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“NONSENSICAL” CARING IN ALI SMITH’S FICTION
AND ITS KIERKEGAARDIAN DEFENCE*

“But the main thing is still this, that need be remedied in every way, and that everything possible be done to remedy all need.” This is the way temporality, well intentioned, talks, and it cannot even talk in any other way. Eternity, on the other hand, says: There is only one danger, that mercifulness is not practiced.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, vol. 2, VII, 326

INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the fiction of Ali Smith, the paper examines the possible sense of “nonsensical” caring. Smith, the author of such novels as *Hotel World* (2001), *How to Be Both* (2014) or the *Seasonal Quartet* series (2016–20), is a contemporary Scottish writer much interested in ethical issues. Her works raise, among others, the following questions: How sensitive can one afford to be in a world full of harm? Is passive empathy a form of care or of co-suffering? Can caring be practiced outside a caring relationship, in the

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name of self-interest, or under duress? Can it be abusive? Should it be distributed? As well as: What is the right course of action when being unable to effectively help the other? Should one refrain from or engage in such apparently ineffective caring? In other words: Does “nonsensical” caring make sense?

By “*nonsensical*” caring I understand here caring which (1) though it involves the carer’s inner commitment and relevant actions (the carer offers their time and attention, engages in toilsome activities, relinquishes their possessions), is apparently *ineffective*, i.e. apparently does not benefit the care recipient,¹ who is either beyond the carer’s reach, imaginary or in no need of care (as in the case of an insentient machine, omnipotent God or, possibly, a dead person). Further, (2) the carer *can predict ineffectiveness* (in the sense specified above) of their efforts; indeed, this ineffectiveness seems to be, by and large, objectively predictable. Such caring does not seem to make sense, but at the same time it is strangely attractive.

Now, it may seem doubtful whether inner engagement (concern about the other and the desire to help) can go together with acting in full awareness that one’s action will not make a difference, i.e. that in the final account no help will be offered. In “Naturalistic Axiology,” Graham Oppy (2021b) claims that it is impossible for people to “reasonably want things while fully recognizing that those things are impossible” (169), since “[i]f ... desires aim to have the world fit them, desires for the impossible simply cannot realize the aim of desires” (152). On this account, the very desire that the other be relieved as a result of one’s action, when this is impossible, is irrational. If humans were rational (and consistent), awareness of the futility of their actions would thus exclude the possibility of their genuine commitment. But humans can be irrational (and inconsistent) in their desires, beliefs and actions, regardless of the fact that, epistemically speaking, this is incorrect. Even so, the extent to which Smith’s carers act against their better judgement may well strike the reader as unusual. But then they are fictional characters and fiction, as is well known, may and often does ignore the principle of verisimilitude. Arguably, it is by means of the fantastic that Smith’s works so poignantly ask the troubling questions listed above.

In the paper *caring* is taken to be a phenomenon consisting of the behavioural component: action aiming to help another—contribute to their welfare

¹ This formulation leaves open the possibility that the caring might bring some benefit to people other than the cared-for; further, it does not preclude the possibility that the cared-for actually does benefit.

and/or relieve/prevent/stop their suffering, and the experiential component: inner commitment or concern, the desire to help. Basically, caring *thus defined* is very close to the *agape* kind of love,² which sees love as a kind of unconditional commitment to care (BOVENS 2019, 269–70). In the light of the above definition, performing caring activities without genuine concern about the other or, conversely, being concerned but refraining from any caring activities, though such activities be available, does not qualify as caring. Notably, the definition does not require that the caring action be (actually or potentially) effective or that the cared-for or their needs³ be real—it is constructed this way partly in order to make the following considerations possible.

The term *nonsensical* aims to capture the puzzlement of Smith’s reader—“But surely this caring does not make any sense at all?”—and formulate my basic question. Admittedly, the term is provocative: it may be that as no cruelty can ever make sense, no care can ever be nonsensical. I put the term in quotation marks to signal the controversy. The most obvious way of defending “nonsensical” caring—showing that it makes sense, or is justified (i.e. there are some good reasons to engage in it)—is by demonstrating its moral value. As a matter of fact, in “The Hanging Girl,” one of Smith’s ([1999] 2004) short stories, before Pauline devotes herself to caring for a ghost, she visits an empty church and asks: “Is this right?... Is this any good?” (24). The question may not be explicit in Smith’s other works, but it seems to be inscribed in all “nonsensical” caring situations. Further, as suggested by the setting of the scene from Smith’s story, moral goodness of caring may (in some contexts) be complemented with spiritual goodness.⁴ In order not to exclude yet other reasons that might help justify predictably ineffective car-

² The two—care and love—are close to each other, but they might be distinguished in that while both caring and love involve some resignation from attending to one’s own needs, in the case of love the needs of the other are given priority. However, since an extensive section of this paper is devoted to Kierkegaard’s view of love, and since he does not adopt such a distinction, I do not adopt it here either. Though for Kierkegaard neighbour love is infinite (vol. 1, V, 180–91; see also COMPAJEN 2014, 348–51), it is wrong, in his opinion, to love another person more than oneself; only God should be loved that way (vol. 1, II A, 18–20; see also LINDSTRÖM 1952, 5–6).

³ The definition does not explicitly use the term “need” and does not require that caring be a response to a need. But it may be that in our reality, given the vulnerability of living creatures, all caring is need-oriented. All caring (even one that consists in offering the other extravagant gifts they might not possibly need) might be argued to respond to their need for assurance that they matter, which seems to be a fundamental human need. Conversely, caring that in no way corresponds with the needs of the cared-for may be experienced by them as burdensome.

⁴ The project does not require that the issue of how spiritual and moral goods relate to each other be resolved; they will tentatively be taken as complementary.

ing, such as its ability to convey (symbolic) meanings, I will speak interchangeably of *value*, *goodness* and *sense* of such care.

Caring (trivially) makes sense when it is effective, when it reduces/stops/prevents suffering and pain, which often (result from and) lead to harm, which is indisputably morally evil.⁵ The issue under discussion is the goodness of caring which is *predictably ineffective*, thus problematic in terms of its (apparently missing) consequences and (possibly faulty) intentions, as the “nonsensical” carer knowingly intends to perform a caring action that will not benefit the other. Two issues intertwine here: the sense of apparently *ineffective caring* and the sense of *predictably ineffective caring* (i.e. the sense of *consciously engaging in apparently ineffective caring*). The project aims to consider metaphysical assumptions on which these two kinds of caring could be defended. Admittedly, evaluation of each instance of the caring in question may depend on various factors, such as the carer’s ability to refrain from “nonsensical” caring activity or their alternative opportunities to care effectively, however, these are the relevant metaphysical assumptions that seem to play the decisive role, determining the nature of care, the reality of the cared-for and their needs, and the extent of the carer’s capacity for caring. Theist assumptions, which most efficiently help justify “nonsensical” caring, are in the present essay exemplified by Søren Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Christian love. After a brief discussion of how other kinds of classical theism might approach the issue, I briefly consider the possible metaphysical frameworks of Ali Smith’s fiction and the support they might lend to “nonsensical” caring.

A SURVEY OF “NONSENSICAL”-CARING CASES IN ALI SMITH’S FICTION

Let us consider the five major cases of “nonsensical” caring to be found in Smith’s novels and short stories. The cases are ordered chronologically (as they appear in her works) but also, as it happens, thematically: from the most to the least imaginary.

