Reworking the Social Order: *Skam* as an Instance of Public Moral Education

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Abstract

The Norwegian high-school drama series *Skam* is produced and published by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, a publicly funded institution distinguished by an explicit obligation to the public interest, not only serving their audience as consumers but even as citizens. Generally, the normativity expressed in *Skam* may be summarized by treating all with respect, involving not only moral considerations of what is right, but also ethical conceptions of what is good, offered, opened up and obstructed by the living social order established there. In season three, given attention here, the plot revolves around issues concerning same-sex relationships, mental disorder and religion. Here *Skam* becomes interesting for the field of moral education, elaborating on how to encounter the challenges of pluralistic societies that undergo continuous changes and in which common values have become open questions. In this paper attention is drawn toward *Skam*'s ethical dimension, considering *Skam* as an instance of public moral education. Faced with tensions, hindrances and conflicts, the norm of treating all with respect, irrespective of how trivial it may appear outside of context, becomes loaded with meaning, while the actualization of the good life is at risk. Appalling is the way hegemonic religion is transformed in the living social order. Decisive is the active role taken by the youths in the series, recontextualizing the norm. The social order here is not a static, given condition, but a continuous, moving, cultivating project. In that respect, a certain democratic aspect of the public moral education of *Skam* also becomes visible. Together, the youths portrayed in the series seem to accommodate a variety of expressions of life emerging within their community.

Keywords Moral education · Ethics · Respect · Disability · Same-sex relationship · Religion

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Introduction

This paper explores ethical aspects in the Norwegian high-school drama series *Skam*, analyzed as an instance of moral education: Intentionally broadcasted for a predominantly young audience, the series lays forward and exemplifies possible ethical practices among young people coping with an urban, pluralistic society.

The overall purpose of this paper is grounded in an interest for a major, ongoing issue within moral education – i.e., how to face the challenges of pluralistic societies that undergo continuous changes and in which common values have become open questions. Renowned are some basic positions within this field (Halstead et al. 2006). According to the value-clarification approach (Raths et al. 1966), the purpose of education can no longer be to give preference to particular values, but to help students clarify values they may connect to by choice. In the 1970s, neoconservatives claimed that this approach did not pay due respect to loyalty, obligation, truthfulness, authority and family values (Bennett et al. 2011), opening up a renewed emphasis on character education, but without giving due attention to social change and pluralism. Furthermore, this position has been criticized for ignoring structural causes of social problems and not encouraging critical thinking (Purpel 1999).

In contrast, aspects of the character-education approach, including Aristotelean elements, are positioned within the frame of liberal education with an emphasis on critical thinking (see Carr et al. 1999; Curren 2010). While the latter position is partly inspired by Kantian ethics, the moral reasoning approach (Kohlberg et al. 1977) is a distinct Kantian approach. Here the students are working with moral dilemmas that involve value conflicts. The aim is to resolve conflicts through moral reasoning, reaching universal principles. This position has been criticized by feminist scholars for ignoring relational and emotional aspects (Gilligan 1982; Noddings et al. 2003), not considering the significance of context (Benhabib 1992).

These various positions demonstrate that the challenges of moral education are not unambiguously settled once and for all, but should be assessed, discussed and developed within an ongoing conversation. My ambition here is to contribute to this conversation. *Skam* represents a pluralistic universe reflecting ongoing historical changes with regard to ethical norms and values. In moral philosophy and political philosophy of the late twentieth century a major response to this societal condition has been to distinguish between norms that reach general consent and conceptions of the good life that may vary. A major point in the following is that such clear distinctions are challenged in *Skam*. Even more, *Skam* demonstrates that there may be good reasons to encourage such a blurring.

Two philosophical positions are brought in that both are distinguished by being sensitive to the significance of context with regard to the ethical dimension. First, Hegel's conception of ethics and second, aspects of Seyla Benhabib's (1992) contextual, sensitive moral philosophy, rethinking Habermas' discourse ethics (Habermas 1990). Both the perspectives from Hegel and Benhabib are pertinent to addressing the ethical dimension discernable in the fictional social order and norms and values that here are put into play.

Contextual Ethics and Universal Norms

Central in Hegel's ethics is the notion of *Sittlichkeit*, referring to the living social order and accommodating what by society is considered to be good (Hegel 1991). From here

follows an ethical theory that Wood (1990) has designated a *self-actualization theory*: Ethics is about actualizing the self by taking part in the living social order. This is also how the self gains social recognition. Within this conception, even individual freedom is understood as partaking in *Sittlichkeit*, not in the emancipation from the restrictions represented by this order.

