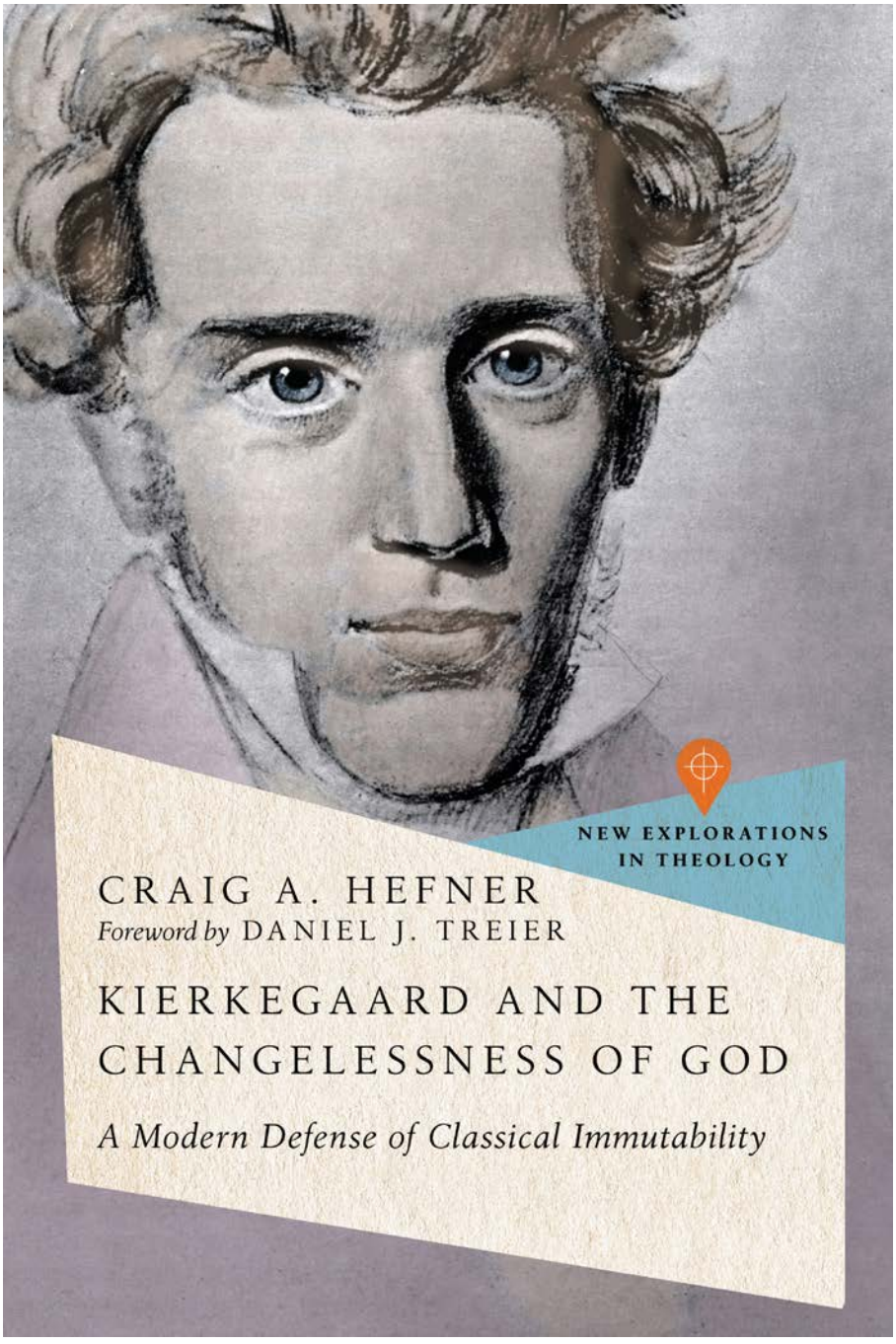

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Retrieving Kierkegaard

But you are the same, and your years have no end.
The children of your servants shall dwell secure.

Psalm 102:26–27

God is unchanging. But this changelessness is not
that chilling indifference, that devastating loftiness,
that ambiguous distance, which the callous understanding lauded.
No, on the contrary, this changelessness is intimate
and warm and everywhere present; it is a changelessness in
being concerned for a person.[1]

Kierkegaard, *EUD*

Introduction

For a defense of the doctrine of God's immutability, the nineteenth century might seem to be a strange place to look. At best, the intellectual developments of this century called for radical revision to the classical theist's conception of God. F. W. J. von Schelling captured the spirit of this age when he wrote in a letter to G. W. F. Hegel, "For you the question has surely long since been decided. For us as well [as for Lessing] the

[1]Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 393.

orthodox concepts of God are no more."[2] At worst, the philosophical revolutions of the nineteenth century were really a covert form of pantheism or atheism, as Heinrich Heine confessed in his history of German philosophy: "No one says it, but everyone knows it; pantheism is the open secret of Germany. Indeed, we have outgrown deism."[3] In such a context, the classical theist belief in a strong doctrine of divine immutability, which had been the traditional belief from the church fathers through the Reformation, seems to have faded away.[4]

Yet we find in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, one of the greatest thinkers of the nineteenth century, a spirited and passionate belief in God's complete changelessness. Kierkegaard's final publication in 1855 was a discourse titled, "The Changelessness of God," which he preached as a sermon on May 18, 1851.[5] Kierkegaard even declared James 1:17, the locus classicus for the doctrine of God's immutability, to be his "first love" and favorite biblical text.[6] Even more surprising, Kierkegaard's belief in God's immutability cannot be easily removed from the architecture of his thought. His belief in God's immutability was not simply a naïvely traditional concept that he should have recognized as ultimately incompatible with his otherwise modern point of view. As this study will go on to show, the doctrine of God's immutability stands near the center of Kierkegaard's thought—and for characteristically modern reasons.