⁵ When care is abused—i.e. practiced in a misguided way so that its consequences for the care-recipient are undesirable (as happens, for instance, when overprotective parents bring up children incapable of empathy)—its default goodness can be limited or (perhaps) even cancelled (depending, among others, on the proportion of the relevant gain and loss).

1. THE IMAGINARY-GIRL CASE

The motif of “nonsensical” care in a very basic form can be found already in Smith’s first novel *Like* ([1997] 2006). The novel features, among others, an 8-year-old Kate, who lives a nomadic life with Amy, presumably her mother. When they are going to move on again, Kate puts the toy animals she has stolen from school during morning prayers in dustbins along the street, but keeps the orange kangaroo, her favourite, to eventually drop it down the drain. Having made sure no one can see what she does, “[s]he leans over the top of the drain until her mouth is quite close to the metal grate. / That’s for you, she tells the dead girl who lives in the drain. That kangaroo’s for you to have. You can have it” (141). One might suppose that this is Kate’s way of making amends: Kate knows that stealing animals is “the bad thing,” that “she’s not meant to have them all to herself,” that it is like “hurting other people. You shouldn’t do it” (23). One can also reasonably think that trying to take care of “the dead girl,” Kate is in fact taking care of herself: she identifies with the girl—she too is an outsider, often playing by herself—and tries to satisfy her own needs vicariously. But regardless of her psychological motivation, philosophically speaking what we have here is—on the assumption that Kate make-believes the girl down the drain is real but knows she is not⁶—a case of “nonsensical” care: there is no girl down the drain, and if she were there, being dead, she would not appreciate the gift of a plastic orange kangaroo; at the same time, Kate’s act of presenting the kangaroo to the girl is real.⁷

2. THE TAMAGOTCHI (VIRTUAL PET) CASE

The next “nonsensical” carer is the hospitalized girl in “Virtual” from *Other Stories and Other Stories* (SMITH [1999] 2004). The girl is clever, beautiful and bed-ridden: her body is wasted as she will not eat. Because she said she missed her cat, her family brings her a toy: a virtual pet. The pet needs “baths and games ... to be disciplined and taught, and fed and watered” (88). It signals its needs on the screen, all the carer needs to do is

⁶ The assumption is not ungrounded: Kate is a highly intelligent child and, as reported by Denis Dutton (2009), the ability to discern between the mode of fiction and nonfiction is acquired early in life (106–7).

⁷ Kate’s act may be contrasted in this respect with Angus’s, the man in love with Amy, who likes imagining he is fighting against Amy’s imaginary oppressors but makes no effort and suffers no loss on that account (33).

press the right buttons. If she fails, the pet is upset; neglected, it can die. The girl seems annoyed but does what needs to be done to keep her pet comfortable. She laughs when saying that, though the virtual pet is not even alive, she does “feel guilty” towards it (88). Relevant for the discussion of “non-sensical” care is the very idea of the Tamagotchi—a digital toy which because of the artificial animation and the alleged risk of death can easily be endowed with subjectivity by its owner. Indeed, the device (like plushies for kids) is constructed so as to illicit from its owner a caring response. The pet is a quasi-being with quasi-needs; in fact it is nonsentient, not even alive, and has no needs, of which the carer is fully aware. (The situation seems close to make-believe acts of care in which kids engage when playing with their plushies and dolls; except that the sick girl is neither a kid nor exactly playing.)

3. THE GHOST-IN-NEED CASE

Smith’s *Hotel World* (2001) involves a spectre, Sara Wilby. Clare, her sister, is determined to time Sara’s fall. Sara, who died in an accident falling down the dumb-waiter shaft, had been a swimmer, obsessed with timing herself, hence Clare’s presumption that Sara must be curious. Clare also attempts to experience the world “for” Sara:

I am watching TV for you in case you are missing it ... when I eat a piece of toast it is slowly so I remember for you what it tastes like ... & I look at things hard so you will know if you want to what they look like ... & I have even been to the pool yeah the pool me so I can smell it for you ... the pool where I wouldn’t have gone for any money I wouldn’t have been seen dead there. (208–10)

Significantly, Clare believes at the same time that there is no one there, witness the passage in which she admonishes herself for talking to her sister: “I am going fucking mad talking to a dead person a person who’s dead & can’t hear anything & here I am talking to it telling it jokes for fuck sake I am losing my mind” (210). Apparently Clare knows that her sister cannot benefit from Clare’s experiences or the information that Sara’s fall took “less than four seconds,” but this does not discourage Clare from acting as she does.

Variants of this case are to be found in two other works by Ali Smith. In “The Heat of the Story” a woman is said to visit every night all year round the grave of her dead husband, but her unusual conduct is only reported and

nothing is said about the woman's beliefs concerning the effectiveness of her action. A much more extensive treatment of the theme can be found in the already mentioned "The Hanging Girl," which tells the story of Pauline who devotes her life to caring for the ghost of an executed girl. Her caring does not quite qualify as "nonsensical" because Pauline, after initial hesitation (visible in the church scene), is fully convinced that her action makes sense (she believes the ghost is real and her caring brings the ghost relief). The reader who does not believe in afterlife and the communing of the living with the dead will presumably consider Pauline's behaviour misguided.

4. THE FAR-AWAY VICTIMISED STRANGER CASE

George, one of the two protagonists in *How to Be Both* (2014), is sixteen when out of curiosity she chooses to watch porn movies on the internet. One of the movies she watches leaves her stunned, as she strongly believes that the young actress performing in the movie has been painfully abused by her much older film partner. George resolves to watch a fragment of the movie (the film is relatively long) every day of her life. To her shocked father, she explains her reasons: she will watch the film "to remind herself not to forget the thing that had happened to this person ... in witness, by extension, of all the unfair and wrong things that happen to people all the time" (33). When her father tries to dissuade her from watching the movie by telling her she will "do damage" to herself, George points out that "[d]amage has already happened." As she explains,

This really happened.... To this girl. And anyone can just watch it just, like, happening, any time he or she likes. And it happens for the first time, over and over again, every time someone who hasn't seen it before clicks on it and watches it. So I want to watch it for a completely different reason. Because my completely different watching of it goes some way to acknowledging all of that to this girl. (34)

George seems to believe that her watching the porn movie will help protect the actress against being degraded by other mindless viewers (or perhaps counterbalance this degradation). This is when her father brings in the argument that is most relevant to the current discussion: "You watching it, whichever way you think you're watching it or intend to see it, won't make any real difference to that girl. It just means the number of people watching the film with her in it will keep going up" (24–35). Thus, there is a teenage

girl watching a porn movie each day of her life (this at least is her resolution) to acknowledge the suffering of the actress and by extension of other wronged people all over the world. George does realize her action will not prevent the girl or other people from suffering—“it won’t make any real difference” to them; she has been told that the effect can be damaging to herself, and counter-productive when it comes to the film’s positioning and thus popularity.

