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KIERKERGAARD'S SELF AS SYTHETIC TENSION

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Philosophy  
The University of Mississippi

by

James E. Johnson

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## ABSTRACT

Soren Kierkegaard was a nineteenth Danish thinker working within the Christian tradition. While he did not think of himself as a philosopher, much of his work as a writer in philosophical in nature and is important to the inquiry on the philosophy of the mind. Particularly within his work, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard presents an idea of the human self as a dialectic, understood to be a tension that must be maintained in the synthesis. This idea of the self a synthetic tension can be seen in Kierkegaard's larger body of work, particularly within the programmatic scheme of the stage of human life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The religious stage, which is the goal of human existence for Kierkegaard, is the only stage that reaches the true character of the synthetic tension required in order for the human self to be healthy and whole.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century was a fruitful landscape for the philosophy of mind. Beginning with the immediate wake of Kant's critical philosophy in the work of those like Fichte, Schelling, and Schleiermacher, and moving through the systematic work of Hegel and the psychological theories of James and Freud, there was no lack of concern or focus on the function and character of the human mind. Issues of subjectivity, the nature of the soul, and the role of the self dominated the philosophical conversation, thinking, and writing of the time.

On the periphery of this dialogue, yet working during the same period and engaging these voices, stood the Danish thinker and writer, Soren Kierkegaard. While not seeing himself as a philosopher, or even as a theologian, Kierkegaard wrote a great deal that fits within the scope of the inquiry. In his own poetic and literary style, he shaped a conception of the human self and subject that would go on to have a profound influence on the philosophy of mind – and that of existence itself – in the twentieth century. Kierkegaard has been termed the 'grandfather of existentialism,' but there is little doubt that he was also a proto-psychologist and an important philosopher of the mind – even if he understood himself to be a literary poet working within the Christian tradition.

In the pseudonymous work *Sickness Unto Death*, which includes the subtitle *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, Kierkegaard opens with:

“A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation...[a] human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sickness*, 13.

This famously difficult passage, which is sometimes dismissed as simply mocking Hegel, contains already the basic elements of Kierkegaard's philosophy of mind, particularly regarding his view of the human self.<sup>2</sup>

First and foremost, the human self is generated through a dialectic, the synthesis of three distinct dyads. While it is unlikely that Kierkegaard meant for these three to be comprehensive, they are representative of human existence: the dialectical synthesis of infinity and finitude, of the temporal and the eternal, and of freedom, or possibility, and the necessary. Each of these dyads speak to the extremes of human givenness and ability, that is, of our being both grounded and winged creatures at the same time.

Kierkegaard's dialectical presentation of the human self must be distinguished from the more traditional understanding of 'dialectic,' however, and further disabused of any confusion with a Fichtean or Hegelian conception of the term. The latter understanding of dialectic holds that a synthesis is the *resolution* of a posited thesis with a counter-posited antithesis, while for Kierkegaard the dialectical synthesis of the self is not a resolution of the posited dyads, but rather a tension that is held between them. The human self, then, is a synthetic tension between these poles of infinite/finite, temporal/eternal, and freedom/necessity. This synthetic tension is a relation that relates itself to itself and that is, according to Kierkegaard, established not by the self, but by another: "The human self is...a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."<sup>3</sup>

What exactly Kierkegaard means by "a relation that relates itself to itself," what it means to be "established by another," and the other aspects of the self as a synthetic tension, we will

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<sup>2</sup> It's important to distinguish between 'Kierkegaard' and his pseudonyms, here 'Anti-Climacus.' That being said, most SK scholars agree that what Kierkegaard writes as AC represent his own views, and so I will refer to SK as the author here and throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> *Sickness*, 13-14.

unpack below. For Kierkegaard, however, this is the essential nature of the human self – so much so, that anyone who fails to hold this tension, collapsing toward one pole or the other in these three respective dyads by resolving them, is trying to be something or someone they are not, and ultimately they fall into despair. Conversely, the human self without despair is the one who: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself...rests transparently [i.e., has faith] in the power that established it.”<sup>4</sup>

This conception of the human self as being in either willing despair or resting in faith is directly connected to what might be called the thematic schema of Kierkegaard’s larger project: the stages of life a person moves through on the way toward becoming a fully formed human self – namely, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each of these stages can be seen in the dialectic of self that Kierkegaard presents in *Sickness Unto Death*, representing a larger synthetic tension that is held between the respective dyads outlined therein.