The conception of moral education in this paper is including a Hegelian conception of the social order. But then it is also necessary to point at how accentuating the social order as constitutive for human freedom may very well end up as a reactionary position reproducing prevailing power structures. The risk is that a critique of the social order, by Hegel linked to morality (exemplified by characters like Socrates), must give ground for actualizing the self in society's values, norms and practices. In other words, such a project may privilege a hegemonic cultural position at the expense of plurality. On the other hand, Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit* presupposes that the values and norms that constitute the living social order are historically conditioned and, as a consequence, provide a variable and malleable notion of the human good. My suggestion is that *Skam* is reflecting on and exploring this historical, amendable dimension of the social order. The orientation of the plot and character development supposes that human freedom involves actualizing the self within *Sittlichkeit* in ways that accommodate the continuous reworking and cultivation of the living social order. This practice takes place by the characters themselves, in conversations and interactions that establish opportunities to actualize the self.

As seen above, Hegel represents a contextual conception of ethics, although values and norms constituting *Sittlichkeit* are also conceived of as general or common (Hegel 1991). This perspective is undoubtedly central to the ethical dimension of *Skam*. The ethical dimension is, however, not solely connected with the reworking of the living social order. As I demonstrate below, there seems to be a universal ethical dimension brought into play as well, expressed in the norm of treating everybody with respect. From this point of view, the plot may be seen as contentious recontextualizations of this norm. Such a perspective distinguishes Seyla Benhabib's rethinking of the discourse ethics of Habermas, positioning the exercise of moral judgment within the web of relationships signifying human lives (Benhabib 1992). A major contribution in her conceptions of ethical theory is that universal moral claims, like human rights, are not passively adopted in specific contexts, but rather emerge as democratic iterations, subject to interpretations, involving disagreement, conflict and plurality (Benhabib 2006; 2011). Pertinent for a study of stories presented in a high-school series is also that Benhabib connects her notion of human situatedness in a web of relationships with the concept of narrative, drawn from Hannah Arendt (Benhabib 1992). Briefly stated, narratives exhibit these webs of relationships.

When I below conceive of the norm of treating all with respect as recontextualized in *Skam*, I follow Benhabib's line of thought, exploring how the norm is played out and problematized in particular conflicts, dilemmas and intrigues folded out in this fictional world.

The two perspectives introduced here may be harmonized, with *Sittlichkeit* representing conceptions of the good and universal norms warranting what is right. Moreover, Benhabib's conception in itself stands out as mediations between these two positions (Benhabib 1986). Still, there are certainly tensions involved as well (cf. Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics [Wood 1990]). These tensions also accrue to how a norm, by virtue of designation and demarcation, inevitably entails exclusion mechanisms. I will return to this issue in the final discussion.

The Skam Series

Skam was published by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation in four seasons from 2015 to 2017. (The Norwegian word *skam* may be translated as “shame” or “disgrace.” In this paper, the Norwegian word is consistently employed.) In the following, ethics and education are seen as intertwined, making this drama series also, broadly conceived, an instance of public moral education.

The series soon gained popularity among the primary intended group of adolescents, even reaching out to adults of various age groups. Launched as a web-television series, *Skam*, without any distributional initiatives, traveled abroad, becoming the most popular show on Tumblr the last week of November 2016 (Krüger and Rustad 2019). The popularity peaked during season three (The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation 2016). Here, the plot revolves around the emerging relationship between the two male characters Isak and Even. The season follows the protagonist Isak’s way ‘out of the closet’, enriched and complicated by Even, diagnosed with a bipolar disorder. In these ways, both sexual orientation and mental disability are brought into the center of the plot development. This is where the attention is drawn in the following, focusing on the key episode nine in season three of the series.

The issues at stake involve social inclusion and exclusion, love, violence and sexual harassment, all framed within a pluralistic society, bringing up issues of religion, disability and sexual orientation. Stereotyped and stable categories are sometimes confirmed, but more often questioned and explored in the series, to be exemplified below, establishing a complex and dynamic narrative discourse.

Skam has been studied from various perspectives, giving priority to literary theory, media theory and social science (see Lindtner et al. 2018; Krüger et al. 2019; Sundet 2020). The role of religion in the fourth season has been examined, where Sana, a Muslim girl, is the main character (Aarvik 2018). There are, however, to my knowledge no contributions that primarily address the ethical dimension of *Skam* (although Brekke [2017] entitles her article “*Skam* as a moral story,” she does not qualify the term “moral” and explicitly considers other issues). The aim of this paper is to address the series ethical dimension.