5. THE FAR-AWAY RELATIVE IN DANGER CASE

In *Summer* (2020), during World War II siblings Daniel and Hannah Gluck write tender letters to each other, which they immediately burn. Hannah, who lives in France and is involved in the Resistance, knows that, if confiscated, her letters might spell danger to many people, not just herself; Daniel knows his letters will not be forwarded—he has been interned with their father on the Isle of Man because of the father’s German origin. All the same Daniel trades a toothpaste for three sheets of paper he promises to return after the war—two for the draft, one for the fair copy—and burns all the three as soon as the fair copy is ready. The act of burning catches the reader unawares—Daniel takes great pains to properly entertain his sister and carefully censors any phrases that might possibly upset her, all so that he can in the end rub the ashes into his hands (182–94). Unlike him, Hannah is not a “nonsensical” carer as on a page torn from Gide’s novel, she assures her brother: “*The heat that will come off this note when I burn it will alter the balance of heat and cold in the world in its own way. / That energy I send your way*” (236–37). She may be taken to trust that her brother will benefit even if he never has a chance to read her letter (235–41).

It is not easy to find similar caring cases in works of other contemporary writers. In Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2005), the protagonist, Roy, lives his life in part as a woman on behalf of his dead sister, Norma; in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) Briony’s care for her dead sister, Cecilia, and her sister’s partner, Robbie, consists in re-writing their life stories in a novel so as to endow them with happier (fictional) lives, but Briony seems to believe that her caring will be effective, at least as an expiatory act, while Roy seems not to be fully conscious of what he is doing; their cases thus do not entirely fit the definition of “nonsensical” caring.

One also might wish to extend the list with some real-life cases, to which the reader might more easily relate, but, as suggested above, Smith’s cases

are fantastic. In real life we often engage in apparently ineffective caring but it is then either not *predictably* ineffective (the carer at least hopes it might help the one in need) and/or it is not undertaken freely and/or it is not costly. Not costly, predictably ineffective caring can easily be found in children’s make-believe games or some video/computer games (though it is virtual harm that seems to be more prevalent there). In both cases caring is make-believe, performed for fun or at times also for educational purposes. In some situations, for example, when a nonbeliever lights a candle on the grave of a person who was dear to them while being convinced that the candle will not comfort the dead, some (not much) real effort, time and money may be involved; in others, the meaning of caring is purely symbolic, as when one crosses their fingers to express concern for a friend who is about to take a hard exam. When by contrast people in real life engage in costly caring—for instance when in spite of being assured by the doctors that the patient will never regain consciousness, for years they tend their relative,⁸ or when the owner of a traumatised dog taken from the shelter tries to make friends with the pet though the animal remains invariably aggressive—they do so because they hope that, unlikely as this may seem, their caring might one day be crowned with success and/or because this caring is an expression of their deep emotional need and/or sense of moral obligation, *which they cannot ignore*. Some such acts of caring may involve religious beliefs. To sum up, there is much apparently ineffective caring in real life but it does not strike us as nonsensical because usually, though it does not bring real relief to the one who is being cared for, it is either performed with the hope that a relief will be brought and/or it serves primarily other purposes (educational, social, recreational) and/or it is not performed in an entirely free way, in the sense that it involves people with whom the carer is most closely bonded. Smith’s cases, by contrast, are predictably ineffective, costly and undertaken freely (i.e. they do not involve people with whom the carer is in a most intimate relationship though twice they involve siblings). Thereby they direct our attention towards caring: how it is and how it should be practiced; relatedly, they ask about metaphysical assumptions which might help justify the apparently nonsensical caring.

⁸ Cf. Harriet McBryde Johnson’s defence of the value (“profound beauty”) of taking care of an unresponsive person (totally unconscious and one never to regain consciousness) voiced in her conversation with Peter Singer (qtd. in TAYLOR 2017, 130).

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF THE FIVE CASES

Extracted from their context, Smith's stories might lose some of their appeal but hopefully they remain vivid and memorable. They are also varied. They differ, above all, in the nature of the care-recipient: an imaginary person, an object that simulates an animate being, a ghost, a far-away victimised stranger and a far-away relative in danger. Consequently, the cases differ in the reason why the caring apparently cannot be effective: the cared-for does not exist, has no needs or has needs that the carer cannot fulfil. The cases vary also in the degree of certainty as regards the carer's belief that their caring will not be effective (George might in fact entertain the thought that symbolically her caring matters) and in the objective assessment of this care's apparent ineffectiveness (again George's case demands special treatment⁹). Further, the carers seem to be partly motivated by different psychological needs—atoning for the offence of stealing the toy animals (Kate), making oneself useful (the sick girl), giving expression to one's grief (Clare), trying to make the world a better place (George), keeping one's promise and expressing one's affection (Daniel); still, all these motivations seem to play the second fiddle to the concern about the other, the desire to take care of them.

More importantly the cases presented above have much in common:

1. *The "recipients of care" apparently do not benefit*; also, most of the time they can hardly appreciate being taken care of, in fact, they are not even aware of being taken care of; the carer and the cared-for seem to be out of touch with each other.

2. *The carer "cares"*—they are concerned and perform an action that involves considerable effort (sometimes, as in the case of George, this effort can be prolonged and spell a risk of psychological damage) and/or sacrifice (cf. Kate's kangaroo); it is often costly, never merely a gesture.

3. *The carer knows in advance that the caring is doomed to be ineffective*, i.e. knows the recipient of caring does not exist or their needs are not real, or helping them is impossible. More precisely, it seems that the carer must realize that their action is doomed to failure. Human knowledge is fallible, and

⁹ Arguably, to the very same extent that people who watch the movie to get sexually aroused degrade (harm) the actress (presumably some people would claim the harm is real), George's watching the movie with the caring intention protects the actress. In other words, the same standards should be applied when interpreting the reality of harm and of care done to porn actors by people watching porn films. Along the standards many people adopt with reference to pornography, George's care might be real and effective.

this is doubly true of human knowledge of the future. Even so, all the cases from Smith’s works depict caring which is predictably futile: i.e. it can hardly help the one to whom it is dedicated.

What matters is both the objective assessment of the caring being likely ineffective and the carer’s subjective foreknowledge thereof. If the carer thought their care would work while objectively it were obvious that it would not, such care should best be called misguided. Moral value of misguided caring would depend among others on the source of the carer’s ignorance (whether it is culpable ignorance, e.g. originating in epistemic neglect, or not, etc.). If, on the other hand, caring were ineffective as a result of unpredictable circumstances (i.e. due to moral luck)—as in O. Henry’s “The Gift of Magi” (1905), in which a husband and a wife, both poor, sell whatever they have to offer a gift to the other: she sells her hair to buy him a watch chain, he sells his watch to buy her a set of combs, in effect their gifts are useless—its moral value would not suffer. The cases of “nonsensical” care are different: both from the carer’s and an external observer’s perspective in advance they appear futile.

Further, all “nonsensical”-caring cases involve an act of imagination. Naturally, all caring actions involve imagination, needed to recognize the other’s needs and foresee how one might help satisfy them. But the act of imagination in “nonsensical” caring seems to be augmented: firstly, the carers empathise with strangers or people who are far away or dead, and, secondly, they perform their caring action *as if* it might be effective, while believing it will not: their caring action seems to embody the counterfactual belief: “this will work.”¹⁰ (Alternatively, the carers might be taken to believe (or make-believe) that regardless of the situation it makes sense for them to care). However—and this is most important—the carers do not make-believe that they care: their subjective experience and their caring actions are real.

