

EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM AND RECONCILIATION IN LUKE 15:11–32: A KIERKEGAARDIAN READING WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) ranks among the most interpreted pericopes in the Christian scriptural tradition, yet its philosophical dimensions remain comparatively underexplored in African contextual biblical scholarship. Existing readings have tended to privilege soteriological and theological concerns while neglecting the parable's capacity to sustain rigorous philosophical analysis of human freedom, existential crisis, and the conditions of genuine reconciliation. This article addresses that gap by bringing Søren Kierkegaard's existential framework into sustained dialogue with the parable and with African *Ubuntu* communitarian ethics. Employing philosophically informed biblical hermeneutics as its primary method, the article conducts a close reading of Luke 15:11–32 through Kierkegaard's threefold schema of aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence, demonstrating that the younger son's journey constitutes a philosophically coherent dramatisation of freedom's misuse, existential despair, and reconstituting grace. *Ubuntu* philosophy, with its relational account of personhood and communal understanding of reconciliation, is then brought into constructive dialogue with this reading, enriching and extending it by recovering the parable's communal dimensions. The article concludes that genuine reconciliation, as the parable envisions it, requires both individual interior transformation and communal reincorporation, a convergence carrying significant implications for African hermeneutics, reconciliation praxis, and interdisciplinary theological scholarship.

KEYWORDS: Existential freedom, Kierkegaard, Luke 15:11-32, Ubuntu, communitarian ethics, reconciliation, and African hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of existential themes such as freedom, despair, and reconciliation offers a compelling framework for engaging with human experiences. Existentialism, a philosophical movement that emphasises individual freedom, personal responsibility, and the search for meaning, provides valuable tools for analysing the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). Few parables in the Christian scriptural tradition have attracted as sustained and diverse an interpretive attention as the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32. From patristic allegorisations to Reformation soteriological readings, and from twentieth-century narrative criticism to postcolonial

hermeneutics, the parable has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to speak across interpretive traditions and cultural horizons (Green, 1997; Snodgrass, 2008). Yet for all its interpretive richness, one dimension of the parable has remained comparatively underexplored in African contextual scholarship, namely, its philosophical depth as a dramatisation of human freedom, existential crisis, and the conditions that make genuine reconciliation possible.

The younger son's departure from his father's household is an act that operates simultaneously on narrative, theological, and philosophical registers. At the philosophical level, his demand for his inheritance and his subsequent journey into the far country enact a claim to radical self-determination, a wager that freedom consists in the unbounded exercise of individual desire and the severing of inherited relational obligations. This philosophical wager, and its catastrophic consequences, invites engagement with existentialist thought in ways that biblical scholarship in Africa has not yet sufficiently pursued (Ukpong, 2001; Westphal, 1996). Through this story, core existential concerns emerge, including the tension between autonomy and relationality, the despair of alienation, and the transformative power of forgiveness. These themes resonate universally but take on specific dimensions within African contexts, where communal values and familial bonds are deeply entrenched.

Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy offers an unusually precise set of conceptual tools for illuminating the son's journey. His account of freedom as anxiety-laden possibility, his analysis of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence, and his diagnosis of despair as the failure to become a coherent self, provides a philosophically rigorous framework for reading what happens to the younger son between his departure and his return (Kierkegaard, 1980b, 1987). Kierkegaard has been engaged productively in Western biblical hermeneutics (Westphal, 1996), but his dialogue with African philosophical traditions remains largely uninitiated.

This article argues that a Kierkegaardian reading of Luke 15:11–32 opens productive and illuminating dialogue with African communitarian ethics, particularly the Ubuntu philosophy of personhood and relational restoration. *Ubuntu's* foundational claim that personhood is constitutively relational, expressed in the Nguni aphorism *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (literally; A person is a person through persons), offers a communitarian complement to Kierkegaard's interior existential analysis, enriching the parable's reconciliation narrative in ways that speak directly to African lived experience (Metz, 2011; Ramose, 1999). While existentialism emerged from European philosophical traditions, its focus on freedom, responsibility, and reconciliation finds resonance in African cultures, which value communal relationships and restorative justice. African worldviews often emphasise the interconnectedness of individuals within families and communities, a concept encapsulated in the philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Tutu, 1999). The breakdown of these relationships, as seen in the younger son's estrangement, is a source of communal and personal anguish, necessitating reconciliation.