Skam Conceived of as Moral Education

In the following, the ethical dimension refers to normative aspects of the fictional universe of *Skam* concerning what is both right and good. I suggest that this dimension preferably may be considered as instances of moral education, cf. a strand of thought in literary theory addressing the edifying function of fiction, already considered addressed in the poetics of Horace (2009). *Skam* is not conceived of as a didactical series that frankly tells the audience how to behave. The edifying function is conditioned by the narrative representations that not just construct, but even exemplify, give nuances to and problematize ethical issues, both in plot development and the presentation of the characters (Lothe 2016, referring to Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*). Consequently, a normativity is in play, implicitly expressed in the narrative structure and dialogues of the series, also determined by the use of sound, camera and film editing. Possible realizations of life are exposed, demonstrated by the main characters, establishing an ethical universe that is surprisingly distinct and simultaneously open. The characters fail and succeed and hinder and assist each other as the stories unfold. The social order is decisively and continuously adjusted and cultivated throughout

the various episodes, accommodating new forms of life expressions. It is first of all in this sense that *Skam* emerges as an instance of public moral education, exemplifying and illustrating how ethics and morality may involve both the adaptation and questioning of dominant values in the social order.

Decisive for the interpretations put forward below is the conception of *Skam* as fiction; that is, a possible world that points in the direction of ways to cope with ethical challenges involved in the transformative processes of adolescence. It is in the suggestive gesture of *this pointing at* that the series expresses itself as moral education.

National Broadcasting serving a Common Good

The conception of *Skam* as an instance of public moral education may be further examined by taking the institutional dimension into account. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation is a publicly funded institution, distinguished by having an obligation to the public interest, serving its audience members not only as consumers, but even as citizens (Sundet 2020, p. 71). The audience should, within such an approach, not just be provided with what they want, but what they need, including both a democratic purpose and perspectives on how to navigate and cope with anxieties and uncertainties in everyday life. Such public institutions, represented by the BBC in Great Britain and similar national broadcasting corporations in the Nordic countries, are expected to serve the entire population.

Aligned with a conception of serving the public interest, the project leader of *Skam* has accentuated an educational purpose, reporting that the vision of *Skam* has been to strengthen self-esteem among youths “by breaking taboos, make them aware of interpersonal mechanisms and demonstrate the rewards of confronting fear” (Sundet 2020, p. 75). This vision is both normative and educational, pointing at tensions and interconnections with regard to subjectification and hegemonic imaginaries.

Certainly this conception of an educational purpose concerns the norm problem of pedagogy (Oettingen 2010): On the one hand the purpose of education is to have a positive impact on students, serving conceptions of what is good and right. On the other hand a central notion is to acknowledge the integrity of the students and avoid indoctrination. As an instance of moral education, *Skam* demonstrates some of the dilemmas here involved. Central is here the fundamental norm of treating others with respect.

The Norm of Treating All with Respect

The norm of treating others with respect is embedded in United Nations’ human rights conventions, also stated in the objects clause of the Norwegian school system.¹ It is sometimes expressed quite openly in *Skam*, like in a sentence put on the wall in the room of the protagonist Noora in season two: “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always.” The sentence is not commented on directly by any character, but it functions on a meta-level, mirroring and contrasting the show’s dynamics. Even the

¹ Most salient is obviously Article 1 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, claiming the dignity of all human beings and stating that they “should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations 1948). The Norwegian schools’ objects clause holds that “education and training shall be based on fundamental values” and lists respect for human dignity as the first of these values (§1 in *The Education Act*, Ministry of Education and Research (2008)).

universal claim of *everyone* is balanced with situating this everyone in specific lives beyond the knowledge of the *you* that is addressed. This is a central example of how Benhabib's perspective on recontextualizing universal norms becomes pertinent for exploring the ethical dimension. Here I suggest that this norm is recontextualized in the fictional universe of *Skam*, constituted by the relationships between the characters and the plot development.

Considering the norm problem of pedagogy, a pertinent issue is the scope of this respect, with regard to positions that do not respect the actualization of others' life. In season 3 of *Skam* the dilemma is made specific in connection with religion and same-sex relationships. How may moral education provide a vision of a living social order in which students with diverse sexual orientations actualize their selves and at the same time accommodate a plurality of ethical positions, including intolerant conceptions of same-sex relationships?

Conceived of as a state-monopolized film production with an educational purpose, *Skam* demonstrates that the norm problem of pedagogy involves the function of hegemonic imaginaries. In dealing with this issue, I draw on the conceptions of ideology and utopia. Following Ricoeur (2008), both ideology and utopia are interpretations of the world included in the greater symbolic structure of social life. Power, authority and domination are legitimized by ideology and questioned by utopia. According to Ricoeur, ideology may sustain social relations, but it also functions as a form of resistance to the transformation of social relations, constituting domination of others. The positive function of utopia is the potential to question and criticize social reality; however, utopia can also provide a means of escape from social reality.