Or, so I will argue in this paper. In doing so, I hope to show that for Kierkegaard the human self fully realized is the self that rests in the synthetic tension between finite/infinite, freedom/necessity, and temporal/eternal – and more importantly, the synthetic tension between the aesthetic and ethical stages of life, that is, the religious stage. While Kierkegaard had no fully formed or systematic philosophy of mind, he did have a profound and nuanced conception of the human self as a willing, thinking, and feeling self – one that is ultimately religious, or faith-grounded, in its healthiest state.

We’ll begin by highlighting the important distinction between the traditional understanding of dialectic and the way in which Kierkegaard uses the term, expounding on this latter use. Then, we will take a step back and take in the view of Kierkegaard’s larger project,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 14.



sketching out the thematic scheme of his stages on life's way: the aesthetic, ethical, and religious – as well as mark their dialectical character. Then, with these tools in hand, we'll turn finally to the pages of *Sickness Unto Death* and chisel from them Kierkegaard's conception of the human self as a synthetic tension and a relation that is ultimately one of faith.

## II. KIERKEGAARD'S DIALECTIC

The character of “dialectical” thinking has taken on many different forms. In order to fully understand the dialectic of Kierkegaard, we will first need to distinguish it from other forms – particularly those being used during his own time.

The generation before Kierkegaard saw a resurgence of the “dialectical” method in philosophy, which had first been made popular some 2200 years prior through the work of Zeno, Socrates, and Plato. Immanuel Kant employed the method in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, perhaps most notably in the section entitled “Transcendental Dialectic,” which outlined four sets of conflicting propositions called *antimonies*. In Kant’s estimation, neither the thesis, nor the antithesis could be proven over and against the other, leaving a contradiction between propositions and no synthesis possible. In this sense, Kant used the dialectical method to demonstrate its failure to provide real knowledge of space and time, the make-up of the world, human freedom, and the existence of God.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, however, had much more confidence in the method. A disciple of Kant and the first to attempt a systematization of Kant’s “transcendental idealism,” Fichte employed a form of the dialectical method in his thinking on the nature and character of the human self and self-awareness. In fact, it was Fichte who popularized the terms *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis* within the philosophical lexicon. A full analysis of Fichte’s philosophical project and its detailed use of the dialectic method must wait for another occasion, but it will serve our purpose here to highlight an aspect that directly relates to Kierkegaard’s work.

In his seminal yet famously demanding work, *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte lays the foundation for the possibility of human freedom and the nature of the self, or Absolute Self, in a

thoroughly dialectical manner. Here Fichte argues that “the self posits itself as determined by the not-self,” that is, by the world – and in this encounter, Fichte also continues, “the self posits itself as determining the not-self.”<sup>5</sup> The internal self serves as the thesis proposition, which is then confronted by the antithesis of the external world it encounters, providing the self with a limiting force and the object of its moral activity. In this collision of self and world, a synthesis of unity between the two is formed, giving rise to what Fichte called the Absolute Self – which is the source of human freedom, creativity, and moral action in the world.

While he did not programmatically use the Fichtean terms (*thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*), Hegel employed a similar dialectical method in his work, only on a much bigger and more comprehensive scale. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that for Hegel, *everything* was dialectical, whether in terms of existence or the entire movement of world history. In a step beyond Fichte, however, Hegel presents the dialectical nature of reality to be a much more dynamic and internally driven process. Whereas for Fichte the counter-point or antithesis collided from outside the posited thesis, Hegel understood this collision to rise from within the very nature of every given thesis. That is, any given thesis will inevitably be so abstract as to warrant its negation, or negative relation, which generates its own antithesis. Only through a synthesis of these two internal aspects can something concrete come to be – which in turn simply becomes a new thesis, with its own abstraction and negation. And so, the dialectic process continues.

This is but a small glimpse through the dialectical window that gave light to Kierkegaard’s philosophical context as he constructed his own literary-philosophical project as a whole and *Sickness Unto Death* in particular. Elements of each of these dialectic methods and

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<sup>5</sup> Fichte, 220.

structures can be seen in Kierkegaard's writing, though transformed and re-emphasized in significant ways.

