell puts it: 'What this pair does together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together, that they know how to spend time together, even that they would rather waste time together than do anything else—except that no time they are together could be wasted.'<sup>48</sup> The way in which this project of friendship (or as Cavell would have it, marriage) inheres in their failed objective projects is in no way *invisible* or *otherworldly*—it is just what we see when we watch the movie.

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47 Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 223d.

48 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 88.

Judge William says of the beauty that inheres in such a subjective project: 'If you say that this beauty is invisible, I shall reply: in one sense it is, in another, it is not; . . . it is . . . visible in the sense in which one says *Loquere, ut videam te* [Speak in order that I may see you]. It is certainly true that I do not see the consummation but the struggle, but yet I also see the consummation at any moment I want to if I have the courage for it. . . .'<sup>49</sup> What we see when we look at a series of goings on as a subjective project is not a consummation, in the sense of something final, something (like a house now built) that is finished, as when Ellie says to her father, 'Can't you get it through your head that King Westley and I are married? Definitely, legally, actually married. It's over. It's finished.'<sup>50</sup> But the reason that a subjective project like friendship or good willing isn't dependent on results, the reason we don't need to look for something finished, something that is finally brought about, is not because we are looking for something otherworldly, but because we are looking for something whose consummation in our world, in front of our eyes, is ongoing, inseparable from the struggle that takes place in each moment.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper I have considered Kant's understanding of the way in which the good will is good in itself and Kierkegaard's notion of the inner deed. I have drawn on the literature on moral luck to present some reasons to be suspicious of the standard view that is attributed to Kant and Kierkegaard on these matters. I have made the case that it is not compulsory that we understand these two thinkers as subscribing to a two-stage conception of action and have offered an alternative understanding their views. On this alternative conception, Kant and Kierkegaard can hold to a unitary conception of action that in no way diminishes the moral importance of what happens in the world. On my interpretation, we can understand the importance of the 'inner deed' for Kierkegaard only by recognizing the distinction between objective and subjective projects. Subjective projects have an inner history, in the sense that

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49 Judge William, *Either/Or II*, 275.

50 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 84.

they don't aim at a result that is independent of the project itself. This understanding of subjective projects allows us a corresponding alternative interpretation of Kant: in the jewel passage when Kant is claiming that having a good will is a subjective project. In claiming that the good will is good in itself and not on account of what it brings about, Kant can be understood in highlighting the way in which good willing possesses the temporal structure of a subjective project, such that the activity is valuable in itself, not in virtue of contributing to a final stage (a result) external to that activity itself.

There is a sense in which one cannot be robbed by chance of the value of such willing, since its value isn't dependent on a later result. But this doesn't mean that the agent who is now in possession of something as valuable as a good will cannot, in the next instant, be struck on the head by a tile falling from the roof, which might put an end to his willing altogether. On this reading of Kant, he is much closer to Kierkegaard, recognizing that morality is not a matter of securing a space where well-disposed people are safe and insulated from failure, but of being 'joyful out on 70,000 fathoms of water. . . .' (SOLW 470)

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