Norms embedded in national law and even in international conventions may be expressions of an ideology that represses the plurality of ideas, viewpoints and voices, but they may as well stand out as utopian elements that provide a critique of domination. This ambiguous status is conspicuous when it comes to the norm of treating all with respect. The norm stands out as inclusive, encompassing anyone, but is easily problematized in the non-ideal circumstances distinguishing situated lives. The utopian character of human rights norms also implies that their critical potential may be continuously retrieved and reenacted in the face of new forms of domination. Here, I am particularly interested in how *Skam* (season three) positions and copes with normativity concerning sexual orientation and mental disability.

***Skam*: Season Three — Reworking the Social Order**

The protagonist in the 10 episodes of season three of *Skam* is the 16-year-old Isak Valtersen. As already introduced, the main issue determining the plot development of this season is Isak's way out of the closet. Isak is situated in a social context constituted by his friends Magnus, Elias and Jonas, living in a shared apartment and facing a distant relationship with his father and mother who recently split up, his mother being a Christian with apocalyptic inclinations. Beyond this, significant others include the greater community of youths that Isak is a part of, framed by the Hartvig Nissen school.

Early in the season, Isak dates the girl Emma, not acknowledging to himself or other people that he has same-sex attraction. However, his attention is soon drawn toward the two-year-older boy Even, who is in a relationship with Sonja. Isak and Even establish a covert relationship that is disclosed by Emma, who dismisses Isak, while Even just gradually ends his relationship with Sonja. The intrigue is further entangled by Even's manic period exposed in episode eight when, in the middle of the night in a hotel in the center of

Oslo, Even, leaving Isak, runs naked out into the street. In episode nine, Even and Isak are reunited, making episode 10 a calm ending of season three.

In this plot, the ethical dimension is made visible in numerous ways, concerning not only the relationship between Isak and Even, but also involving other characters inhabiting the fictional universe. Actually, negative notions of mental disorder stand out as more significant than prejudice toward same-sex relationships as a hindrance to the happy ending.

Mental Disability and Trust

In the plot development of season three, the point of departure in episode nine is the threatened relationship between Isak and Even, established as the result of the conflict emerging in episode eight. When a naked Even leaves Isak in the middle of the night, the desperate Isak calls Sonja – despite a previous warning from Even. She conceives of the situation as the result of Even's bipolar diagnosis. Sonja concludes that Even is in a manic period and that Isak cannot trust his love and she asks Isak to stay away. In episode nine, Even continues with posting high-flown, pompous messages that leave Isak puzzled and uncertain, finally urging Even not to send him anymore messages.

From the perspective of the protagonist Isak, the decisive question is whether Even is trustworthy and can be relied upon. There is a prolepsis in episode five anticipating this situation: Even asks Isak how his parents would approach a relationship between them. Isak assures him that his father would accept it, but he is uncertain about his mother, who is a Christian with apocalyptic inclinations and reported by Isak to be crazy. Isak has broken all contact with her, claiming, "I have made the decision that my life is better without mentally disabled persons around me" (*Skam*, season three, episode five, 14:38–14:43).

Is Isak's predicament, as stated here, an issue of moral philosophy? If moral philosophy is primarily concerned with public norms, leaving out private realizations of what is good, the answer must be negative. In a liberal society, the particular choice is left to the individual citizen. Following Habermasian discourse ethics, Isak's anxiety may well be considered urgent and significant, but it is not an issue to bring into the deliberative practices of settling the norms that should determine action. However, in a broader conception of ethics, this is obviously an interesting case. The point here is to explore how the series establishes a dynamic structure that accommodates various expressions of what it is to be human. From this perspective, a key scene occurs five minutes into episode nine, to be studied in more detail in the following.

After some days off, Isak returns to school and meets with his friends Jonas and Elias in the school cafeteria. Isak looks down, sullen, telling his mates that Even has turned crazy, supposedly being bipolar. After some time, Magnus turns up, telling them that his mother is bipolar, too, encountering Isak with an open gaze and Isak looks up.

Isak: Do you also have a crazy mother?

Magnus (with a somewhat resigned look): She is not crazy. She is bipolar.

Isak: Yeah, but what is she like?

Magnus: Fucking awesome. She's... You've met her, right?

Isak: Uh, yeah, I have. But she's normal.

Magnus: Yes, she is completely normal. She just has periods where she is depressed or excited. Who are you talking about?