Theoretically, the article proceeds by outlining Kierkegaard's existential framework and methodologically adopts a philosophically informed biblical exegesis of the parable, synthesising the Kierkegaardian reading. Additionally, it engages Ubuntu communitarian ethics and constructs a dialogue between both traditions before drawing

out implications for the African context. By engaging with existential themes such as freedom, despair, and reconciliation, the research will illuminate the ways in which this narrative addresses universal human concerns while offering specific insights for African audiences. This approach underscores the relevance of biblical texts in addressing contemporary challenges and affirms the enduring power of scripture to speak to diverse cultural contexts.

KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL FRAMEWORK

Any productive philosophical engagement with Luke 15:11–32 requires a sufficiently precise understanding of the conceptual framework being brought to bear on the text. Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy is not a single, systematically organised doctrine but a body of thought developed across pseudonymous and signed works, united by a persistent preoccupation with the question of what it means to become an authentic human self. Central to this preoccupation is his understanding of freedom, not as a neutral capacity that the human being simply possesses and deploys at will, but as an anxiety-inducing confrontation with possibility. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard (1980a) describes freedom as producing a peculiar psychological state he names anxiety, the “dizziness of freedom” that arises when the human being gazes into the abyss of its own possibilities and must choose among them without any predetermined essence to guide the choosing. Freedom, on this account, is not a gift that arrives without cost; it is a burden that simultaneously constitutes and threatens the self.

It is within this understanding of freedom that Kierkegaard develops his celebrated account of the three stages or spheres of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, each representing a qualitatively distinct mode of human selfhood and a different relationship to freedom, desire, obligation, and transcendence (Kierkegaard, 1987). The aesthetic stage is the mode of existence organised around immediacy, sensory pleasure, novelty, and the satisfaction of individual desire. The aesthetic individual is not necessarily shallow or unintelligent; rather, the organising principle of their existence is the pursuit of experiences that gratify the self in the present moment. Kierkegaard's aesthetic individual in *Either/Or* is a figure of considerable sophistication and even brilliance, yet one whose existence is structurally incapable of providing lasting meaning because it is perpetually dependent on external stimulation and novelty (Kierkegaard, 1987). The aesthetic stage inevitably collapses inward upon itself, producing what Kierkegaard diagnoses as aesthetic despair, a creeping emptiness and boredom that no accumulation of pleasurable experiences can remedy, because the problem is not the insufficiency of the experiences but the insufficiency of the self-structure that pursues them.

The ethical stage represents a qualitative advance beyond the aesthetic. Here, the individual awakens to the reality of universal moral obligation and takes upon themselves the demands of duty, commitment, and responsibility toward others (Evans, 2006). The ethical individual does not merely pursue personal gratification but recognises themselves as a moral agent accountable to standards that transcend individual preference. Kierkegaard admired the ethical stage as a genuine achievement of human seriousness, yet he argued with equal force that it contains its own

insufficiency. The ethical stage operates within purely human categories of merit, desert, and obligation, and it therefore has no resources for addressing the situation of the individual who has genuinely failed, who carries guilt that no amount of moral effort can fully discharge. At the boundary of ethical existence, the individual encounters what Kierkegaard calls the requirement of the infinite, a demand they cannot meet through their own moral resources (Westphal, 1996).

The religious stage is Kierkegaard's most demanding and most theologically charged category. It is reached not through a logical progression from the ethical, but through what he famously describes as a leap, a movement of faith that cannot be rationally justified or socially administered but that alone restores the broken self to genuine wholeness (Kierkegaard, 1983). The religious individual does not abandon ethical seriousness but moves beyond it into a relationship with the Infinite that is characterised by grace rather than merit, by unconditional love rather than proportional desert. It is at this stage that genuine reconciliation becomes possible, not merely the social reintegration of a wayward individual into a moral community, but the reconstitution of a self that has been shattered by the misuse of freedom.

Undergirding all three stages is Kierkegaard's concept of despair, developed most fully in *The Sickness Unto Death*, where he defines despair as the failure or refusal to become the self that one is called to be (Kierkegaard, 1980b). Despair is not merely an emotional state of sadness or hopelessness; it is an ontological condition, a disorder in the structure of the self's relationship to itself and to its ground. Significantly for the reading that follows, Kierkegaard insists that despair is also the necessary precondition for authentic selfhood, because it is only in the confrontation with the collapse of the false self that the genuine self becomes possible (Evans, 2006). This paradox of despair as both crisis and possibility will prove central to the philosophical reading of the prodigal son's journey.

