Kierkegaard's Romantic Legacy

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FOR KIERKEGAARD, though we must make our selves, there is a right way and a wrong way to do it. His understanding of self fits well with the ethos of Aristotelian metaphysics, where what a thing is is defined by what it is meant to be. I shall argue, therefore, that the proper perspective for understanding the metaphysics of Kierkegaard's notion of the self is that of teleology.

There is generally a lack of appreciation of how traditional Kierkegaard's seemingly iconoclastic theory of the self is. In this chapter, we will see that he does in fact retain a metaphysical conception of the self.

Below, I consider Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood, and what goads us to develop despair. Then I explore his notion of despair, specifically why he thinks it to be necessary for human development.

DESPAIR

Anti-Climacus, the pseudonym used to write Sickness unto Death, provides valuable insight in what the self was for Kierkegaard. Anti-Climacus says, "A self is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self." Anti-Climacus also remarks, "The self is not a relation but the relation's relating to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity." According to Kierkegaard, the self is a synthesis, such that we cannot have the conception of infinitude without the finite, of freedom without necessity, of the eternal without the temporal. For him, each item is metaphysically related to its opposite. There is also the further relation that relates to itself. "This relation is the positive third, and this is the self."

For Kierkegaard, the self is reflection. Anti-Climacus says that imagination also is reflection. It is by imagining that we in fact represent ourselves to ourselves. We do not simply look in a mirror and say, "yes, there I am." We have a certain conception of ourselves as lazy, courageous, worthless, independent, and so on. The self represents itself as possibility. Anti-Climacus says, "The imagination is the whole of reflection's possibility; and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the self's intensity." If we are to admit that we imagine ourselves in a particular way, it is clear that part of this imagining is that of thinking of what we can be. Thus we have people who always knew they were going to be doctors, lawyers, musicians, or amount to nothing.
Let us reiterate the basic structure of self according to Kierkegaard. It can be said to consist of two opposing poles that stand in relation to one another. The one pole of the self can be called necessity and the other possibility. All other categories could be found to be reduced to or be in kinship with these basic concepts. On the one hand we have temporality, necessity, finitude, and on the other hand, the eternal, possibility, infinitude. The self is not one or the other, but both together in a relation that relates to itself.

When we think of ourselves, we could, for example, meditate upon necessity. It is necessary that we eat, that our bodies will die, that we were born, and that we had a particular experience. The past is the paradigm of necessity. I cannot change the past whether my childhood was a happy one or one spent locked in a closet.

Conversely, within certain natural limitations it is quite possible that I could do any number of things in the future; the possible allows me to make the future different from the past. The possible is what is not yet, where necessity is what actually is (or what has been actualized). If we think of the self as a story, it has a past and a future, and is itself in a state of unfolding.

Kierkegaard concedes that we become ourselves. We have the freedom to make certain choices in our lives. Yet, if we are to consider life as the task of becoming ourselves, as Kierkegaard does, failure is a clear risk. Anti-Climacus holds that your life is wasted if you have not become aware of yourself as spirit. There is the possibility that we may not become ourselves; we could rather lose ourselves. Anti-Climacus remarks, "The biggest danger, that of losing ourselves, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. is bound to be noticed." When we lose something tangible, it is obvious; but if we lose ourselves, it is unlikely to be noticed.

Now, let us meditate upon the words to become ourselves in more detail. To become ourselves, according to Kierkegaard, is to relate our self to itself.8 Basically, we can understand Kierkegaard to be affirming human nature, yet the imposition of free will makes living in accordance with our true nature a task. The failure to fulfill the existential task is a sickness, which Kierkegaard calls despair.