Isak (looks down): Even. He is also bipolar.

In this interaction, Magnus's inclusive gesture is to position the mental diagnosis within what is normal. Concurrently, Magnus demonstrates that he respects his mother, or even stronger, that he loves her.

The dialogue proceeds with Isak repeating the story of Even going naked out into night, which invokes Magnus's laughter, bringing up another wild, hilarious story about his mother picked from one of her manic periods. The camera shifts between a laughing Magnus and the grave downward gaze of Isak. While Isak signals fear and anxiety, Magnus's laughter signals confidence and acceptance. A new turn in the dialogue is introduced by Magnus asking Isak about how Even is doing now.

Isak: I haven't talked to him.

Magnus: Why not?

Isak: Because... Everything has been bullshit from his side.

Magnus: What do you mean?

Isak: He has been manic.

Magnus: You've been with him a long time, he hasn't been manic all that time. When my mon is manic, it's like I can't make contact with her (with his right hand drawing an imaginative wall between himself and Isak). You've had lots of contact with Even.

Isak: Yes. But Sonja said that he has been manic the whole time.

Magnus: Who is Sonja?

Isak: His ex.

Magnus (with an indulgent gesture): So you think... You trust his ex, when she's telling you that he doesn't have feelings for you? (Camera moves to the persisting grave gaze of Isak and remains there until the end of the scene.) Smart, Isak! That's the best thing I've heard today! Wow! Wow. How about asking Even what he feels? He isn't braindead just because he had a manic episode. Talk to him when he has calmed down.

Jonas: You're actually pretty cool, Mags.

Magnus: You're realizing that just now?

Jonas: Yes.

Magnus: Thanks, Jonas, you're also pretty cool.

While the first part of the scene positions the medical diagnosis within the sphere of normality, the last part challenges a static conception of Even's diagnosis, bringing authority back to Even in his relationship with Isak. This move is accomplished by Magnus's sharing his experiences of his mother with a similar diagnosis, introduced as a contrast to the evaluation made by Sonja. Moreover, Magnus ironizes over Isak's dismissal of Even's feelings to him, putting more trust in the assessment of Even's ex than in Even himself, ending in the suggestion to ask Even about his feelings for him.

The ethical impetus in this dialogue is expressed by how Even is detached from a categorization that obstructs the relationship between him and Isak. Magnus does not neglect the significance of a medical diagnosis, but he positions Even with his diagnosis within normality, accentuating variety and not unambiguousness, claiming that the one with access to Even's feelings toward Isak is obviously Even himself.

In these ways, *Skam* brings movement into the living social order. The dialogue between Isak and Magnus is a particular, concrete case at the center of the plot, exploring potentials, strengthening respect, reducing fear and establishing a utopian universe that offers nuances in static categorizations. This is how self-actualization is made possible, in the love story of season three, facilitating the possible continuation of the emerging relationship between Isak and Even. The dynamics disclosing the possibility of treating others with respect are here prompted by the youths themselves.

From the perspective of Benhabib, this scene may be seen as the practicing of democratic iterations of treating all with respect. The democratic aspect is expressed in an open deliberation accommodating various experiences and point of views, even including disagreements and confrontations, demonstrating medical diagnosis as a hindrance for practicing the norm of treating everyone with respect.

Focusing in *Sittlichkeit*, this scene demonstrates how the living social order in *Skam* is established and reestablished in a continuous negotiation distinguishing this (fictional) pluralistic society, decisive for the multiple opportunities for self-actualization, involving exclusion and inclusion mechanisms on a micro-level. The series is obviously not about formulating moral principles on the basis of just communicative procedures. However, as stated in the introduction, I do suggest that the norm of treating all with respect is recontextualized in the series and not primarily in the representation of concrete behavior, but by doing its work in the dynamic social order. This is even more conspicuous when it comes to the other aspect of the relationship between Isak and Even that involves the dynamics of the living social order; that is, their same-sex attraction.

Same-sex Relationships: The Ethical Dimension and the Role of Religion

As we have seen, medical diagnosis turns out to be a contested issue in season three of *Skam*, putting the relationship between Isak and Even at risk, mainly due to a categorization that leaves Even outside the field of normality. Historically, this situation is also distinguishing same-sex relationships, standing out as the other aspect of season three's embedded ethical dimension and prompting movements in the living social order. Parallel to mental health, same-sex relationships is also an area subject to a complex representation in the fictional universe. On the one hand, *Skam* seems to reflect an urban, modern setting tolerant of same-sex relationships. On the other the narrative demonstrates Isak's complex coming out of the closet.