There are thus the five cases of “nonsensical” care and the questions: What sense (if any) does it make to care when apparently this caring cannot benefit the cared-for? What sense (if any) does it make to engage in a caring activity as if it might be helpful while being convinced it will not? Let us first focus on the former question. Moral value of apparently ineffective caring can easily be defended with reference to the carer’s intentions: by definition

¹⁰ In some cases the carers imagine still other, clearly counterfactual things: Kate not only imagines that the dead girl will enjoy the orange kangaroo, not only acts as if she might offer the dead girl the toy animal, but also and in the first place imagines the dead girl herself; the virtual pet owner imagines in the first place that her pet can feel, count on her and, should she fail it, die.

these are good. More problematic is the assessment which focuses on the consequences. The standard desirable consequences of caring actions are the satisfied needs of the care recipient, thus their minimized, prevented or stopped suffering. In the cases under discussion all these are clearly missing. When caring is, so to speak, ineffective (e.g. a doctor tries but fails to save a patient's life), it might nonetheless help fulfil the basic meaning of all caring, which is to convey to the one in need the sense that someone cares for them, and thus to increase their welfare. Admittedly, in our cases, since the cared-for cannot receive this message, also this effect is missing. More precisely, it is not experienced by the cared-for. For an external observer, however, the cared-for is no longer on their own, there is someone attentive to their needs, someone to whom they matter. Apparently ineffective caring might thus be said to reduce the objective condition of loneliness or abandonment of the cared-for (naturally, this applies only to existent and sentient beings, who can be lonely or abandoned). If benefits to the cared-for are unavailable or symbolic, the sense of caring might be sought in the carer's benefits. Typically these might include psychological benefits (such as feeling needed and useful or giving expression to one's affection and concern),¹¹ moral benefits (practice in virtuous behaviours, sense of having done one's duty), or cognitive benefits (like higher competence in caring). Notably, the carer's gain, as long as it is their *personal* gain, lends limited value to the caring in question, not because self-care is irrelevant, but because the carer is usually not the one urgently in need of help. Also the welfare of the social group to which the carer and cared-for belong might increase as a result of caring. The situations of apparently ineffective caring under discussion do not emphasize such benefits,¹² but neither do they preclude them. Finally, "nonsensical" caring in virtue of its apparent lack of sense can forcefully convey the carer's belief that caring matters (possibly more than anything else) and that, though people often feel strangers to each other, caring is possible; it can further voice their defiance against the world of mindless cruelty, oppression and abuse.¹³ It is important to recognize all these effects of

¹¹ Other benefits of the kind might include gaining higher self-esteem or social standing, enjoying one's agency, strengthening one's sense of security based on expectation of reciprocity, or relieving one's conscience if caring is an expiatory act.

¹² In Smith's works the witnesses of "nonsensical" caring into whose experience the reader has insight—George's father and the hospital visitor who tells of the virtual pet owner—are, as it happens, deeply disturbed.

¹³ Moral goodness of an action is most easily assessed with reference to its effects or the agent's intentions. There are other possibilities: the action may be good in virtue of complying

caring; when speaking of *apparently ineffective* caring I do not mean to question them, but merely to emphasize the fact that the primary purpose of the caring under discussion, which is to benefit the cared-for, remains unfulfilled.

Now, it might seem that if the answer to the first question—about the value of caring that brings no benefits to the cared-for (i.e. apparently ineffective caring)—is basically positive, so is the answer to the second question—about the value of engaging in such actions with a deep conviction of their futility (i.e. “nonsensical” caring). This seems to be the case if we consider the consequences: though mostly limited to the carer, they are equally good whether it is predictable or unpredictable that the caring will fail to help the cared-for. If we take into account the carer’s intentions, the situation is less obvious: their foreknowledge of the futility of the caring action may detract from its goodness.¹⁴ In particular for the carer, should they be aware of all this, their “nonsensical” self-care might not be defensible after all.

Now, the main threat to the sense of predictably ineffective caring consists in alternative, effective caring opportunities in which the carer does not engage on account of engaging in the former. Let us consider the imaginary-girl case. Presumably Kate could give her plastic orange kangaroo to a friend or a poor child, instead of dropping it down the drain. In terms of their consequences—likely a real child happily playing with the animal—the alternative caring actions seem to be morally superior to the one Kate selects. The virtual pet owner, by contrast, has very few alternative caring possibilities: confined to her bed, she is almost too weak to do anything but press the buttons. There might thus be some caring situations in which such opportunities seem to be unavailable. If they are available, the moral harm of neglected needs to which the carer might otherwise effectively respond undermines the moral good of apparently ineffective caring.¹⁵ In terms of extenuating circumstances, one might note that the attitude of concern (the subjective component of care) is not entirely under the carer’s control. Humans can culti-

with a certain norm or it may be morally good in itself. Since the present discussion is meant as introductory, such more sophisticated interpretations of moral value are not discussed here.

¹⁴ *Nota bene*, aware of the apparent ineffectiveness of their actions, the carers might have some intuition as regards the value their actions might otherwise have, which might “redeem” their intentions.

¹⁵ The value of apparently ineffective caring might also be diminished by its undesirable side-effects: injury (mental or physical) of the carer, the cared-for or the third party. Most likely might be the situation in which ineffective carers exhaust themselves, which might be seen as an act of morally permissible self-sacrifice.

vate the attitude of attentiveness to others' needs but cannot at will decide that some person should or should not deeply matter to them. It may be impossible for humans to refrain from caring for people whom they hold dear.

To sum up, apparently ineffective caring, when examined more closely, is not entirely ineffective. It brings some positive side-effects—benefits for the carer and their social environment—and thus makes some sense. It also makes some sense in that it objectively helps overcome the abandonment of the care recipient; in some situations it also might subjectively reassure the cared-for that they matter (though in Smith's cases this effect is missing). Still, these effects might be viewed as unsatisfactory—the one in need of help does not receive it; other people whose needs might more effectively be attended to are left on their own. Considering how much suffering there is in the world, caring makes the most sense when it is predictably effective. This at least is what the situation looks like on naturalism,¹⁶ which presupposes that “reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing ‘supernatural’” (PAPINEAU 2007¹⁷), i.e. which excludes the possibility of the spiritual dimension of caring and of supernatural assistance.

KIERKEGAARDIAN DEFENCE OF “NONSENSICAL” CARING

Søren Kierkegaard's deliberations on love presented in *Works of Love* (1847)—commonly taken as one of his most important works and one in which he most fully presents his ideas on the subject—instantiates here a classical theist defence of predictably ineffective caring.

Love can be construed in a variety of ways, not necessarily as care, but this is how Kierkegaard construes it: Christian love, to which he also refers as *neighbour* love (and which he calls in Danish *Kjerlighed*) consists in helping people in need; or, as C. Stephan Evans puts it (2004), taking care of them and their welfare (182). M. Jamie Ferreira classifies this kind of love as *agape* love (2001, 40; cf. Bovens's definition cited in the introduction). In this construal Kierkegaard is by no means exceptional. The so-called altruistic love or the *agape* model of love is today more popular than the alternatives (FEHR 2006, 227–29). When speaking in the paper of love, I am referring to this model. In other words, unless indicated otherwise, *care*, (*neigh-*

¹⁶ This is a simplification; at the end of the paper I will suggest that the value of “nonsensical” caring on naturalism might on some additional assumptions be more extensive.