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[2]G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 32. Also quoted in Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealist Logic of Modern Theology* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 163–64.

[3]Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, ed. Terry Pinkart, trans. Howard Pollack-Milgate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58–59.

[4]Richard A. Muller notes that the doctrine of divine immutability "is a mark of continuity in the thought of the church from the time of the fathers through the seventeenth century" (*The Divine Essence and Attributes*, vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 308).

[5]Kierkegaard customarily insists that his discourses are 'without authority' because they are not sermons. When Kierkegaard indicates that this discourse was actually preached, it may signal that this text has a greater authority in his corpus. For this point, see George Pattison, *Eternal God/Saving Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 275.

[6]Kierkegaard writes, "If a person were permitted to distinguish among biblical texts, I could call this text [James 1:17–21] my first love, to which one usually (*always*) returns at some time; and I could call this text my only love—to which one returns again and again and again and *always*" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978], 6:569, emphasis his).

Kierkegaard's surprising and passionate belief in God's immutability calls for further theological investigation. This study approaches the subject matter of Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability in the mode of retrieval theology.[7] There are good reasons for approaching the topic in this mode, which I will explain later. But for now, it is important to identify the basic goal of this study: this study proposes to retrieve Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability in order to offer a biblical and characteristically modern case for a classical definition of this doctrine.

Before going too far, it is necessary to define both a "characteristically modern" case and a "classical definition" of the doctrine of God's immutability. This Kierkegaardian case is "characteristically modern" in two ways. First, this case makes the positive claim that the self's existence and coherence through change depends on the possibility of a relation with the immutable God. Apart from this relation to the immutable God, change disintegrates the self in such a way that the self is given over to disintegration or sheer flux. This concern for how the doctrine of divine immutability impacts the self is a characteristically modern question. According to Kevin W. Hector, the concept of "mineness" becomes a particularly central concern for modern theology, where "mineness" refers to the sense in which one's life counts as mine "insofar as it hangs together in such a way that one can identify with it."[8] Kierkegaard clearly shares this characteristically modern interest in questions of mineness and the self's coherence, but he grounds the possibility of a coherent self in the relation to the immutable God. This case is also characteristically modern in a second sense. This case makes the more negative claim that this Kierkegaardian account offers a defense of a classical definition of God's immutability "without metaphysics."[9] I am using "metaphysical" here to refer narrowly to a way of gaining knowledge of God, where one begins "from below" with the nature and properties of created being and then reasons by abstraction to the attributes

[7]For a summary of the methods and promise of this "mode" of systematic theology, see John Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Ian Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 583–99.

[8]Kevin W. Hector, *The Theological Project of Modernism: Faith and the Conditions of Mineness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

[9]Hector details the modern concern to do theology without metaphysics, and he offers an account of language to this end (*Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011]).

of God. In other words, a metaphysical account is one that depends on a certain kind of natural theology, where the doctrine of God's immutability is derived through a philosophical analysis of nature. This claim will require further unpacking, but for now it is worth noting that this account is not anti-metaphysical. This account claims only to be a sufficient case for a classical definition of God's immutability without metaphysics in this specific sense, and it makes no judgment about the possibility of other accounts, whether metaphysical or non-metaphysical. In doing so, this case takes into account as much as possible the modern suspicion of metaphysics—not by simply rejecting metaphysics all together but rather by addressing immutability on other grounds.[10]

This study then offers a characteristically modern case for a classical definition of God's immutability. But in the spirit of retrieval theologies this study does not consequently take modernity to impose "a new and inescapable set of conditions on theological work."[11] In other words, this Kierkegaardian account should not be taken as a defense of a doctrine of God's immutability strictly "under the conditions of modernity."[12] Rather, in the mode of retrieval theology this account presents a doctrine of God's immutability within the context of modernity but not for that reason simply within limits set by modernity.[13] The conviction of this study is that Kierkegaard's writings help us to articulate a biblical doctrine of God's immutability in a modern context. By extension, this study applies also to a postmodern context, where the trajectories of thought on the nature of the self

[10]For the purposes of this study, I take for granted that Hector has identified correctly at least two broad characteristics of modern theology. There may, of course, be other key characteristics of modern theology, in which case this account is characteristically modern only in the two senses identified by Hector: an interest in questions of "mineness" and a desire to do theology without metaphysics.

[11]Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 584.

[12]I borrow this phrase from Bruce L. McCormack, who describes Karl Barth's theology in this way: "His [Barth's] achievement lay in revising what it means to be 'orthodox' in the realm of Christology *under the conditions of modernity*" (*Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 232, emphasis his).