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF LUKE 15:11–32

The pericope of Luke 15:11–32 is, by the standards of New Testament textual criticism, a relatively stable text. However, one consequential variant occurs at verse 21, where many manuscripts, including Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲱ) and Codex Alexandrinus (A), present the longer reading in which the son completes his rehearsed speech by adding “make me as one of your hired servants”. A textually superior group, most importantly Papyrus 75 (P75) and Codex Vaticanus (B), presents the shorter reading, in which the father interrupts before the son reaches that concluding phrase. The Nestle-Aland critical text (NA28) follows the shorter reading, and Metzger (1994) assigns this decision a “B” rating, applying the principles of *lectio brevior potior* and the greater difficulty of the shorter text. This variant matters philosophically: if the shorter reading is original, the father's response overtakes the son's transactional request entirely, heightening the portrayal of grace as something that exceeds and interrupts ethical calculation rather than responding to it.

The parable occupies the culminating position within Luke 15's triadic sequence of lost things, addressed to a mixed audience whose internal fractures reconcile the parable's animating concern from the outset (Green, 1997). Snodgrass (2008)

persuasively argues that the father's responses to both sons constitute the parable's theological centre of gravity, and this article directs primary philosophical attention to the younger son's existential journey while holding both sons in view.

The younger son's demand for his inheritance before his father's death is, as Bailey (1992) notes, culturally tantamount to wishing the father dead. Philosophically, it is an assertion of radical self-determination, the aesthetic individual's conviction that freedom is achieved through the removal of relational constraint rather than its responsible exercise (Kierkegaard, 1987). The "far country" is not merely a geographical destination but an existential statement: the self's attempt to constitute itself entirely on its own terms. The subsequent dissolution of his resources and his reduction to feeding ritually unclean swine (vv. 14–16) represent the inevitable collapse of aesthetic existence, a comprehensive loss of identity, dignity, and communal standing (Nolland, 1993). He has exercised freedom maximally and arrived at its precise opposite.

Verse 17 contains perhaps the most philosophically significant sentence in the entire parable: "when he came to himself". The Greek construction, εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν, literally renders as "having come into himself", suggesting a return to an interior space that had been abandoned rather than inhabited (Bovon, 2002). This is not a minor narrative transition; it is an existential event. The son has been living outside himself, dispersed among pleasures and subsequently consumed by survival, and the moment of self-reckoning marks the beginning of what Kierkegaard would identify as the movement from aesthetic despair toward ethical awakening. The son's interior monologue in verses 17–19, with its careful moral accounting and its rehearsed speech of confession, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (v. 18–19), bears the marks of the ethical stage: a recognition of transgression, an acknowledgment of obligation violated, and a willingness to accept diminished status as the morally appropriate consequence of his actions (Evans, 2006). He does not yet comprehend what awaits him; he calculates within the categories of merit and desert that define ethical thinking. Desert, as used here, is the broader philosophical concept that encompasses both what a person deserves positively and what they deserve negatively because of their actions. Desert is the principle that responses to persons ought to be proportionate to and grounded in what those persons have done. A person who has acted well deserves reward; a person who has acted badly deserves an appropriate negative consequence. Desert is therefore the governing moral logic behind any system of justice that insists on matching responses to prior actions.

The father's response shatters every such calculation. Running to meet the son while he is still distant, restoring him fully before his rehearsed speech reaches its transactional conclusion, is an action of conspicuous undignified urgency in the ancient Near Eastern cultural world (Bailey, 1992). The father thus enacts what Kierkegaard identifies as the logic of the religious stage: a love that moves anticipatorily and unconditionally toward the broken self, operating according to grace rather than merit (Westphal, 1996). In Kierkegaard's framework, this reading carries significant philosophical weight if the shorter reading is original, as the critical text argues. The son prepares to ask for servant status, a request grounded in the ethical logic of proportional desert and earned reinstatement, and the father's response overtakes that request

entirely, rendering it unnecessary and even beside the point. This dramatically heightens the parable's portrayal of grace as something that exceeds and interrupts ethical calculation rather than responding to it. Moreover, the robe, the ring, and the sandals are not merely festive accessories; they are public signs of complete restoration of sonship, personhood, and social standing (Green, 1997).