¹⁷ Papineau cites this definition in his entry on naturalism with some reservations.

bour) love and *mercifulness* (another term used in the English translation of Kierkegaard’s work) will be taken as more or less synonymous.¹⁸

To love for a Christian consists in participating in God’s *eternal* love and sharing it with others. In the prayer which opens the book, Kierkegaard ([1847] 1998) addresses God: “you who are love, so that one who loves is what he is only by being in you!” (3). At the end of the book he states, “to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living ... to love people is the only blessed comfort both here and in the next world” (Conclusion, 375). Neighbour love is God’s presence in human life since God is love.¹⁹ People have been granted this love²⁰ and owe it to any person in need unconditionally. Any person in need, as Ferreira (2001) notes, “has a claim on your love and is your neighbor” (47). This is in contrast with *earthly* love—instantiated by romantic love (*Elskov*) and friendship (*Venskab*)—which is preferential, i.e. dependent on the attractiveness of its object. Earthly love is further directed at one’s own welfare, unlike neighbour love, which cares about the other. Also in contrast with earthly love, neighbour love is not “*a matter of feeling*” but “*of conscience*” (vol. 1, III B, 143).²¹ In all, Christian love entails for Kierkegaard an affective component but, as Ferreira (2001) notes, it is a disposition to act out of compassion rather than a specific feeling (196); love’s nature is essentially spiritual²² and moral.

Caring for one’s neighbours means important benefits for them. To love means, above all, “*to help another person to love God*” (vol. 1, III A, 107),

¹⁸ Ferreira (2001) notes that the word “love” is problematic; she is first inclined to speak like Lévinas of “responsibility” (48), later opts for “(responsible) caring” (2008b, 106–7). “Caring” indeed seems the best option as the Danish term Kierkegaard actually uses with reference to love proper, i.e. *Kjerlighed*, means “caring” (FERREIRA 2001, 43; cf. also her comment on “caring for” vs. “caring about,” 48–49).

¹⁹ Kierkegaard uses the same word (*Kjerlighed*) when speaking of God as love and of neighbour love (FERREIRA 2008b, 107).

²⁰ Significantly, God’s love, for Kierkegaard, consists in “sacrificial giving of himself” (vol. 2, IV, 264; see also LINDSTRÖM 1952, 9–10).

²¹ Finding Kierkegaard’s construal of romantic love in *Works of Love* inconsistent, Krishek (2009) claims that neighbour and romantic love should be re-interpreted in the light of *Fear and Trembling* so that they both are desirable, both entail self-affirmation (recognition and satisfaction of the lover’s worldly needs). While Kierkegaard’s treatment of earthly love in *Works of Love* may be slightly inconsistent, Krishek’s proposal seems to miss two important points: that though neighbour love requires self-denial, it is more than compensated by the bliss of God’s presence, and that earthly love is commendable insofar as it resembles neighbour love.

²² Some authors seem to miss the mystical and supernatural nature of Kierkegaard’s love; but not all (cf. KRISHEK 2017, 4, 15n28, or TIETJEN 2017, 83–84).

but it also means helping them to be themselves, independent and free (vol. 2, IV, 274), as well as attending to their down-to-earth needs (this is most evident in Kierkegaard's discussion of the merciful Samaritan, vol. 2, VII, 317).²³ *Nota bene*, all the time God is "the true helper" (vol. 1, II B, 48). But there are also the carer's benefits—the most important of which is love itself. When caring, one is in God. Though love of one's neighbour is self-denying and self-sacrificing, it brings the carer great happiness and endows their life with meaning. Another spiritual good to be gained by caring is becoming like God insofar as this is humanly possible²⁴ and practicing one's devotion to God.²⁵ By loving one also fulfils one's obligation: for a Christian "to love is a duty" (vol. 1, II A, 24). All these spiritual goods make caring invaluable.²⁶

Before moving to ineffective caring, it is important to consider how in Kierkegaard's view love's usual effects (listed above) relate to its goodness. Ferreira (2001) reads Kierkegaard as an anti-consequentialist: love is not invalidated when it fails to bring (intended or observable) results (24–25). Evans does not perceive love's effects as central either, when claiming that for Kierkegaard God's command is the source of morality: caring is good because it is commanded by God (EVANS 2004, 120–24, 136–39; [1998] 2006, 231–37). This is obviously problematic. Can one speak of love—the greatest blessing and God's grace—in terms of obligation? Can the duty-bound carer's choice to care be free?²⁷ Though Kierkegaard frequently speaks in his

²³ Cf. Ferreira's insistence that the neighbour should also be offered practical, material help (e.g. FERREIRA 2001, 34, 62, 70, 166; cf. also EVANS 2004, 185).

²⁴ Cf. Kierkegaard's words "God is Love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving" (vol. 1, II C, 62–63).

²⁵ Cf. Kierkegaard: "If you want to show that your life is intended to serve God, then let it serve people, yet continually with the thought of God" (vol. 1, IV, 161).

²⁶ In some theist worldviews, the greatest spiritual good is uniting with God. In Christian tradition this idea can be found, for instance, in the writings of Meister Eckhart or Thomas Aquinas. Kierkegaard does not speak (in *Works of Love* anyway) of the possibility of a human uniting with God; apparently only Jesus is "in the communion of love" with God the Father and the Spirit (vol. 1, IV, 155). Caring might bring still further benefits on classical theism: one might thereby atone for one's sins/sinful nature or gain God's reward. These are missing from Kierkegaard's work, which foregrounds the doctrine of God's grace and rejects the idea of merit that human work might earn (cf. FERREIRA 2001, 17–19, 80).

²⁷ In defence of this idea, Ferreira (2008b) claims that one may act out of compassion when fulfilling the love commandment (107). More importantly, Ferreira (2001) points out that love for Kierkegaard is in the first place God's gift (17–18) and the human need, and only then it is an obligation (26–27, 39–42). Cf. similar argumentation for the need to contextualize the commandment in EVANS (2004, 197–98). Others prefer the strict and literal interpretation of the command

book of the Christian duty to love, twice he admits that if human desire of love is strong enough, there is no need for the obligation (vol. 1, V, 178–79; Conclusion 375–76). Its primary function might be pedagogical.²⁸ Among moral approaches relevant to Kierkegaard's works experts list further virtue ethics (MARCAR 2018, 342n5), moral fideism (TIETJEN 2017), Kantian intentionalism and Aristotelian human-nature theory (EVANS 2004, 19–22), as well as H. Richard Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility (FERREIRA 2001, 243–44), but not consequentialism. Love for Kierkegaard is the supreme good because it is God, and it is good for people to care because in this way they relate to God. This goodness manifests in all kinds of benefits that caring brings to everyone involved, which is why the benefits should not be ignored; nonetheless, for Kierkegaard they do not constitute the value of caring. This is clear in the excerpt that serves as an epigraph in this essay, in which Kierkegaard contrasts the worldly perspective, which focuses on relieving suffering (i.e. the results of caring), with the eternal perspective, in which practicing God's love is the only thing that matters.