[13]Webster models this approach in his article on theological anthropology but with the context of postmodernity and in regard to eschatology and anthropology. He notes that Christian theology "is responsible *in* its context but not in any straightforward way responsible *to* its context. For context is not fate; it may not pretend to have a necessary character, to be anything other than a contingent set of cultural arrangements which stands under the judgements of the Christian gospel" ("Eschatology, Anthropology and Postmodernity," *IJST* 2, no. 1 [2000]: 15–16, emphasis his).

are not altogether different but rather an intensified version of modernity and in some cases the natural conclusion. Modernism, for instance, rejects divine immutability but aspires to a unified and coherent self. The postmodern belief that a unified and coherent self is illusory is really an intensified rejection of divine immutability by carrying this rejection to its natural conclusion. And so, while this study offers a characteristically modern case for a classical doctrine of immutability, these trajectories of thought are not limited to modernity but also help us speak of God's changelessness in the postmodern context.

Having clarified the sense in which this study is "characteristically modern," we can now identify the meaning of what I am calling a "classical definition" of the doctrine of God's immutability. Simply put, I will take a classical definition of God's immutability to refer to the belief that God cannot change in any way.[14] Put more philosophically, a classical definition of this doctrine denies the possibility of any movement from potentiality to actuality in God because the possibility of movement requires potentiality, parts, and a lack of perfection. Because God does not have potentiality, parts, or lack of perfection, it follows that God cannot change in any way. This absolute changelessness applies to God's essence, knowledge, will, and place.[15] In short, according to the classical definition, God is changeless in every way.

Unfortunately, in his writings Kierkegaard never explicitly offered his own definition of this doctrine. Kierkegaard was preoccupied almost exclusively with the question of *how* the self relates to the immutable God, not *what* immutability is. That being said, there are good reasons to assume that Kierkegaard took for granted something very close to a classical definition of God's immutability. When he declared James 1:17 to be his favorite biblical

[14]Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.9.1 co.

[15]I take these distinctions from Stephen Charnock's discourse "On the Immutability of God" in which he considers four ways in which God is immutable: in his essence, in his knowledge, in his will and purpose, and in his place (*Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* [New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1873], 319–30). Still, one might affirm the perfection of God's immutability in terms of different distinctions. For instance, Johann Gerhard identifies instead five ways that "a rational nature can be changed": with respect to existence, with respect to place, with respect to accidents, with respect to understating, and with respect to the intent of the will; see *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2007), 148.

text, Kierkegaard was surely aware of the long history of citing James 1:17 in defense of this classic doctrine.[16]

Further, Kierkegaard seems to deny a real ontological relation between God and creation that might make God suspectable to real change, strongly implying a classical definition of God's immutability.[17] Kierkegaard speaks of the dogmatic discovery, similar to Copernicus's discovery in astronomy, that "God is not the one who changes (God could neither become gentle nor angry), but that man changes his position in relationship to God—in other words: the sun does not go around the earth, but the earth goes around the sun."[18] In his discourse on "The Changelessness of God" Kierkegaard also asserts that neither the act of creation nor the incarnation change God in any way.[19] Kierkegaard is aware that these claims about creation and the incarnation involving no change in God are complex and highly debated. Kierkegaard's insistence that God does not change at all in the face of these challenging theological objections seems to indicate again that Kierkegaard held to a strong classical definition of the doctrine of God's immutability, even if he never explicitly defines it in this way. But we can do more than rely on these underdetermined statements. This study will go on to argue that, whether he intended it or not, Kierkegaard's account does in the end require a classical definition of this doctrine.

Still, what is also essential to our study is that even though Kierkegaard held to a classical definition of this doctrine, he affirmed this doctrine for very different reasons than traditional accounts. At this point, it is important to differentiate clearly a classical *definition* from a classical *account* of God's immutability. Kierkegaard at least implicitly affirms a classical definition of this doctrine, which once again is the belief that there is no possibility of

[16]See, e.g., Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991), 66; Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1.14.15 *s.c*; Hermann Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 153.

[17]For the importance of the denial of a real relation between God and the creation for a classical definition of immutability, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 129–38.

[18]Kierkegaard, *JP*, 2:86. .

[19]Kierkegaard compares God's act of creation to one changing a garment: "He changes it as one changes a garment—himself unchanged." Further, neither does history, even "when the Savior of the human race is born," change God: "He changes everything—himself unchanged" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment* and *Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], 217).

movement from potentiality to actuality in God. God cannot change in any way. By contrast, a classical "account" not only affirms this definition but also arrives at it by traditional arguments, which will primarily be metaphysical. In Thomas Aquinas, for a paradigmatic example, there can be no movement in God because the possibility of movement requires potentiality, parts, and a lack of perfection.[20] It follows that God cannot change in any way. We do not find these or similar classical arguments for the doctrine in Kierkegaard's writings. Instead, Kierkegaard's reasons for a classical definition are more existential and based on his interpretation of James 1:17.[21] Thus, when I say that this Kierkegaardian account offers a case for a classical definition, I do not imply that Kierkegaard affirms this definition for classical reasons. To the contrary, Kierkegaard's case is characteristically modern, so throughout this study it will be important to keep in mind the distinction between a classical definition and a classical account.