REPHRASED VERSION

The elder son's response in verses 25–32 introduces a counterpoint that deserves serious philosophical attention. His grievance is ethically coherent and morally understandable: he has remained faithful, obedient, and consistently present, and his sense of just proportion is genuinely offended by what appears to be the rewarding of irresponsibility. Kierkegaard would recognise in him not a villain but a figure whose existence is firmly and admirably organised around the ethical stage, yet who remains inaccessible to the religious precisely because he has never made that transition (Hannay, 2003). His resentment is therefore not merely a character flaw but a philosophical symptom: it reveals that a life structured entirely around duty and proportional desert, however honourable, cannot by itself generate the unconditional generosity that genuine reconciliation demands. He has obeyed his father as an obligation rather than loved him as free devotion, and that distinction is existentially consequential. The parable closes without revealing whether he accepts his father's invitation to join the feast, and this deliberate narrative openness is itself a provocation: ethical fidelity alone, without the movement into the religious, may finally be incapable of participating in the reconciliation that grace makes possible.

KIERKEGAARDIAN SYNTHESIS: FREEDOM, DESPAIR, AND RECONCILIATION IN THE PARABLE

The exegetical reading of Luke 15:11–32 conducted in the preceding section reveals a narrative whose internal movement corresponds with remarkable precision to the existential journey that Kierkegaard traces philosophically across his major works. The parable is not simply a story about a wayward son who returns home and is generously received. It is a dramatisation of what it means to exercise freedom irresponsibly, to suffer the consequences of that misuse in the form of existential despair, and to discover that genuine reconciliation requires an encounter with grace that exceeds every category of ethical self-repair.

The younger son's trajectory maps coherently onto Kierkegaard's three stages. His departure into the far country is an act characteristic of aesthetic existence: the prioritisation of immediate desire, the conviction that freedom is achieved through the dissolution of inherited relational obligations, and the self's confident wager that it can constitute itself adequately on its own terms and resources. The aesthetic individual, as Kierkegaard consistently argues, does not recognise the self-deception embedded in this wager until the consequences arrive with full force (Kierkegaard, 1987). The son's destitution represents this arrival precisely: the aesthetic stage collapsing under the

weight of its own structural inadequacy, producing a despair that no further accumulation of experience can relieve.

The moment of self-reckoning in verse 17 initiates the movement toward the ethical stage. The son's interior moral accounting, his recognition of transgression, and his willingness to accept diminished social status as proportionally appropriate consequence all reflect the ethical individual's characteristic mode of reasoning (Evans, 2006). He rehearses a speech calibrated to the categories of merit and desert, setting out toward home with a morally serious but fundamentally transactional understanding of what restoration might look like. This is an ethical awakening, genuine and commendable, but insufficient for the reconciliation the parable is moving toward.

What the father's response introduces is something the son's ethical framework could neither anticipate nor generate from its own resources. Kierkegaard argues in *Works of Love* that the highest form of love is not love that responds proportionally to the beloved's merit but love that calls forth the beloved's truest self through unconditional embrace, before and regardless of moral performance (Kierkegaard, 1995). The father embodies this love precisely, constituting the religious dimension of the reconciliation the parable dramatises.

What the Kierkegaardian synthesis ultimately establishes is that the parable's reconciliation is deeply anthropological. The son who returns is not simply restored to his former position; he is reconstituted as a self. Kierkegaard insists in *The Sickness Unto Death* that the self-emerging from genuine despair is more authentically constituted than the one that existed before the crisis (Hannay, 2003). The prodigal son does not return to who he was; he arrives at who he was always meant to become. This is the existential paradigm the parable offers, and it is one that African communitarian ethics, as the following section will demonstrate, has the resources to receive, enrich, and productively extend.

AFRICAN COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS: UBUNTU, PERSONHOOD, AND RECONCILIATION

Any serious engagement with African communitarian ethics must begin by resisting the temptation to treat it as a loosely organised collection of folk wisdom or cultural sentiment. Ubuntu philosophy constitutes a philosophically substantive account of human identity, moral obligation, and communal flourishing that deserves engagement on its own intellectual terms (Metz, 2011; Ramose, 1999). Its foundational anthropological claim, expressed in the Nguni aphorism *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, that a person is a person through other persons, is not a pious observation about the value of community. It is a metaphysical proposition about the constitution of personhood itself. Identity, on this account, is not a private possession that the individual brings ready-formed into social relationships; it is something that relational engagement with others actively produces, continuously sustains, and, when necessary, restores (Shutte, 2001). This understanding of personhood stands in deliberate and productive contrast to the Western liberal tradition's tendency to ground human identity in the autonomous individual before and independent of communal belonging.