Kierkegaard's defence of caring which appears to be ineffective includes the discussion of love of the dead, love of the imaginary, as well as apparently ineffective love due to moral luck. The title of the seventh chapter of the second volume of his work—"Mercifulness, a Work of Love Even If It Can Give Nothing and Is Able to Do Nothing"—speaks for itself. Retelling the story of the good Samaritan, Kierkegaard argues that the Samaritan would be "merciful" even if out of poverty he were unable to effectively help the assaulted man (if he had no money to pay the innkeeper, nothing with which to bind the wounds of the injured man, no way of saving his life), as long as helping that man were the Samaritan's honest desire (vol. 2, VII, 317). Clearly, though ineffective on account of moral luck, i.e. circumstances the carer cannot control (lack of appropriate resources being a case in point), neighbour love is to be practiced. Under such circumstances it is the inner experience that matters. At first glance, since the behavioural component seems missing, this does not comply with the definition of care adopted in the present essay or, for that matter, with Kierkegaard's claim that "Christian love ... is sheer action" (vol. 1, III A, 98). But caring for Kierkegaard may be acting even if the carer appears to perform no externally

to love (e.g. HALL 2002, 11–50; we are summoned "to stand convicted and humbled before the command to love," 14).

²⁸ The notion of obligation might further serve to ensure that love will not be misconstrued as an emotion. As Ferreira (2008a) points out, love interpreted in terms of feelings could not be commanded (131).

observable action (FERREIRA 2001, 24–25). Such caring may consist in prayer, an act of forgiveness, or a presupposition of the other’s love. Apparently, it might be a mental or even spiritual act. Kierkegaard rounds off the chapter, stating that mercifulness “is a work of love even if it has nothing to give and is able to do nothing” (330). If so, all apparently ineffective caring is good—all of it is *work of love*.

And yet of caring for unreal beings Kierkegaard disapproves: “When it is a duty to love the people we see, *one must first and foremost give up all imaginary and exaggerated ideas about a dreamworld where the object of love should be sought and found—that is, one must become sober, gain actuality and truth by finding and remaining in the world of actuality as the task assigned to one.* / With regard to loving, the most dangerous of all escapes is wanting to love only the unseen or that which one has not seen” (vol. 1, IV, 161). Valter Lindström (1952) clarifies the context: Kierkegaard disapproves of people who, pretending they cannot find a real human worthy of their love, direct their attention towards the dreamland (13). Taken literally, Kierkegaard thus negates the value of caring in the imaginary-girl case and the Tamagotchi case, in both of which the care recipient is imaginary. But Kierkegaard’s rationale for such negation clearly does not apply to Smith’s characters, who do not hold the world in disdain. Their choice of the imaginary recipient is a matter of circumstances beyond their control: the carer’s mental or physical condition (Kate is a child leading with her mother a nomadic life—she has few actual friends; the virtual pet owner’s body is wasted—she is physically unable to engage in more usual caring activities). If so, perhaps they perform works of love after all.

Since for him the dead are nonimaginary, Kierkegaard does not object to the loving recollection of the dead; on the contrary, it is a human duty to recollect them. In fact love of the dead is for Kierkegaard the purest kind of earthly love: “most unselfish” (not burdened by any expectation of reciprocity), “freest” (not extorted by any pressure of the beloved) and “most faithful” (unaffected by any changes in the beloved) (vol. 2, IX, 349–55). This obviously justifies the ghost-in-need case. Considering the reasons why love of the dead is the purest kind of love, caring for a victimised far-away stranger should be assigned to the same category since also this caring does not involve either a burden of expected reciprocity, or an element of compulsion, or an opportunity to blame the cared-for for one’s failure in love; needless to say, it concerns a nonimaginary human being.

There is more to it. Inspected closely, Kierkegaard's treatment of the dead undermines his treatment of the imaginary. Notably, Kierkegaard's reasons for loving the dead do not concern their welfare. Presumably on account of his Lutheran background,²⁹ he does not uphold the belief (common among Christian theists) that the dead might benefit spiritually from being piously recollected. To cite Kierkegaard, the dead person is "no actuality; ... he is *no one*," a "nonbeing." The relationship between the living and the dead is thus paradoxical: "when a person relates himself to one who is dead, there is only one in this relationship" (vol. 2, IX, 347, 349). This implies that loving the dead must be good on account of neighbour love being a blessing in itself, a merciful act by engaging in which one participates in God.³⁰ This is consistent with the following remark: "As far as thought is concerned, the neighbor does not even need to exist. If someone living on a desert island mentally conformed to this commandment, by renouncing self-love he could be said to love the neighbor" (vol. 1, II A, 21). To say that the passage expresses "the irrelevance of the actual other in Kierkegaard's ethic" is to misread it, says Ferreira (2001) but she confirms that for the Dane the inner attitude (renunciation of self-love and being attentive to one's neighbour) is crucial and, if the neighbour were (counterfactually) missing, this attitude would suffice as far as the commandment goes (34–35). Admittedly, the neighbour is rarely missing from the world. But for some (like Kate or the pet owner) forming with them a caring relation might be problematic. Given the way Kierkegaard understands the dead and the relation that the living form with them, one may well conclude that there is little difference (if any) between the dead and the imaginary—if it is good to love the former, it should be good to love the latter.

All in all, the strongest argument against loving nonexistent beings (or things) is the human duty, which is to love actual people. But if so, loving the dead is as mistaken as is loving the imaginary. If, conversely, loving the dead is praiseworthy, then so is loving the imaginary. In that case we need to ignore the duty concerning actual people and cling to Kierkegaard's claim that as long as God's love is practiced, the worst danger is averted. This seems logical. However, one might interpret the task of loving "the people we see" as a differently phrased alternative-caring-opportunities argument.

²⁹ Though critical of the Lutheranism of his days, "Kierkegaard was deeply committed to what he saw as the core doctrines defended by Luther" (FERREIRA 2001, 11; see also 19–21 and 248–53; cf. also HALL 2002, 14–22, 27–40).

³⁰ Loving the dead is also to be practiced because it is instructive: one can thereby learn how to love the living (vol. 2, IX, 358).

It is because there are so many real humans in need, that it is wrong to love imaginary ones, who do not really suffer. Ferreira in her study recalls the thought of Jacques Derrida—we care for some at the expense of others—to suggest that Kierkegaard (2001, 107–8) might have thought likewise but stayed silent so as not to weaken the reader’s motivation to care. This may but need not be so (cf. the epigraph). Anyway, my point here is not that on classical theism it makes sense to care for imaginary creatures,³¹ but that in terms of Kierkegaard’s ethics of love (his interpretation of love’s nature and desirability) and his defence of love for the dead, such care is defensible.³²

In its extreme version the Kierkegaardian defence of apparently ineffective caring, might be summed up as follows. All the cases of apparently ineffective caring under consideration are works of love, they all involve practicing God’s love, and thus all mean a blessing and make sense. (Though Kierkegaard speaks to Christians of Christian love, what he says applies to all people who engage in neighbour love—on his interpretation of this love, they cannot possibly do so without relating to God; cf. COMPAIJEN 2014, 362n71.)³³ In particular, caring for the dead (case 3) is the purest kind of earthly love and one that lets the carer gain competence in neighbour love; by analogy so is caring for people who, being strangers or far away, will never reciprocate the carer’s concern or manipulate them (case 4). Arguably, this analogy holds also for the imaginary care recipients (cases 1 and 2). Further, love which is apparently ineffective on account of moral luck (e.g. lack of proper resources; cases 3, 4 and 5) is as good as if it were effective; as a matter of fact it is effective as it means practicing God’s love. As for “nonsensical” caring, Kierkegaard does not explicitly consider it, but given his reasons for the positive assessment of apparently ineffective caring, it would be highly inconsistent for him to claim that such caring is only good when it could not have been predicted to be ineffective.