First, Kierkegaard agreed with Kant's estimation that some theses and antitheses were irresolvable, though this did not lead him to abandon dialectic thinking altogether. Second, like Fichte, Kierkegaard understood the human self to be of a dialectical construction, though, again like Kant, he did not believe any knowledge of the self – or Absolute Self – could be gained through a synthesis of self and world. That is because, finally, Kierkegaard agreed with Hegel that the dialectic movement or activity of the self was something internal to the process itself, at least to an extent, though he did not believe that the synthesis of two counter-points led to ever-new theses.

In Kierkegaard's use of the dialectic method, thesis and antithesis cannot be resolved into a synthesis without destroying the necessary tension between them that gives each proposition its meaning and function. In fact, for Kierkegaard, it is this dialectical tension between thesis and antithesis that is the synthesis itself – that is, in the case of the self for instance, it is “the relation relating itself to itself in the relation.”<sup>6</sup> To resolve this tension is to fall short of the truth; to synthesize it is to lose the truth of the respective posited propositions. Only when both thesis and antithesis are held in their entirety and in dialectical tension with each other, do we have a synthesis that reflects the true dialectical character of the process – particularly when it comes to the dialectical nature of the human self, as we will see below.

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<sup>6</sup> *Sickness*, 13.

### III. THE STAGES ON LIFE'S WAY

The first place we find Kierkegaard's dialectic strategy at work is in the over-arching paradigm of his whole project: the stages of human life or existence. Kierkegaard believed that the human self moves through three distinct stages, which are themselves bound in a dialectic relationship: the *aesthetic* stage, the *ethical* stage, and the *religious* stage. He filtered the overwhelming bulk of his literary output through this lens in one way or another. A brief and non-comprehensive look at these stages, and their dialectical relationship, will set the stage for Kierkegaard's presentation of the human self in *Sickness Unto Death*.

The first stage, or the beginning thesis of the human life, is the *aesthetic stage*. This stage is most fully developed in Kierkegaard's first major work, *Either/Or*, a curious and fascinating read that is nothing like a standard philosophical work. Rather, what we find here is two volumes that consist of a collection of different kinds of writing – all written pseudonymously and collected by yet another pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita – including aphorisms, essays, diaries, and letters written by two characters, called “A” and “B.”

The first volume of *Either/Or* consists of the papers of “A,” which, in the editor's view, “contain a multiplicity of approaches to an esthetic view of life.”<sup>7</sup> These include essays and thoughts on the nature of love and music, happiness and sorrow, tragedy and passion – and, perhaps most famously, a piece called, “The Seducer's Diary.” Taken together, we are given a picture of what the aesthetic stage of life consists of: seeking pleasure and entertainment, while avoiding pain and discomfort. In this stage, the individual self and their immediate concerns are

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<sup>7</sup> *Either/Or I*, 13.

all that matter – and the worst possible condition to find oneself in is that of boredom. Moving from one stimulation to the next, the aesthete has no moral compass more important than himself and how he feels.

In fact, even the pleasure and the pain of the self ultimately fail to provide meaning for any experience, much less moral value, and so the aesthete winds up practically paralyzed:

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way...Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life.<sup>8</sup>

When meaning and morality are in such a paralyzed state, no choice makes any difference. In the end, the one trapped in this aesthetic stage never truly accomplishes anything of value, sinking inevitably into indifference and the dreaded sin of boredom.

The only way out of such a condition, or stage of life, is to find moral value in our choices by appealing to something larger than ourselves, that is, something universal to all people. This leads to the second stage, or the antithesis of human life, the *ethical stage*, which is presented in the second volume of *Either/Or*. Here we are given the papers of “B,” consisting of three letters written by a Judge William to the aesthete “A” of the first volume.

In this correspondence, a way of life guided by morality is presented, moving away from personal feelings and toward universal imperatives. Judge William attempts to prove to the young man that only a moral life based on duty to something bigger than himself will provide meaning and peace to his existence – but in order to reach it, the aesthete must be willing to *choose* the ethical way of life. For Judge William, the reason this young man has failed to find meaning and value, and why he is subject to boredom and despair, is that he has been unwilling

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

to make a real choice:

But you have not actually chosen at all, or you have chosen in a figurative sense. Your choice is an esthetic choice, but an esthetic choice is no choice. On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical...The esthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity.<sup>9</sup>

Lost in the abstraction and isolation of his own manifold experience, the esthete is unable to make a choice that has any real value or consequence, and therefore unable to move toward the ethical stage.