Religion in Isak's Interactions with Sana and his Mother

In the scene when Emma confronts Isak with pretending to be open to a relationship with her, she states in a devastating line, "You are an asshole because you let me be interested in you, although you are gay. We live in 2016, Isak. Get out of the closet!" (*Skam*, series three, episode five, 28:10–28:20). Emma appeals to the fact that the living social order she and Isak are a part of recognizes same-sex orientations, making Isak's pretense toward her unnecessary and morally unacceptable. In subsequent episodes, Emma's assessment is confirmed by the consistently positive reactions Isak receives when he comes out of the closet.

However, the history of the recognition of same-sex relationships is brief in Norway, as in other parts of the world. Although supported by national law, the issue remains contested within many religious communities. The General Synod of the Church of Norway, the majority Lutheran church in which currently 7 out of 10 Norwegians are members, adopted as late as 2017 a resolution that accepted same-sex marriages in Norwegian churches. Still, a restrictive position not accepting same-sex relationships as consistent with religious moral, is articulated both within the clergy and among lay people.

In the universe of *Skam*, the issue of religion and same-sex marriage is made manifest in three different ways. The first is in conversations between Isak and Sana, a practicing Muslim (and the protagonist of season four). Sana begins by arguing against homosexuality on the basis of evolutionism, a position that apparently also supports a restrictive religious

approach. Later, when she realizes the relationship between Isak and Even, she admits that this was too simple a conclusion to draw. When Isak confronts her with elucidating what Islam's stand on this issue may be, Sana concludes with making a universal claim (*Skam*, season three, episode five 10:51–11:43):

Islam states the same as always: that all human beings in the whole world have equal value. That no human beings should be backbit, insulted, condemned, or made ridiculous. If you hear anybody appealing to religion as an argument for their hate, don't listen to them. Because hate does not come from religion, it comes from fear.

Sana recontextualizes the norm of treating all with respect in her own religious tradition. Isak generally does not express religious convictions, but in the aftermath of this conversation, he sends an SMS to his mother, telling her about his relationship to Even. This is the second example of how religion is brought into the context of same-sex relationships:

Hello Mum. I am in a relationship with a boy. I know you believe in God and that it is stated in the Bible that it is a sin, but you don't need to worry because it is also stated that God has created everyone in his image and that all people have the same value. I am sorry if this has made you sad. Hug from Isak.

Isak here reiterates in a Christian context the respect for all human beings that Sana claimed on behalf of Islam, possibly encouraged by Sana's statement. At the same time, Isak's problems in acknowledging same-sex attraction (cf. his relationship with Emma) here resurfaces by the uncertainty regarding his mother's reaction, possibly condemning the relationship.

In the two examples above, religion is openly thematized as an aspect of Isak's relationship with Sana and his mother, expressed in his interactions with them. Particularly with regard to Sana, the dialogue may be conceived of as a parallel to Isak's dialogue with Magnus, offering a conception of religion that does not condemn same-sex relationships, opening a new possibility for Isak's relationship with his mother. In these cases, religion seems to play a role in the rather secularized universe, being a part of the manifold social order. However, religion also takes a more central and even fundamental position. This is expressed in the narrative structure and cinematically in the employment of camera, sound and editing.

Religion Expressed in the Narrative Structure

A conspicuous aspect of *Skam*'s production is how the series follows the time dimension of the social and natural world in which it is published. The fictional characters and initial viewers share the same calendar and seasons. In episode nine of season three, several elements of the plot development converge in a Christmas concert taking place in a church. In Norway, such church concerts are a part of the cultural activities in December, gathering an extensive number of people who do not seek church at other times of the year (Løvland et al. (2013) report that one third of the adult population in Norway attend the Christmas concerts). These concerts distinctly express the cultural dimension of religion in Norway. The program may include Christmas carols, but even secular songs may be brought in, depending on the artists who are touring. In such a context, religion rarely concerns doctrine or explicit preaching. A primary aim of the concerts is to bring about feel-good sentiments.

It is this cultural phenomenon that enters the universe of *Skam* in episode nine. The hymn that is included in a clip from the concert, “O Helga natt,” is performed by the Norwegian artist Nils Beck and instantly became, when published, viral on social media. The artist was interviewed in prime time by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s news program on December 13, 2016. However, neither within the context of episode nine nor in the public space surrounding the broadcasting of this episode are doctrinal aspects of religion touched upon. Instead, the Christmas concert is seamlessly integrated into the narrative, offering an interpretive perspective. I suggest that this perspective also involves cultural aspects of *Sittlichkeit*, recontextualizing the norm of treating all with respect.