I also intend to show that this characteristically modern case for a classical definition has biblical warrant. This Kierkegaardian case is not characteristically modern merely for the sake of being characteristically modern. Instead, it is better to understand this case as retrieving a set of legitimately biblical themes that are especially emphasized in modern thought. Throughout this study, then, I regularly note Kierkegaard's use of Scripture, and in particular I concentrate attention on his use of James 1:17. Further, I not only highlight Kierkegaard's use of that text, but I also defend his interpretation on exegetical grounds. In doing so, I move beyond simply historical recovery of this Kierkegaardian case and into the realm of retrieval theology.

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[20]Thomas's defense of immutability focuses on these three problems for ascribing mutability to God: it posits in God the existence of potentiality, parts, and imperfection (*ST*, 1.9.1. *co*). For an analysis of these arguments in Thomas and their relevance for modern theology, see Gilles Emery, "The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the 'Suffering of God,'" in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 27–76.

[21]I am not thereby suggesting that Thomas's account necessarily lacks a biblical foundation. For biblical warrant underlying his account, Thomas might also point to James 1:17 and the implied contrast between God and the motion of the astronomical bodies. However, as we will see in more detail later, Kierkegaard's interpretation better accounts for the relation between the predication of immutability and the gift-giving in James 1:17, as well as the relation of this verse to the themes of integration and double-mindedness in the rest of the book of James. And Thomas's account appeals to other grounds that Kierkegaard's would not.

Kierkegaard and Retrieval Theology

I have located this study within the broad realm of retrieval theologies, and so it is important now to define this approach to theology and identify how it shapes my approach to Kierkegaard's writings. David Buschart and Kent Eilers provide a clear definition of retrieval theology: "As we use the term, retrieval names a mode or style of theological discernment that looks back in order to move forward. It is a particular way of carrying out theological work . . . in which resources from the past are found distinctly advantageous for the present situation."[22] This study of Kierkegaard largely adopts a retrieval approach to theology, looking back to Kierkegaard's writings as a distinctly advantageous resource for thinking of God's immutability in the context of modernity.

For a number of reasons, Kierkegaard's writings have rarely been the target of a retrieval theology. For one, theologies of retrieval have tended to privilege classic and premodern resources.[23] Yet, given the basic approach of retrieval theology, there seems to be no reason to reject outright the possibility and usefulness of retrieving an early-modern thinker. In fact, retrieving the theology of a thinker like Kierkegaard makes possible a particular sort of argument, one that engages modernity internally and not just externally. For instance, this Kierkegaardian case defends a classical definition of God's immutability for characteristically modern reasons, bringing to light the way that ideas and emphases internal to modernity can be theologically useful for the present situation.

A second reason that Kierkegaard has rarely been the target of a retrieval theology is that his writings seem to be a part of the very problem to which retrieval theology is a response. Thus, retrieving Kierkegaard's theology could be an inherently self-defeating project. Especially problematic for theologies of retrieval, Kierkegaard's theology has on several occasions been interpreted in radically anti-realist terms according to which Kierkegaard's theological language does not refer to anything objective or real but only to his own psychological experience or his ideals of

[22]W. David Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 12.

[23]Webster points out that theologies of retrieval tend to agree that "classical sources outweigh modern norms" such that "classics come first; they exceed the possibilities of the present and have the capacity to expose and pass beyond its limitations" ("Theologies of Retrieval," 590).

human subjectivity. However, such anti-realist interpretations have been seriously called into question. David Gouwens, for instance, has suggested that "Kierkegaard is a thinker for whom the religious and Christian concepts provide the governing concepts for his psychological reflection."[24] Still, even if Kierkegaard's theology is not strongly anti-realist, some have seen his writings as perpetuating theological problems that are opposed to the attitudes and modes of retrieval theology. For instance, Karl Barth at first saw Kierkegaard as an ally for his theological project, but later came to see Kierkegaard's writings as part of the problem. Barth worried that Kierkegaard placed too much emphasis on human subjectivity at the expense of the objective revelation of God.[25] Kierkegaard's theology was consequently seen by Barth to be reductive to the conditions and interests of the modern subject. Whether Kierkegaard was guilty of this reduction or not, it might be said from a Kierkegaardian point of view that Barth's tendency could be to overreact in the opposite direction, failing to speak about the self and its existence.[26]

Still, despite these objections there are good reasons to consider Kierkegaard's writings in the mode of retrieval theology. As we have noted, against anti-realist interpretations there is now a well-established realist and theological approach to reading Kierkegaard's writings. Further, at least with reference to our current study, it is likely that Kierkegaard himself was engaging in something like retrieval theology. Kierkegaard's existential emphasis on the doctrine of God's immutability has precedent at least in the

[24]David J. Gouwens, Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 69. Lee C. Barrett provides a helpful overview of the reception of Kierkegaard in modern theology. According to Barrett, Paul Holmer and D. Z. Phillips pioneered the approach to reading Kierkegaard as an expositor of Christian theological concepts ("Kierkegaard as Theologian: A History of Countervailing Interpretations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], 540–43). This approach, in turn, shaped the continued exploration of Kierkegaard's theology in the influential works of C. Stephen Evans, Sylvia Walsh, and David Gouwens.