The point that Judge William is making here is not that this young man has chosen a bad way of life – for the aesthetic things of life are not necessarily good or bad – but rather that he has failed to make a choice at all, because he has failed to choose based on the criteria of good and evil. The act of choosing itself based on what is good or evil is to be ethical: “...what is important in choosing is not so much to choose the right thing as the energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses.”<sup>10</sup> Only by choosing to choose between good and evil does the aesthete move into the ethical, and so toward meaning and value in life.

There is, of course, much more that could be said about both the aesthetic and ethical stages of life, but it serves our purposes here to simply highlight their dialectical contrast. It is telling of Kierkegaard’s intent here, as well as of his dialectical strategy, that while *Either/Or* presents both of these stages of life, it does not truly endorse *either* the aesthetic *or* the ethical – at least not in Kierkegaard’s own words. Rather, Kierkegaard leaves them in dialectical tension, refusing to resolve it in one direction or the other. Both of these stages, and their quantitative difference, are revisited and explored again and again in the course of Kierkegaard’s writing career, both in the signed and pseudonymous works – but, never truly resolved one way or the other when taken in the larger context of Kierkegaard’s project.

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<sup>9</sup> *Either/Or*, 166-67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

Which leads us, finally, to the third stage and the synthesis of the human life, the *religious stage*. As a synthesis in the Kierkegaardian sense, the religious stage represents the dialectical tension between the aesthetic and the ethical stages – and is qualitatively different from the other two. That is, as a tension between the two, it is a relation and not a position – a relation that relates itself to itself.

It seems clear, given the tone and presentation of his entire project, Kierkegaard believed that the religious stage of life is the target at which human lives should be aimed. It is also, however, the most difficult to understand, much less achieve – which is due primarily to its qualitative difference as a dialectic tension, rather than resolved position. It is more than anything, in Kierkegaard’s mind, a life-long task of faith, and faith “by virtue of the absurd” at that.<sup>11</sup>

Again, treatments of the religious stage of life can be found throughout Kierkegaard’s opus, but he gives it this “absurd faith” spin most clearly in what might be his most famous and well-read book, *Fear and Trembling*. Here we are introduced to yet another pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, a name that perhaps foreshadows the spirit of Wittgenstein’s famous ending to the *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”<sup>12</sup> Even so, being neither a philosopher nor a believer, Silentio gives it his best shot.

In this work, or “Dialectical Lyric” as the subtitle suggests, Silentio takes up the case of Abraham, who is widely recognized as the father of faith. The issue is what to do with God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, which Silentio attacks from both the ethical and (to a lesser extent) the aesthetic point of view. As he tries to reason his way through this problem, he realizes that a new category is required, that of faith, as reason and philosophy alone

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<sup>11</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, 157.



cannot resolve the issue.<sup>13</sup> In other words, what is needed is a category that can sustain the dialectic tension between losing and receiving back, between the universal and the absolute, and ultimately between the quantitative existence of humanity and the qualitative difference of God's existence – the category of faith, or, the religious stage of human life.

Silentio unpacks this new category of “faith by virtue of the absurd” by introducing the reader to the *knight of infinite resignation* and *of faith*. He asks us to imagine the scenario where a young man “falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life, and yet the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized.”<sup>14</sup> Because he cannot be with her, the knight of infinite resignation makes the normative and passionate movement to resign himself to the loss, thereby making his love for her “an expression of an eternal love,” and so “be reconciled to existence.”<sup>15</sup> This is, no doubt, a painful movement of resignation, for the knight knows he will never be with the princess – and yet, he has also “grasped the deep secret that even in loving another person one ought to be sufficient to oneself.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though it takes great strength and energy to achieve this kind of resignation, Silentio can fully understand how it can be done, hearing the knight of infinite resignation say: “By my own strength I can give up the princess, and I will not sulk about it but find joy and peace and rest in my pain, but by my own strength I cannot get her back again, for I use all my strength in resigning.”<sup>17</sup>

The movement the knight of faith makes, however, baffles Silentio. This second knight also resigns himself to the loss, and is reconciled to his existence in the pain of that loss, but then says: “Nevertheless I have faith that I will get her—this is, by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of

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<sup>13</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

the fact that for God all things are possible.”<sup>18</sup> This is not a movement that Silentio can make, or truly understand, since while he can imagine giving up the princess and living with the pain of loss, he cannot believe in the possibility of receiving her and living in that joy. As he said before: “I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd.”<sup>19</sup> In a word, Silentio does not have faith.