The Ubuntu account of freedom follows directly from this relational anthropology. Freedom in the African communitarian tradition is not the liberal individual's freedom from communal constraint, the kind of freedom the younger son attempts to purchase with his inheritance, but rather freedom achieved through and within the web of relational obligations that constitute authentic personhood (Gyekye, 1997). Gyekye's important distinction between radical communitarianism, which subordinates the individual wholly to communal determination, and moderate communitarianism, which affirms genuine individual agency while insisting that this agency is always embedded in and shaped by communal relationships, prevents any collapse of the person into the collective (Gyekye, 1997). Freedom, on this account, is a relational achievement rather than a pre-social given.

The Ubuntu understanding of reconciliation carries implications that extend well beyond the private, interior dimensions of forgiveness. Because personhood is constitutively relational, any rupture in the web of relationships that constitutes a person is simultaneously a rupture in that person's identity. Wrongdoing and estrangement are therefore not merely moral failures requiring individual repentance; they are ontological diminishment requiring communal restoration (Tutu, 1999). Reconciliation in the Ubuntu framework is a communal process of acknowledgment, dialogue, and ritual reincorporation whose goal is not punishment proportional to transgression but the healing of the relational wound that transgression has opened (Metz, 2011).

The father's celebratory feast in verses 22–24 is not a private transaction between two individuals; it is a communal event publicly restoring the returning son to full participation in the community's life. The music, the dancing, and the fatted calf are communal acts of reincorporation whose publicity is essential to their restorative function (Bailey, 1992). Private forgiveness without public communal restoration would leave the reconciliation incomplete in Ubuntu terms.

John Mbiti's foundational observation that "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 106) illuminates this precisely. The younger son's sojourn in the far country is, in Ubuntu terms, not merely an economic and moral catastrophe but an ontological one: he has severed the relational connections through which his personhood was constituted, and has consequently ceased, in the deepest African philosophical sense, to be fully a person. His return and the community's celebratory reception are therefore acts of ontological restoration.

CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE: KIERKEGAARD AND UBUNTU IN CONVERSATION

Having examined both traditions on their terms and brought each into conversation with Luke 15:11–32, it becomes possible to identify where Kierkegaard and *Ubuntu* speak productively to one another, where they genuinely diverge, and what interpretive gains their dialogue yields. The tensions between them deserve honest engagement rather than superficial harmonisation, for it is precisely within those tensions that the most generative thinking occurs.

The most significant convergence lies in both traditions' shared rejection of radical individualism as an adequate account of human freedom. Kierkegaard's critique

of the aesthetic stage is fundamentally a critique of the self that attempts to constitute itself through unrestricted individual desire, severed from binding obligations to others and to the Infinite (Kierkegaard, 1987). *Ubuntu* arrives at a structurally analogous conclusion from a different philosophical direction: the individual who severs relational connections in pursuit of unconstrained self-determination does not achieve a fuller selfhood but diminishes the very personhood they seek to express (Ramose, 1999). Both traditions read the younger son's departure not as an achievement of freedom but as a philosophical error whose existential consequences are devastating.

Both traditions equally resist understanding reconciliation as a merely formal or transactional event. For Kierkegaard, genuine reconciliation requires an encounter with unconditional grace that reconstitutes the broken self at a depth that ethical self-repair cannot reach (Westphal, 1996). For *Ubuntu*, it requires a communal process of relational reincorporation that restores the offender's personhood within the web of relationships that constitutes it (Tutu, 1999). Neither tradition is satisfied with a reconciliation that leaves the more serious ontological damage of estrangement unaddressed.