“O Helga natt” is a lyrical interpretation of Christmas conceived of as a Christian festival. The hymn refers to the holy night when the Son of God was born.² The event is presented as a night of reconciliation both between God and the world and between enemies, expressing the gospel of salvation and peace, calling for adoration and opening up the realm of freedom.

This is the hymn that is performed shortly after Isak enters the church. Two strands in the narrative web converge in this scene. First is Isak’s relationship with his parents. The initiative and invitation to join the concert has come from Isak’s father. His motivation, as expressed to Isak, has been to make his mother happy. In the church, Isak’s parents, who have split up, rejoin, albeit only for this short moment. Isak, who has broken with his mother, now reunites with her and she gives approval to his same-sex orientation.

This strand is entangled with the central thread of the plot in season three, constituting Isak’s relationship with Even. When Isak initially answers his father’s invitation, he introduces his relationship with Even for the first time, preparing to bring him along to the concert, later, in episode nine, to conclude that he will come alone and that his relationship with Even is over. This broken relationship is still the situation when Isak enters the church, joining his parents who have already found their places. The cinematic expression changes its moods in this scene, giving weight and significance to the transformations of relationships. In slow motion, a somewhat reluctant and hesitant Isak meets with his parents and gives them a hug, accompanied by the instrumental overture to the hymn. Just before the vocals start up, Isak receives an SMS from Even, made visible to the viewers:

Dear Isak. I’m sitting now where we met each other for the first time and I’m thinking about you. It’s soon 21:21. I want to say a thousand things to you. I’m sorry for scaring you. I’m sorry for hurting you. I’m sorry for not telling you that I’m bipolar. I was afraid of losing you. Had forgotten that it’s not possible to lose someone, that all people are alone anyway. In another place in the universe we’re together forever, remember that. Love you. Even.

The SMS stands out as the salient turning point in episode nine, decisive for the plot of the whole season, accentuated by turning the church concert into a music video. When the artist starts singing, the camera is focused on him, soon to shift to Isak, sitting in the pew.

In the next seconds, the camera shifts between the artist and sequences of rapid flashbacks that bring up pictures of the love story between Isak and Even. The first sequence follows the words “and happily meet your freedom”; the next sequence is accompanied by the second verse of the hymn starting with “O holy night.” Then Isak is seen looking at the SMS once again, standing up and walking out of the church.

² In Norway usually performed, as is the case here, in the Swedish version of the French original. For English text, see: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/o-helga-natt-o-holy-night.html>.

When Isak leaves the church, a third sequence of historical flashbacks is brought up, shifting with Isak's walk through the night, continuing with a fourth and fifth sequence of flashbacks. Eventually, the camera spots Even sitting on a bench outside school, a place pivotal in the early development of their relationship, but the next shot exhibits just the bench, disclosing the image of Even as a mirage. Finally, Even comes out of a door from the school. Once again, the movements are exposed in slow motion, this time not a mirage and the two are reunited. The only words that are uttered between the two are Isak's: "You are not alone," contrasting Even's statement in the SMS and being an obvious conclusion of the present situation at the end of episode nine. During Isak's walk through the night and final reunion with Even, the hymn continues all the way to the end. While Even and Isak are standing in the night with their winter clothing, tenderly snogging, the scene is accompanied by the final words of the song, "O holy night, you gave us salvation."

In one respect, *Skam* here makes use of the feel-good sentiments of the Christmas concert when bringing the cinematic story to a happy end. With regard to the contested issue of same-sex relationships within religious communities in mind, it is conspicuous that the acceptance that is at the heart of the gospel of Christmas expressed in "O holy night" accompanies the reconciliation of the relationship between Isak and Even. Both the cinematic devices of historical flashbacks and the musical soundtrack are taken advantage of here. In this way, religion is brought into the acceptance of the relationship between Isak and Even that is expressed in the narrative structure of *Skam*. From the perspective of such an interpretation, the literary theorist Northrop Frye's conception of the biblical narrative as a comedy (Fry 1982), with a pervasive influence on subsequent literature, is elucidating. Frye conceives of the Christian world view as a narrative scheme of creation, degradation and reconciliation. In season three of *Skam*, this scheme is at least partly deployed when the relationship between Isak and Even is brought to a narrative end accompanied by the Christian Christmas gospel. This, then, is how the norm of treating all with respect is recontextualized in this social order.

Final Discussion and Conclusion

In the analysis above on season three of *Skam*, focusing on episode nine, I have addressed the ethical dimension. An assumption has been that the norm of treating all with respect is recontextualized in the series in ways that transcend a dichotomy between what is right (moral principles) and what is good (the living, social order). The emphasis has here been laid on the social order, as it is established and reestablished in the fictional universe. The vital elements have been the representations of medical diagnosis and same-sex relationships.