He can see, however, that Abraham did:

[Abraham] had faith by virtue of the absurd...He climbed the mountain, and even in moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac...He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God would give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, Abraham resigned himself to the loss of Isaac, but had faith he would receive him back again – just as the knight of faith believed that he would receive the princess. To have “faith by virtue of the absurd” then, is to rest in the tension of the possible and the impossible, in between what we know and what we can’t possibly imagine.

It is exactly this tension that Kierkegaard sees as the religious stage of life, one that is beyond “human calculation,” and so qualitatively different from the aesthetic and ethical stages. These stages of life have often been presented in the form a ladder, as though human selves move up or down, getting progressively better or worse, with aesthetic at the bottom and religious at the top. What I hope is clear in the analysis above, and what will be an important consideration for what follows, is that the human self is designed, in Kierkegaard’s thinking, to be a dialectic tension between all three stages at the same time. We are never purely aesthetic, ethical, or religious, but rather a tension and relation between all three at the same time – that is, when we have a healthy self not diseased with despair.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 46,

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

#### IV. THE SELF AS SYNTHETIC TENSION

Kierkegaard was a master of irony and seemingly never passed up a chance to take a shot at the philosophical thinking of his time, particularly at grand yet opaque systems of thought. For this reason, many have read the beginning of *Sickness Unto Death* as Kierkegaard's best attempt to parrot and mock the work of Hegel, Schelling, and, to a lesser extent, even Fichte. Without a doubt, there is some truth to this claim, but if we take seriously the subtitle, "For Upbuilding and Awakening," then we must be encouraged to read deeper for Kierkegaard's intent and meaning. It will be instructive to revisit the passage in question:

"A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation...[a] human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis."<sup>21</sup>

And then he adds that the, "human self is...a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."<sup>22</sup>

There is a good deal to unpack here, applying what we have explored concerning Kierkegaard's dialectical method and the larger structure of his project, but it will serve us well to note that his main concern in this work is to diagnose and provide treatment for the titular disease, which he believes is *despair*.

In the simplest terms, despair is a sickness of the will. It takes root in the self who either wills to be someone he is not in weakness, or wills to be the self he is, yet does so in defiance, rejecting his other-established existence. It is ultimately a despair of self, as Kierkegaard writes:

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<sup>21</sup> *Sickness*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 13-14.

“To despair over oneself, in despair to be rid of oneself – this is the formula for all despair.”<sup>23</sup>

All despair has this character of the self wanting and willing to be something or someone else, and “to tear his self away from the power that established it.”<sup>24</sup>

For our purposes, we need not further elucidate how Kierkegaard goes on to define this despair of the self as sin. It is enough to see that there is something at stake when we fail to understand the dialectic character of the human self, and that failure to hold the synthetic tension of which the self is made results in an unhealthy psychological state, reflected in the despair of the will. We turn to how this failure comes about in two of the sets of dialectics Kierkegaard outlines in *Sickness Unto Death*: infinite/finite and freedom/necessity.

The first dialectic tension of the human self that Kierkegaard addresses is that of “the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task it is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God.”<sup>25</sup> For Kierkegaard, human beings are both infinite and finite, a synthesis that is established by God, and so can only be held in relationship to God. The temptation, however, is to resolve this tension, rejecting the establishing power, and moving toward what Hegel would call the “concrete.”

If a self resolves this tension in the direction of infinitude, then the despair of this self takes on the form of “the fantastic, the unlimited,” leading the self further and further away from itself.<sup>26</sup> More than anything, this is an act of the imagination – but as Kierkegaard points out, “the imagination is related to feeling, knowing, and willing,” and so all three of these aspects of the self can also be imagined – that is, “infinite.”<sup>27</sup> Through this act of the imagination, feeling, knowing, and willing become “fantastic,” leading finally to the entire self becoming

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 30.

fantastic and living a “fantasized existence” that is wrapped up more and more in the abstract, rather than the actual. The result is despairing isolation, lost in the fantasy itself.