How does this Kierkegaardian (and by and large Christian) defence relate to other classical theist defences of “nonsensical” caring? Classical theism

³¹ There remains the question whether one can care for someone who is not there. The definition of care I adopted does not require that the cared-for be real, but the definition has little epistemic authority. It is by all means reasonable to argue that caring requires a (real) cared-for.

³² Presumably, when recommending caring for the dead, Kierkegaard is making a rare concession to human emotionality, whereas playing down the importance of the care-recipient, he aims to pay homage to God’s grace.

³³ At the same time Kierkegaard might find the situation of a non-Christian practicing neighbour love unlikely. As argued by Compaijen (2014), he exaggerates the contrast between “a Christian and a natural perspective” on the goodness of neighbour love when claiming that outside Christianity it can only be seen as “offensive” (357–60).

assumes God—a perfectly good and omnipotent Being. If caring (love) is morally good (and this seems to be the case), it basically follows that God, insofar as this is doable and good for them, cares for other beings, as well as approves of their caring for each other. This means that God will approve of love even if God is not love; *nota bene*, all major religions associate divinity with love (*Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, 2008). On classical theism there is, further, less urgency (compared with naturalism) to care effectively—God is the real carer, who ensures that every pain is healed, every suffering either purposeful or compensated for (see, e.g., the pro-theistic argument that if God exists, God ensures that the suffering always benefits the sufferer, discussed by Klaas Kraay (2018, 15)). In other words, classical theists might tend to appreciate the value of care irrespective of how effectively it helps the one in need. What is problematic for a classical theist (as it is for a naturalist) is the harm of neglected effective caring opportunities. Comparing classical theism with naturalism as regards their justification of “nonsensical” caring, one might say that while the classical theist justification seems stronger,³⁴ in terms of its epistemic status theism (and other supernaturalisms) seems weaker than naturalism.³⁵

METAPHYSICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF ALI SMITH’S FICTION AND “NONSENSICAL” CARING

Ali Smith does not seem to accept theist belief. More precisely, many characters from her fiction—the source of “nonsensical” care cases—do not believe in the classical theist God, i.e. the perfect being, omniscient and omnipotent, who created the world and maintains it in existence. There is too much suffering in the world, for them, to be reconciled with this image of God. They overlook the possibility of God being deeply concerned and help-

³⁴ For a naturalist, caring cannot have absolute value and had better be effective. This is not to say that naturalists are committed to the claim that caring is only good because of its direct effects. They might, for example, derive the value of caring from its adaptive function in biological life, on evolutionary naturalism, or see it as one of moral values established as morally desirable by human communities, on humanist naturalism.

³⁵ Compare Oppy’s claim: “what is distinctive of naturalism is that, in the causal domain, it is committed to just those kinds of things for which there is expert agreement on their existence,” while “non-naturalists are committed to the claim that things are not as they seem: there are nonnatural kinds of entities whose existence evades a significant proportion of the experts among us and yet are known to those non-naturalists” (OPPY 2021a, 89). Even if Oppy exaggerates the contrast (there is a considerable difference of opinion among naturalist experts as regards, for example, the status of consciousness), it can hardly be denied.

less, a “nonsensical” carer, so to speak. Having construed God as omnipotent but indifferent, they choose not to believe.

Smith’s fiction may be read instead as expressive of a different kind of supernaturalism, postulating active presence in the world of impersonal spiritual forces or personal spirits, some of which might be benign, supportive of human efforts to care and interconnecting all living things with each other (the view associated with postsecular religiosity; as construed by MCCLURE 2007, 1–25).³⁶ On such metaphysical assumptions, “nonsensical” caring might bring certain spiritual benefits: it might increase the amount of spiritual goodness in the world; also, spiritual forces (or spirits) might help people spiritually create a community, thus the cared-for, being in touch with the carer, might mystically benefit after all. These are vague intimations only but, as John McClure explains, postsecularist religiosity deliberately refrains from trying to intellectually dissect the spiritual realm (12–17).

Alternatively, Smith’s fiction might be read as assuming a kind of naturalism, enriched with two assumptions—of the relatedness of human beings and of caring being a/the meaning of human life. The relational model of humans—assumed and explored among others by ethicists of care (Virginia Held, Fiona Robinson or Jean Keller), posthumanists (Rosa Braidotti or Donna Haraway), and experts in social ontology (Mark Bickhard, Kenneth Gergen or Gilbert Simondon)—sees humans as interdependent, relational and intrinsically social (rather than autonomous, separate and driven by self-interest). In radical versions of the model, humans—their selves, identities, experience—are constituted in relationships and/or interactions with others; they become, get enacted or performed in “relatings,” and do not exist prior to or outside of them. On this model, the carer’s benefits stop being the carer’s private gain and become social gain as well as, paradoxically as this may sound, the gain of the cared-for. If I am partly me and partly the other with whom I am in a relationship (or with whom I am interacting), and the other is partly the other and partly me, then whatever happens to me happens to the other, and the other way round. The carer’s benefits are the benefits of the cared-for; they become more substantial, increasing thereby the goodness of apparently ineffective caring. Admittedly, this may seem very counter-intuitive to someone used to the individualistic model of the human being dominant in western culture.³⁷

³⁶ Cf. my essay “A Postsecular Reading of Nonsensical Caring in Ali Smith’s Fiction” (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, in print).

³⁷ The intuition is hardly a new one. It was famously formulated by John Donne in Meditation XVII (1624): “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of

Also the other assumption—that caring is the/a meaning of human life—adds extra value to the carer's benefits. Arguably, even if life's meaning is not itself a moral value (as some claim), a chance to live a meaningful life is an important good. Any caring action by adding meaning to the carer's life increases either their moral gain or existential welfare. Strange as this may seem, few authors concerned nowadays with the meaning-of-life issue defend the idea that caring is the main, let alone the only, source of such meaning. But caring features prominently in the writings of Iddo Landau (2017, 218), Terry Eagleton (2008, 95–97), Susan Wolf (2010, 4–13), all of whom are pluralists (i.e. believe that there are other sources of life's meaning apart from care, such as pleasure, happiness or academic investigations), or John Cottingham, representing the theist tradition in philosophy. Searching in the past philosophical tradition, one can find caring to be more or less life's meaning for non-theist Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Lévinas (who might perhaps be called a non-classical theist) or Søren Kierkegaard (a Christian theist).

The assumptions of human relationality and of care being the meaning of human life are compatible with both naturalism and theism. On theism, however, they make less difference as theisms often hold that spiritually people form a community,³⁸ and typically see the meaning of human life as granted by God. One might say that the two assumptions help bring the non-theist view of "nonsensical" caring closer to the theist view: they reconnect humans (though typically not by spiritual means) and give extra meaning to caring (though not by making it essentially divine). Smith seems to tentatively introduce into her fiction the two ideas in question but how precisely she does this is an issue that needs research in its own right.

As regards the relative compatibility of the ethical questions which Smith formulates against an apparently non-Christian metaphysical background with Kierkegaard's radical view of Christian love, it might originate in their common intuition that nothing matters quite as much as caring for the other; it might also originate in her Christian background: Smith was raised as a Catholic, stopped going to church in her late 20s (SMITH 2012), yet some elements of the Christian ethical thought might remain part of her work.

the main" (1057; *nota bene*, the context of the Meditation is theist through and through). Interestingly, though the predominant opinion is that the Kierkegaardian self is anti-social (KRISHEK 2009, 2–3), Furtak (2013) claims that "the Kierkegaardian self is constituted by its relations, both the beloved other and my relationship with her or him are aspects of my personal identity" (234).