Two different lines have been identified. First is how the youths themselves in dialogues accommodate a variety of actualizations of lives that are expressed in their community with each other. Exclusion mechanisms expressed in static categorizations of mental disorder are challenged extending the scope of what is supposedly considered to be normal. The leading example is the conversation between Isak and Magnus in the aftermath of Even's manic period. The dialogue between Isak and Sana on same-sex relations is another example. Here, an initially restrictive religious position must yield for another one distinguished by respect, and Isak employs a structural religious argument presented by Sana to meet a

possible skepticism from his mother on same-sex relationships. These dialogues involve reworking a social order in ways that open up respect for all, recontextualizing this norm.

The other line involves the position of the Christian tradition within the narrative structure. Here, a denouncing view on same-sex relations is turned to full acceptance in the final presentation of the reunion between Isak and Even expressed in a music video presenting a Christian hymn of freedom and salvation. This use may be conceived of as an expression of secularization, letting the Christian cultural material become available for free, fictional use, beyond the field of normative religion. On the other hand, such creative employment is well-known from a historical perspective, Dante's *Divina Commedia* being a prime example. Furthermore, it is possible to connect *Skam*'s employment of this religious reference to a theological position that accommodates the acceptance of same-sex relations within the Church of Norway, even reflected in other denominations. In any case, the hegemonic position of Christianity within a Norwegian context here seems to be extended into a high-school series that otherwise portrays a pluralistic and quite secular society. The central role of the biblical narrative in the narrative structure, scarcely explicitly commented upon in the series, strengthens this impression. Among the characters, it is primarily the Muslim Sana that represents a religious position in the series, offering respect within the pluralism represented in this cinematic universe.

This is also how *Skam* emerges as an instance of public moral education. On the one hand, the high-school series demonstrates how—faced with tensions, hindrances and conflicts—the norm of treating all with respect, irrespective of how trivial it may appear outside of context, becomes loaded with meaning, while the actualization of the good life is at risk. Decisive is the active role taken by the youths in the series, recontextualizing the norm. The above exploration of season three of *Skam* demonstrates how these recontextualizing practices involve reworking the social order when stereotypes, categories and ideology obstruct and blur the possibility of treating all with respect. In this way, *Sittlichkeit* stands out not just as a static condition for given actualizations of life, but as a continuous, moving, cultivating project. In that respect, a certain democratic aspect of the public moral education of *Skam* also becomes visible. Together, the youths portrayed in the series seem to accommodate a variety of expressions of life emerging within their community.

On the other hand, *Skam* also demonstrates dilemmas expressed in the norm problem of pedagogy, as referred to in the introductory part of this paper. In the reworking of the living social order offered by this high-school series, certain limits and obvious priorities are expressed. Most importantly, considering the issues given attention above, religious positions that dismiss same-sex relationships, possibly represented by both Isak's mother and Sana, fade out and are replaced by the basic norm of respect and acceptance, explicitly expressed by the same characters. Fundamentally, it is the actualization of the relationship between Isak and Even that is privileged, placing other positions that may jeopardize their rejoinder in the happy ending on the sideline. Medical diagnosis deployed as a stigma also relates to these positions.

From this follows that the ethical dimension of *Skam* may be considered as utopian, offering a base of critique of positions that pose restrictions on legitimate actualizations of life in a pluralistic society, with particular focus on mental disability and same-sex relationships. However, at the same time *Skam* also may be said to represent a hegemonic position. Conceived of as moral education, the role of religion as it appears in the narrative structure may here be problematized. In contrast with the dialogues that stand out as open, deliberative and democratic, the reworking of the social order in the narrative structure is more covert, employing various aesthetic and cinematic means, as addressed above. How this

problem could be dealt with, is illustrated by imagining *Skam* studied in an institutional setting of moral education. Here the reworking of these aspects of the social order might be subject to scrutiny, analysed and unpacked, enabling the students to assess and review the normativity involved. In that way, this aspect of the series is made available for further democratic iterations.

In this paper, through an analysis of the fictional universe of the high-school series *Skam*, I have explored the significance of considering both individual and societal dimensions in moral education, with particular emphasis on mediations between these two. The living social order is conceived of as offering opportunities to actualize the self. As a consequence, this order should be subject for considerations, discussions and continuous reconsiderations. *Skam* points at possible enactments of such practices among youths themselves. The critical perspective has been particularly connected with the democratic iterations of the norm of treating others with respect. That the challenges here involved are not finally settled, could, from perspectives offered above, be conceived of as a condition internal to the norm problem of pedagogy.

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