On the other hand, if the self resolves the infinite/finite tension in the direction of finitude, then despair takes on the character of strict determinism, characterized by reduction and narrowness of thought and behavior. Such a self, as Kierkegaard sees it, becomes so suffocated by the horde of society that they cease to be a self and become a number – and becoming “more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself.”<sup>28</sup> Even so, such a life of conforming despair can appear comfortable, simply because it is conforming. This is the self that never ventured, gained the world, but “mortgage[d] themselves to the world.”<sup>29</sup>

The self will also fall into despair if it resolves the possibility/necessity tension that is held in the synthesis of self. In the task of becoming itself, the self is full of possibility – that is, freedom – but in as much as it is already itself, the self is tethered with the necessary. But, “if possibility outruns necessity so that the self runs away from itself in possibility, it has not necessity to which to return ; this is possibility’s despair.”<sup>30</sup> In much the same way that embracing the infinite led to the self’s abstraction and isolation, so also in running free in possibility, the self loses all ground to make such freedom make any sense or lead to any actual meaning. Lost in the “mirror of possibility,” such a self is in despair and unable to recognize itself.

To lose the self in all necessity, however, is just as despairing, for the “necessary is like

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 33-34.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

pure consonants, but to express them there must be possibility.”<sup>31</sup> More than that, the self that is without possibility is also without the ability to hope, suffocated by the binding of life’s necessary ties, and ultimately incapable of faith in the God through whom all things are possible. Such a self in despair also teeters on the edge of cynicism, as lacking possibility “means everything has become necessary...or that everything has become trivial.”<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard notes the self bereft of true possibility can still imagine that possibility exists through the use of probabilities, living “with a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens.”<sup>33</sup> But again, this is despair as a thinly veiled cynicism on the nature of human existence as being determined.

Kierkegaard does not explicitly handle the third synthetic tension he introduced in the beginning – that of the temporal/eternal – but, its character and correlative form of despair can be seen implicitly in his conception of the human self as being a synthesis that is established by God. Humans are temporal inasmuch as we are both necessary and finite, but being established by God, we are also bound with the eternal for Kierkegaard – who began this work by stating: “A human being is spirit.”<sup>34</sup>

His question, however, seems to be: Are we willing to accept that? The human self’s failure to remain within the synthetic tensions that define itself are always, for Kierkegaard, a failure of the will. In other words, resolution of the dialectic, moving toward one pole or the other, is a choice that human beings make to move away from their true selves and the power that established them, God. As such, it is either an act of *weakness* in being unwilling to be oneself, or it is an act of *defiance* in willing to be oneself, without acknowledging God – and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 13.

both are forms of despair. The third option, the act of faith, is “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”<sup>35</sup>

Returning now to the “stages on life’s way,” the *aesthetic*, *ethical* and *religious*, we can see how the human self as synthetic tension presented in *Sickness Unto Death* maps onto Kierkegaard’s larger project.

As we saw before, the person who is in the aesthetic stage of life is fully concerned with the immediate pleasure and pain in their own lives. Their focus is on feeling good and feeling good now, and avoiding all discomfort and pain, including the ultimate evil of boredom. Such a person is a self in despair, according to Kierkegaard, having resolved and made concrete the tensions between their finitude and infinitude, their possibility and necessity. In the first instance, the aesthete is absorbed by the infinite, torn free of all finite tethers in their imagination. Indeed, it is precisely when the finite comes crashing onto his infinite imagination that despair can be felt the most acutely. And in the second instance, the aesthete has become all possibility, finding his necessity to be an hindrance at best and boring and uncomfortable at worst. In both instances, the aesthetic self is one that has rejected the power that established them, relying completely on themselves, and so no synthesis in Kierkegaard’s sense is possible.