The most productive tension concerns the relationship between individual interior transformation and communal restoration. Kierkegaard's existential journey through despair and grace is irreducibly interior and cannot be administered by communal processes (Hannay, 2003). *Ubuntu* insists, conversely, that interior transformation alone cannot complete the restoration of a self that has been relationally diminished; the community must actively perform reincorporation (Metz, 2011). Applied to the parable, this tension is illuminating: the son's interior self-reckoning is necessary but not sufficient. The father's embrace and the community's feast are, in *Ubuntu* terms, constitutive elements of reconciliation rather than mere confirmations of an interior event already accomplished. Hence, together, Kierkegaard and *Ubuntu* produce a reading that is philosophically richer and anthropologically fuller than either tradition generates alone.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

The constructive dialogue between Kierkegaard's existentialism and *Ubuntu* communitarian ethics in reading Luke 15:11–32 is not merely an academic exercise in comparative philosophy. It carries implications that extend into the living texture of African intellectual, social, and theological life in ways that deserve explicit articulation. For African biblical hermeneutics, this reading contributes to the ongoing and urgent project of developing interpretive frameworks that take both the biblical text and African philosophical traditions with equal scholarly seriousness. Too frequently, African contextual readings have employed African cultural materials as illustrative backgrounds for conclusions already reached through Western interpretive methods, rather than as genuine philosophical dialogue partners capable of reshaping the interpretive conversation itself (Ukpong, 2001; West, 2010). The present reading models a different approach, one in which *Ubuntu* philosophy does not merely decorate a Kierkegaardian reading but genuinely extends and corrects it by insisting on the communal dimensions of reconciliation that existentialist analysis structurally tends to

underemphasise. African philosophy, this reading demonstrates, is hermeneutically generative rather than merely illustrative.

For communal reconciliation processes across sub-Saharan Africa, the parable read through this dual lens offers resources of considerable practical significance. The convergence of Kierkegaardian interior transformation and *Ubuntu* communal restoration suggests that genuine reconciliation requires both dimensions working together: the individual's honest interior journey of self-reckoning and the community's active, public work of reincorporation. In contexts marked by family rupture, ethnic estrangement, political division, and the social fragmentation produced by rapid urbanisation and economic inequality, a reconciliation that addresses only one of these dimensions will remain incomplete (Tutu, 1999; Metz, 2011). The parable, interpreted through these complementary lenses, offers a vision of reconciliation capacious enough to hold both the personal and the communal within a single coherent account.

For theology and philosophy as academic disciplines within African universities, the article models the kind of genuinely interdisciplinary conversation that the institutional proximity of these disciplines in institutions makes both possible and necessary. Biblical scholarship, philosophy of religion, and African thought need not operate in disciplinary isolation from one another; their most significant contributions emerge precisely at the boundaries where their distinct vocabularies and concerns are brought into honest, rigorous dialogue (Dube, 2000; Shutte, 2001). The parable of the prodigal son, it turns out, has more to say than two millennia of interpretation have yet exhausted.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Luke 15:11–32, read through Kierkegaard's existential framework of aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence, yields a philosophically rigorous account of the younger son's journey from premature self-assertion through existential despair to genuine reconciliation. The Kierkegaardian reading illuminates with precision the interior dimensions of that journey: the self-deception embedded in the aesthetic wager for unconstrained freedom, the moral awakening signalled by the son's self-reckoning in the far country, and the reconstituting power of the father's grace that exceeds every ethical calculation the son carries home. *Ubuntu* communitarian ethics, brought into constructive dialogue with this reading, enriches and extends it by insisting that the reconciliation the parable envisions is not merely an interior event but a communal one, in which the restoration of relational personhood through the community's active reincorporation of the returning son is as philosophically indispensable as the son's individual transformation.

Together, these two traditions produce a reading of the parable that is hermeneutically more adequate, anthropologically fuller, and contextually more resonant for African readers than either tradition generates in isolation. The younger son's story is, finally, not only a theological statement about divine grace, though it is certainly that. It is a philosophical account of what authentic human existence demands: the honest exercise of freedom, the courageous confrontation with its consequences, and

the willingness to receive a reconciliation that reconstitutes rather than merely reinstates the self.

The theological significance of the Parable of the Prodigal Son lies in its depiction of divine grace and the possibility of restoration. The father's unconditional acceptance of the returning son symbolises the reconciling love of God, a theme that permeates the Gospel of Luke. This narrative aligns with existentialist concerns by highlighting the potential for individuals to find meaning and redemption through relationships. Gabriel Marcel, a Christian existentialist, emphasises the importance of "being-with" others as a fundamental aspect of existence, contrasting with the isolation that characterises despair (Marcel, 1949). The parable thus bridges existential philosophy and Christian theology, offering insights into the human condition and the transformative power of forgiveness.

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