[25]For an overview of Barth's relationship to Kierkegaard, including Barth's worry that Kierkegaard's theology is overly subjective, see Kimlyn J. Bender, "Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth: Reflections on a Relation and a Proposal for Future Investigation," *IJST* 17, no. 3 (2015): 298–318.

[26]Though not in reference to Kierkegaard, Charles Marsh raises this concern for Barth's theology: "I suggest that this propensity leads to dangers equally as grave as the ones Karl Barth discerned in the liberal Protestant tradition. There are perhaps worse things than speaking about God by speaking about humanity in a loud voice—like not speaking of humanity at all" ("In Defense of a Self: The Theological Search for a Postmodern Identity," *SJT* 55, no. 3 [2002]: 255).

biblical book of James and in Augustine's writings. Kierkegaard's knowledge and use of Augustine was limited by prevailing nineteenth-century caricatures.[27] But it still seems that Augustine's influence stands behind Kierkegaard's well-known formula of the self without despair as a self that "rests transparently in the power that established it."[28]

A comparative study between Augustine and Kierkegaard on the doctrine of God's immutability will also find significant points of agreement between the two thinkers. Like Kierkegaard, Augustine sees God's eternity and immutability as a condition to preserve the existential integrity of the human creature across the vicissitudes of time and change. Augustine develops these themes in book 11 of the *Confessions*, where he contrasts a fallen experience of time with a redeemed experience of time. For Augustine, the redeemed experience of time occurs only when the human person participates in God's changelessness and in doing so stabilizes their mutable existence in time.

We find similar themes in the biblical book of James, which this study will later develop in detail. James 1:17 speaks of God's changelessness, but as we will see this affirmation is also connected to existential themes in the book. On a Kierkegaardian reading, in James the self's friendship with the immutable God makes possible a reintegrated existence through change, an existence that is no longer double-minded but rather reintegrated and pure in heart. In this way Kierkegaard's account of God's immutability is itself already engaged in the mode of retrieval theology. Kierkegaard draws on Augustinian themes and the book of James as resources that are distinctly advantageous for his present situation. This

[27]Lee C. Barrett attempts to reconstruct as well as possible Kierkegaard's knowledge and perception of Augustine; see his *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 29–64.

[28]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 14. Robert B. Punchniak has argued that Kierkegaard's understanding of the self in *The Sickness unto Death* is "thoroughly Augustinian" ("Kierkegaard's 'Self' and Augustine's Influence," *KSY* [2011]: 181–94). Christopher B. Barnett likewise argues that Kierkegaard's account of rest strongly resembles Augustine, and Barnett specifically sees the Augustinian influence on Kierkegaard's reflections on rest in *The Sickness unto Death* and his discourse on "The Changelessness of God." See "'Rest' as Unio Mystica? Kierkegaard, Augustine, and the Spiritual Life," *SJCP* 16 (2016): 58–77. For comparative studies between Augustine and Kierkegaard on a variety of topics, see the essays in John Doody, Kim Paffenroth, and Helene Tallon Russell, eds., *Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017).

study continues the same pattern by bringing Kierkegaard's theology forward to address the doctrine of God's immutability—but now in the context of later modern theology.

Interpreting Kierkegaard in the mode of retrieval theology shapes the content and goals of this study. As a project of retrieval theology, this study goes beyond mere repetition of Kierkegaard's ideas. So this study is not primarily historical in the sense of simply aiming to describe and identify what Kierkegaard said. This study does analyze Kierkegaard's writings closely, but it also aims as much as possible to present Kierkegaard's arguments as theologically coherent and compelling. Thus, this study will at times construct Kierkegaardian arguments that go beyond a mere description of his view, and on occasion it will involve other thinkers in order to present Kierkegaard's case in the best possible light. That being said, this study also is not a straightforward and unrestricted constructive argument. The themes and major claims of this study emerge from what Kierkegaard's approach enables us to say. This tension is admittedly ambiguous, perhaps making it difficult on occasion to parse out where descriptive work ends and constructive work begins. But this ambiguity is characteristic of theologies of retrieval, and in my judgment despite such ambiguity this mode of engagement can be historically responsible and remains useful for the task of theology.

The Warrant for Retrieving Kierkegaard

The method and aims of retrieval theology involve both historical and theological concerns. The warrant for a retrieval theology, then, is also both historical and theological. In what follows, then, I put forth a twofold warrant for this retrieval of Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability.

The historical warrant for this study is simply that the doctrine of God's immutability remains an insufficiently examined concept in Kierkegaard's writings. It is recognized on occasion that Kierkegaard affirmed this doctrine, but there is not an extended and focused study on the doctrine of God's immutability in Kierkegaard.[29] This study then addresses a gap in

[29]For some previous but partial studies on the changelessness of God in Kierkegaard, see, e.g., Paul Martens and Tom Millay, "The Changelessness of God' as Kierkegaard's Final Theodicy: God and the Gift of Suffering," *IJST* 13, no. 2 (2011): 170–89; Caspar Wenzel Tornøe, "The

research on Kierkegaard's writings by giving focused attention to Kierkegaard's understanding and use of this doctrine. As it turns out, the doctrine of God's immutability is a widespread and critical concept for Kierkegaard's overall thought.