³⁸ This perhaps is not to be taken for granted; in a theism that attaches a lot of importance to personal salvation one's sense of community with others may be threatened.

CONCLUSION

Generally and trivially, one might say that apparently ineffective caring (i.e. one from which the cared-for cannot benefit) may well be effective in that it may bring other benefits, mostly to the carer; but its value is inferior to that of caring which does help the cared-for. Whether “nonsensical” caring (i.e. one which is predictably ineffective) is seen as a reprehensible activity, comparable to a spell of idleness, or as a praiseworthy activity, second best to predictably effective caring, or else takes some position between these extremes, seems to depend on specific metaphysical assumptions.

Along the Kierkegaardian interpretation, God is love (caring). If there is a responsive care-recipient, in the act of caring the carer and the care-recipient relate to each other in God. The carer who honestly engages in caring when the care-recipient is missing, far-away, or unresponsive continues to practice love and experience God. That God’s love is practiced is the one thing that really matters. Whether effective or ineffective, caring is good.

Incidentally, it is possible to think of a (non-classical) theism which identifies God with caring on which effectiveness does matter. Should God—identifiable with love and painfully concerned about all those who suffer—be unable to help them directly but dependent in this respect on the mediation of God’s creatures, effectiveness of caring could well be crucial, even though—whether effective or not—caring would be divine and thus of superb value. This would be especially true if God were present in the caring people offer each other but not otherwise. Should (non-classical) God be missing, caring (and protecting others against one’s own malevolence) might be the way to make God present—another invaluable effect.

Another theist strategy for strongly defending “nonsensical” caring (and one that does not identify God with love) might involve a partial negation of the reality of suffering. If the world were taken as a “mock” reality in which God’s creatures practice making moral choices (care for or harm others), on the basis of which God judges them and invites the deserving ones to “real” eternal life, caring for (or harming) imaginary creatures or creatures with imaginary needs might serve God’s purposes just as well as caring for (or harming) the real ones.³⁹

³⁹ There are two problems with this strategy: (1) “mock” suffering continues to hurt, (2) God who permits creatures to harm each other merely for soteriological purposes cannot easily be deemed good.

On other theisms (i.e. ones which do not identify God with caring but assume that God is good), caring will presumably be consistent with God's will, while its effectiveness will not be crucial: there is God to ensure that hopefully all suffering comes to an end, all harm is compensated for. Arguably, acceptance for "nonsensical" caring is in such context considerable. Less importantly, supernaturalisms can offer some special caring possibilities: if human souls are believed to be immortal, it may be possible to care for the dead; if people are supposed to need and receive spiritual support, it may be reasonable to pray for them, and the like. Some kinds of caring which seem "nonsensical" on naturalism might here be reasonable.

On naturalism, the situation is different. "Nonsensical" caring essentially seems to satisfy the carer's (possibly unconscious) psychological (emotional) or moral needs. This should by no means be deprecated: deprived of a chance to satisfy such needs, the carer might be deeply disturbed. But the carer's benefits, even taken together with the symbolic meaning of "nonsensical" caring, may fail to fully justify it. In a God-less world caring is not in itself divine; at the same time it is urgently needed to bring relief to the ones who suffer. It is thus more challenging to defend the choice of predictably ineffective caring if one has alternative effective caring opportunities (and a real chance to make use of them: this might not always be the case as humans are not caring machines). It is possible to imagine a God-less world in which needs are so painful and resources so limited that caring, unless one is absolutely certain that it will benefit the cared-for, is morally wrong. Hopefully, this is not our world.

Conversely, in a God-less world, all human caring is in the long run doomed: humans are bound to fail to effectively protect from suffering and dying even the ones they care for most deeply. In other words, non-believers who adequately estimate their capacity for helping each other may well think of all their caring as ultimately predictably ineffective. Still, as they have no choice of (in the long run) effective caring opportunities, this caring is the best thing they can do—it does make sense.

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“NONSENSICAL” CARING IN ALI SMITH’S FICTION
AND ITS KIERKEGAARDIAN DEFENCE

Summary

The present paper considers the possible sense of “nonsensical” caring—caring (1) which for various reasons apparently cannot help the cared-for, and (2) in which the carer, though convinced that it will not be effective, whole-heartedly engages. The project is inspired by the fiction of Ali Smith, which offers varied, vivid and memorable examples of such caring: worried that her dead sister misses life experience, Clare in *Hotel World* makes sure her sensations are doubly intense and rich though she knows her sister, being dead, will not benefit from them; in *Summer* Hannah and Daniel write to each other tender letters which they immediately burn for safety’s sake so that the addressee has not even the slightest chance of ever reading them; in “Virtual” a bed-ridden girl diligently takes care of her virtual pet, well aware that it is not alive,

let alone sentient. Smith's examples of "nonsensical" caring are strangely compelling, yet in real life such caring—predictably ineffective (as regards helping the other) and costly—is rare. Why? Under what metaphysical assumptions, if any, could "nonsensical" caring make sense? The paper considers these questions, taking Søren Kierkegaard's extensive discussion of *agape* love in *Works of Love* (1847) as its primary point of reference.

Keywords: nonsensical caring; ineffective care; metaphysical assumptions; Søren Kierkegaard; *Works of Love*; Ali Smith.

"NONSENSOWNA" TROSKA W TWÓRCZOŚCI ALI SMITH I JEJ KIERKEGAARDIĄSKA OBRONA

Streszczenie

Artykuł rozważa możliwe sensy "nonsensownej" troski — troski, która z różnych powodów nie może, jak się zdaje, pomóc temu, do kogo jest skierowana, a w którą ten, kto się troszczy, angażuje się w pełni, mimo przekonania o jej nieskuteczności. Inspiracją dla projektu jest twórczość Ali Smith, która zawiera liczne, przemawiające do wyobraźni i zapadające w pamięć, przykłady takiej troski: zmartwiona, że jej zmarła siostra odczuwa brak życiowych wrażeń, Clare w *Hotel World* [*Hotel Świat*] zabiega usilnie o to, by jej wrażenia były możliwie intensywne, choć wie, że jej siostra — będąc martwą — nie skorzysta z nich; w *Summer* [*Lato*] Hannah i Daniel piszą do siebie czułe listy, które palą natychmiast po ich napisaniu ze względów bezpieczeństwa, tak że adresat nie ma najmniejszej szansy na ich przeczytanie; w "Virtual" obłożnie chora dziewczyna opiekuje się wirtualnym „zwierzątkiem”, choć zdaje sobie sprawę, że nie jest żywe, nic więc nie odczuwa. Przykłady Smith są niezwykle sugestywne, jednak w prawdziwym życiu tego typu troska — przewidywalnie nieskuteczna (tj. niezdolna pomóc potrzebującemu) i zarazem kosztowna — jest rzadka. Czemu? Przy jakich metafizycznych założeniach (jeśli są takie) "nonsensowna" troska mogłaby mieć sens? Artykuł rozważa te pytania, przyjmując obszerną analizę miłości *agape*, jaką w *Czynach miłości* (1847) przedstawia Søren Kierkegaard, za podstawowy punkt odniesienia.

Słowa kluczowe: nonsensowna troska; nieskuteczna troska; metafizyczne założenia; Søren Kierkegaard; *Works of Love*; Ali Smith.