If we look back to our representative aesthete, the character “A” from *Either/Or*, we see a self in precisely the kind of despair with which Kierkegaard is concerned. Lost in the abstraction of infinitude and prisoner of possibility, he has grown weary of his pursuits and cries out:

Wine no longer cheers my heart...My soul is dull and slack; in vain do I jab the spur of desire into my side; its exhausted, it can no longer raise itself up in its royal jump. I have lost all my illusions. In vain do I seek to abandon myself in joy’s infinitude; it cannot lift me, or, rather, I cannot lift myself...My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 14.

intoxicating!<sup>36</sup>

Yet, even though the self in the aesthetic stage is aware that he is in despair, he doesn't have the knowledge or the resources to pull himself out. Again, he is paralyzed and unable, or unwilling, to choose to be his true self. All he can do is long for what once brought him pleasure or joy, and so continue in defiant despair.

The ethical self, however, is not in a much better place. While the ethical person may have the ability to move between the infinite and finite, the possible and the necessary, they fall short of holding the true synthetic tension that defines the self for Kierkegaard. There is freedom in the autonomy of a rational and universal law, the ethical self might hold – as the infinite imagination is given meaning and shape by the finite rules of life – but the person in the ethical stage of life is still attempting to rest in their own ability to sustain these synthetic tensions of freedom and necessity, the infinite and the finite.

If we return to Judge William, we see an ethical self that is in despair – even if he isn't as aware of it as the aesthete “A” is – because he believes that “either a person has to live esthetically or he has to live ethically.”<sup>37</sup> A synthetic tension between these two stages is impossible for him, as one must make a choice, even if “the point is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing.”<sup>38</sup> It is in this very act of choosing the ethical over the aesthetic, however, that Judge William has chosen to will to be himself in defiance, rather than to rest in the power that established his self, and so he is in the same despair as the aesthete. In Silencio's words, he may, at the end of the day, reach the level of the “the knight of infinite resignation,” believing he can achieve “rest and peace and comfort in the pain” through his own strength and energy – but it is precisely this move that leaves him in defiance and despair.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Either/Or I*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Either/Or II*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>39</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, 45.



In that same vein, a self that is free of despair must become what Silencio called a “knight of faith,” who has reached the religious stage. Like Abraham, this despair-free self must make the movement of faith, even if it is “faith by virtue of the absurd,” because only then can the synthetic tension of the human self be held – as it “relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself, relates to a third” – that is, to God.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the aesthetic and ethical stages, the movement of faith is not calculable, but rather qualitatively different from both, even as it holds them in tension within the self. For the religious self, the infinite and finite, the possible and necessary, and the temporal and eternal aspects of human existence are open and available – free from despair and resting in faith, defined by Kierkegaard as, “that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Sickness*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

## V. CONCLUSION

In his own mind, Kierkegaard was not a philosopher – and he may not be the first we turn to when thinking about the philosophy of the mind – but as we have seen here, he did a great deal of reflecting and writing that is both deeply philosophical and at least nascently psychological. Though expressed through literary flourish, his thought on the character and development of the self fits well within the scope of the inquiry on the human mind, as has been shown through his influence on the existentialist and phenomenological movements of the past century. Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s ontology of the self is not limited to sporadic musings or even to seemingly random books, but is woven throughout his entire project.

All that being said, it is also clear that this project of Kierkegaard’s was profoundly theological, if not Christological as well. His main concern in all his writing was for ‘upbuilding and awakening,’ as the subtitle of *Sickness Unto Death* suggests. Whatever his thoughts or reflections on the self, the soul, or the nature of the human mind, they are all filtered and colored through that lens. What we have presented here testifies to that fact.

Kierkegaard understood the human self in dialectical terms – not those of Fichte and Hegel, but in a way counter to their method. The self is a synthetic tension, a synthesis that doesn’t resolve the thesis and antithesis, but rather holds them in relationship – and relates to itself in that relationship. For Kierkegaard, only by relating this tension back to God was such a synthesis possible. Anything short of that is lacking the necessary conditions for a true and healthy human self, leaving the self broken and in despair. And even this despair was cast by Kierkegaard in theological terms, eventually calling it sin in *Sickness Unto Death*.

Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, the human self is a self of faith – one willing to choose an

act of faith over and against itself and in the power that established it. This a central part of Kierkegaard's thought on the subject, and cannot be easily dismissed. It impacts all avenues of human existence, whether aesthetic or ethical, individual or communal. And it leaves any reader of Kierkegaard wondering just how absurd we are willing to be in order to truly understand ourselves.

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