It is often recognized, for instance, that the theme of change and the task of *becoming* a self through change are central and distinctly Kierkegaardian emphases.[30] In an influential study, Mark C. Taylor has argued that the self's relation to time unites at least the pseudonymous works of Kierkegaard. To this end, Taylor argues that the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence characterize different ways of relating to time.[31] There are many who agree that the self's relation to time or change is a widespread and important concern in Kierkegaard's writings. But it is not often sufficiently recognized that Kierkegaard's interest in these existential concepts goes along with his account of God's immutability.[32] As this study will show, for Kierkegaard the self can only become itself through change or time through its relation to the immutable God. In light of this gap in research, this study is warranted in part by the lack of direct and focused attention on the concept of God's immutability in Kierkegaard's writings.

Interestingly, those who have implicitly recognized the importance of God's immutability in Kierkegaard's thought are those most intent on secularizing Kierkegaard's ideas. For instance, Kierkegaard developed a concept that he called "repetition," and this concept has enjoyed major influence and acceptance in broadly existentialist and postmodern conceptions of the self, where the self is taken not to be an essence but a repeated act of becoming. Yet much of the use of these Kierkegaardian ideas tends toward an interpretation of the self's existence as absurd and groundless.[33] Ironically though

Changeless God of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard," *KSY* (2006): 265–78; Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51–79.

[30]See, e.g., Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

[31]Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[32]George Pattison is a notable exception on this point. In a recent study, Pattison recognizes that beliefs about God's eternality always involves beliefs about the self's being in time. And Pattison traces this dynamic in Kierkegaard's authorship (*Eternal God/Saving Time*, 247–87).

[33]For a summary of such existentialist interpretations of Kierkegaard with particular attention to the use of the concept "repetition," see Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, 137–48.

unintentionally, these thinkers take for granted a central premise of this study: the immutable God is the ground for the self's existence through change. If one denies the existence of an immutable God, then on Kierkegaard's account the self's existence would be adrift and tend toward complete disintegration. Kierkegaard of course believes in the possibility of a reintegrated and non-despairing existence through change, but his reasons for thinking so are resolutely theological. Kierkegaard's writings take for granted the belief in an immutable God and also the possibility of the self being in relation with this immutable God. Such beliefs cannot be easily proven on existential grounds alone and this study will not attempt to do so, but following Kierkegaard we can and should say that these beliefs have existential import.

In addition to these historical questions of interpreting Kierkegaard, there is also theological warrant for this study. At the most obvious level, this study is warranted theologically because recent debates on the doctrine of God's immutability have largely neglected Kierkegaard's potentially unique contributions. This oversight is not without consequences: specifically, recent debates overlook the possibility of characteristically modern reasons for a classical definition of God's immutability.

It is noteworthy that many recent theologians have thought it necessary to revise or reject the doctrine of God's immutability for characteristically modern reasons. Among those who reject or revise the doctrine, God's immutability is thought to be existentially deficient because it portrays God at a distance from human experiences of suffering and change.[34] Further, a classical definition of God's immutability is thought to be founded on a metaphysics of being. In place of this static view of God, modern thought

John Milbank also questions the use of repetition in poststructural thought, recognizing correctly that in Kierkegaard's case the concept of repetition went along with the belief in a transcendent God ("The Sublime in Kierkegaard," in *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Phillip Blond [London: Routledge, 1998], 131–56).

[34]Jürgen Moltmann is representative of this line of thinking. Moltmann's doctrine of God is motivated by an exercise in a theodicy, specifically to make God relevant to the post-war years of Western society. For Moltmann, Christian theology finds its relevance in the modern age when it becomes a "theology of the cross," which brings about a "liberating theory of God and man" (*The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 25. Moltmann is unambiguous that this theology of the cross involves a destruction of the "idols of the Christian West" as it "remembers the 'crucified God'" (*The Crucified God*, 36).

prefers dynamic concepts and the notion of becoming.[35] Kierkegaard clearly shares some of these characteristically modern values, privileging the self's existence and the task of becoming. Yet it is for these same characteristically modern reasons that Kierkegaard strongly affirms a classical definition of God's immutability.

Kierkegaard habitually brought together existential themes and the doctrine of God, and this tendency was actually in step with his philosophical milieu. Kierkegaard was surely aware of the debates over J. G. Fichte's doctrine of God and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's charge that Fichte's theology entailed nihilism.[36] What is noteworthy about this debate for our purposes is the precedent for linking doctrines of God with existential concerns. Interestingly, Jacobi's response to Fichte is not that his concept of God lacks perfection or is inadequate to explain the cause of finite being. Instead, Jacobi moves immediately to the existential charge of nihilism. According to Jacobi, Fichte's subjective idealism will mean that everything outside of the psyche will be a mere projection and a nothingness. So Jacobi writes, "Everything outside her [the psyche] is nothing, and she is itself a *phantom—not just a phantom* of something, but a phantom in itself, a real nothingness, a nothingness of reality."[37]

According to George Pattison, Kierkegaard's analysis and critique of Fichte is an extension of Jacobi's charge of nihilism. As Pattison puts it, Kierkegaard's argument is that regardless of the coherence of Fichte's ideas, "it is disastrous when it is adopted as a principle by which to live."[38] This study

[35]The theology of Alfred North Whitehead is characteristic of process theology in its preference for a dynamic and evolutionary understanding of being. Whitehead speaks of the nature of God in equally dynamic terms, as a nature which "evolves in its relationship to the evolving world." (*Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* [New York: The Free Press, 1985], 12). For a summary of modern reasons against the doctrine of God's immutability, including the impact of process theology on the doctrine of God in contemporary theology, see, e.g., Giles Emery, "The Language of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the 'Suffering of God,'" 77–98; Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 1–26.

[36]For a summary of Kierkegaard's theology in relation to Fichte and the so-called Atheism Controversy, see George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: The Paradox and the 'Point of Contact'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 80–101. For a more general and excellent treatment on the *Atheismusstreit* (the Atheist Controversy), which took place between Jacobi and Fichte, see Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 448–65.

[37]Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "Jacobi to Fichte," in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. George di Giovanni (London: McGill, 1994), 512.

[38]Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 82.

is not directly concerned with whether Jacobi's and Kierkegaard's critiques of Fichte are valid. Instead, our goal here is to point out the tendency among nineteenth-century thinkers to argue for or against a particular doctrine of God in light of its anthropological or existential consequences. Our concern is not Fichte's doctrine of God and its possible atheism but the notion that God might be changeable in some way. Like the debates with Fichte, a Kierkegaardian account allows us to bring forward existential concerns over belief in a mutable God. By retrieving Kierkegaard's case for the doctrine of God's immutability, we attempt to bring forward some of these characteristically nineteenth-century concerns for contemporary consideration.

A retrieval of Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability is theologically warranted because it offers a uniquely modern and existential case for the doctrine. Such an argument is timely, given the widespread tendency to reject the doctrine of God's immutability for modern reasons. By retrieving Kierkegaard's case for this doctrine we invert the logic and make a surprising case for a classical definition of God's immutability.

Interpreting Kierkegaard

Any interpreter of Kierkegaard immediately encounters a number of complex hermeneutical considerations, and this is no less true for a retrieval of Kierkegaard's theology. It is difficult to reconstruct Kierkegaardian arguments in any straightforward way. The difficulty of describing his ideas generally has to do with Kierkegaard's distinct strategy of indirect communication. Because he preferred indirect communication, Kierkegaard also developed a highly sophisticated use of pseudonyms. In Kierkegaard's view, indirect communication is one of the best ways to communicate subjective truth, which refers to the sort of truth that demands existential appropriation. Indirect communication is what enabled Kierkegaard to play the role of a Socrates. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard's goal was not to communicate straightforward theories or doctrines but instead to implant the truth within his readers in a more subjective and existential way.

This complex communication style and the use of pseudonyms make Kierkegaard's writings more enjoyable to read but at the same time more difficult to interpret. Because this study intends to retrieve Kierkegaardian ideas, it will be necessary to make a few judgments on how to approach

these complexities in his corpus. Kierkegaard commented directly on the complexity of his writings in two key places: at the end of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and in the posthumously published *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.[39]

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard takes credit for several pseudonymous works but then he declares, "In the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me."[40] So in one sense Kierkegaard admits to being the author behind the pseudonyms but at the same time he distances his own view from theirs. This is a complex issue, but in my view there are at least two extremes that should be avoided. On the one hand, it is a mistake to ignore the pseudonyms and attribute their thoughts *directly* to Kierkegaard. On the other hand, it is also a mistake to take Kierkegaard's statement in the *Postscript* too literally, as if the pseudonyms do not express Kierkegaard's own view in any way.[41] The right approach lies somewhere between these extremes, recognizing that above all the purpose of the pseudonyms is to help Kierkegaard communicate *indirectly*. Even in those pseudonymous works that seem the farthest from Kierkegaard's own view, there is in my view generally something that Kierkegaard himself wishes to communicate, albeit indirectly. Given this complexity, I do not follow any straightforward rule or program for interpreting the pseudonyms. At times I will quote the pseudonyms as if they more or less directly correspond to Kierkegaard's own view. In other places, I may acknowledge a distinction between Kierkegaard's point of view and that of a particular pseudonymous author. The complexity of Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication and pseudonyms demands flexibility and is in my judgment best handled on a case-by-case basis.

Another complex but related issue is how much unity we should expect to find across Kierkegaard's writings. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard himself finds a great amount of unity throughout

[39]Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 625–30; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[40]Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 626.

[41]On these issues, I am largely following Clare Carlisle's *Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 25–44. For more on Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and indirect communication, see also C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24–45.

what he calls "the authorship," and he traces a sort of movement from various pseudonymous works through others to some of his upbuilding discourses, attributing this unity in part to the work of divine governance.[42] Kierkegaard goes on to suggest that his "whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue: becoming a Christian."[43] Kierkegaard, it seems, found a general pattern of unity across his writings, despite the complexities of the pseudonymous and indirect communication. Still, some have found reason to doubt Kierkegaard's evaluation of his own authorship and see his self-evaluation as an imposed and implausible unity.[44] On the whole, this study finds more unity than disunity across his authorship, though it does not simply take this unity for granted at the outset. But on the subject of God's changelessness, Kierkegaard's authorship is generally unified. The early pseudonymous works do not address the topic directly, but they do indirectly point to the self's need for its relation to the immutable God. *Either/Or* and *Repetition*, for instance, demonstrate the self's need for a relation to the immutable God by showing us the inability of the self to repeat or become itself through change apart from this relation. Thus, without making any judgment about other themes and concepts in Kierkegaard, this study will trace Kierkegaard's account of God's immutability as a coherent and basically unified idea in Kierkegaard's authorship.

Outline of This Study

Having clarified the approach of retrieval theology and some difficulties about Kierkegaard's authorship, we can now outline the shape of this study. Its goal, once again, is to retrieve Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability in order to offer a biblical and characteristically modern case for a classical definition of this doctrine. To this end, the study unfolds in four major chapters.

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[42]Kierkegaard, *POV*, 6–12.

[43]Kierkegaard, *POV*, 23.

[44]George Pattison argues that Kierkegaard's authorship has an essential unity, and he addresses some of the objections to this assertion. Roger Poole sees the pseudonyms of Kierkegaard as distinct voices that are fundamentally incompatible, and Joakim Garff attacks Kierkegaard's own self-evaluation in Point of View as running roughshod over the actual discontinuities across the so-called authorship. For Pattison's summary of these debates and his case for an essential unity to Kierkegaard's authorship, see Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature and Theology (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–11.

Chapter 2, "The Disintegrated Self," examines the existential problem of change at three key places in Kierkegaard's authorship. We will see first that *Repetition* introduces the problem of change to Kierkegaard's early authorship against the background of the debates in Denmark over the logic of Hegelian mediation. Second, we examine some of Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses, which provide three key philosophical arguments for how change disrupts the self's efforts at existential coherence or reintegration in terms of the self's narrative, teleology, and intention. Third, we consider *The Sickness unto Death*, where Kierkegaard interprets theologically his analysis of change with the criterion of the self being "before God."[45] These arguments in Kierkegaard's authorship combine to introduce an existential worry over the belief in divine mediation or changeability. In short, on Kierkegaard's account, if God were changeable, then the self's disintegration and despair would be unavoidable.

Still, Kierkegaard's case for the doctrine of God's immutability involves more than a critique of conceptions of God as changeable. In chapter 3, "The Reintegrated Self," I examine Kierkegaard's positive case that the self can reintegrate across change through its relation with the immutable God. For Kierkegaard, the self reintegrates when it practices the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Recalling the forms of disintegration in the previous chapter, we can understand these virtues as the corresponding solutions. And so, we will see that faith reintegrates the self's narrative, hope reintegrates the self's teleology, and love reintegrates the self's intention. To examine the reintegrated self, then, we consider first Kierkegaard's reflections on the three virtues of faith, hope, and love, and we see how the practice of these virtues reintegrate the self. And second, we see that for Kierkegaard these virtues reintegrate the self because they involve a relation with the immutable God, in which the self finds rest through change.

In chapter 4, "Returning Again to James 1:17," I turn to identify and assess the biblical origins of Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability. To this end, I will argue that Kierkegaard derives his doctrine of God's immutability in particular from his interpretation of the book of James, especially

[45] *SUD*, 79

James 1:17, the Christian locus classicus for the doctrine of God's immutability. In this chapter, I trace Kierkegaard's interpretation of James 1:17, according to which the gifts that come down "from above" establish the immutable God as the object of the self's faith, hope, and love. Afterward, I defend this interpretation by making an exegetical case that the theme of James 1:17 is friendship with the immutable God. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that this Kierkegaardian interpretation offers biblical warrant for a classical definition of the doctrine of God's immutability, and it does so in a way that is more textually sensitive to the logic and themes of James 1:17 than some classical tendencies.

In chapter 5, "Immutability without Metaphysics," I argue that a Kierkegaardian account offers a non-metaphysical case for a classical definition of God's immutability. To this end, I survey the two most prominent positions in the recent debates on the doctrine of God's immutability. These debates leave us with what seems like an unavoidable dilemma: either secure a classical definition of God's immutability by means of metaphysics or reject this definition in favor of a more christocentric and antimetaphysical approach. Ironically, both predominant positions share a key assumption: that a classical definition of divine immutability must be derived metaphysically. In contrast to both of these positions, I offer a Kierkegaardian case for a classical definition of God's immutability but without metaphysics.

Together these chapters retrieve Kierkegaard's doctrine of God's immutability in order to make a biblical and characteristically modern case for a classical definition of this doctrine. This case is characteristically modern because it links the doctrine of God's immutability with existential concerns for the self's coherence through change and it develops this doctrine without metaphysics. This case is also biblical because it shows that James 1:17 offers warrant for this Kierkegaardian doctrine of God's immutability. For these reasons, there is promise in retrieving the doctrine of God's immutability in Kierkegaard's authorship. By looking back to Kierkegaard's authorship as a resource, this study intends to bring forward Kierkegaard's passionate commitment to the doctrine of God's changelessness in a modern context and in fact for characteristically modern reasons.