Anti-Climacus believes there to be three types of despair, which are all understood as “sickness of the spirit.”9 First, unauthentic despair: being unconscious of having a self. This could be the case if we, for instance, were lost in a crowd. Despair, thus, is even present in those who claim not to have experienced it. "What is rare, the great rarity, is that one should truly not be in despair...it altogether overlooks that the very fact of not being in despair, or not being conscious of being in despair, is itself a form of despair."9 Anti-Climacus wants us to admit that we can be in despair even when we do not think we are. In fact, he says that "not being in despair may exactly be to be in despair."9 According to Kierkegaard, unauthentic despair is not functional: it does not aid in the development of the self. For Kierkegaard, to recognize oneself as in despair is to realize that one was always so.
The second type of despair is not wanting to be ourselves, of desiring to be rid of ourselves. The extreme case is, of course, suicide, where we are sick of our self. Anti-Climacus, however, writes:

On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely the inability to die... to be sick unto death is to be unable to die, yet not as though there were no hope in life. No, the hopelessness is that even the last hope, death, is gone... When the danger is so great that death has become the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die.

The torment of despair, in its most definite sense, is that with the suffering of life we cannot even die. Anti-Climacus says, “Yet despair is a consumption of the self, but an impotent self-conception not capable of doing what it wants.” Despair consumes the self, but never fully, as “he cannot consume himself, cannot be rid of himself, and cannot become nothing. This is the heightened formula for despair, the rising fever in this sickness of the self.”

Despair, in one sense, is consuming us. Even so, it is not successful in doing so, and this results in the heightening of despair at not being able to rid oneself of one’s self; despair falls short of “doing what it wants” and hence despair is retained. Anti-Climacus remarks, “To despair over oneself, in despair to want to be rid of oneself, is the formula for all despair.” Whereas physical sickness can or will kill the body, sickness of the soul cannot kill the soul: “despair cannot consume his self, [...] this is precisely the torment of contradiction in despair.” The self is preserved in despair.

Anti-Climacus says, however, that all forms of despair can be reduced to the third type of despair, “wanting in despair to be oneself.” In this case, we may want to be ourselves, yet by trying to invent ourselves, we in vain avoid becoming ourselves. Since the self is always transcending toward the possible, despair comes from the recognition of the end of “the possible”: death.

Even the despair of wanting to be ourselves, says Anti-Climacus, can be understood as a mechanism by which we avoid being ourselves. We think “I want to be person X”—Caesar, in Anti-Climacus’s example—but all the while we are only avoiding ourselves.

For Kierkegaard, despair represents an imbalance within the dialectics of the self. Anti-Climacus describes the eradication of despair in this way: “In relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.” The power referred to is God. So, by becoming ourselves we set right our position to God. Despair, conversely, amounts to not being ourselves, which for Kierkegaard means not having attained a relation to the eternal.

The self that despairs will undoubtedly experience it as negative. Even so, Kierkegaard thinks despair serves a purpose in the development of a self. Anti-Climacus says: “Consequently it is an infinite merit to be able to despair. And yet not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair.”
Despair is a sickness of the spirit. The sickness of despair is rooted in the very structure of the self. It is, says Anti-Climacus, “the possibility of this sickness [that] is man’s advantage over the beast.” Despair is not an imbalance within the structure of the self; rather, it is an imbalance in the relation (by which we relate to ourselves). We are not always mis-relating to ourselves. Rather, despair represents a certain fall from grace. Anti-Climacus remarks, “Nor could he despair unless the synthesis were originally in the right relationship to the hand of God.” We were in the correct relation to ourselves, as a Platonic idea of sorts, yet we became mis-related. There is the possibility of going astray, because, as we have already stated, we have freedom. Anti-Climacus says, “...despair is an aspect of spirit, it has to do with the eternal in a person. But the eternal is something he cannot be rid of, not in all eternity. He cannot rid himself of it once and for all; nothing is more impossible.”

What we are, our pre-given telos, is already determined, and to try to avoid our self is despair. Death is the cause of the awareness of our sickness. We could readily anticipate the problem a self will encounter, given the understanding of what a self is in Kierkegaard’s philosophical theology. Human existence is temporal (unlike concepts); all things come to an end with death. With the end of possibility, it seems that the human situation is bound to lead us into despair.

Anti-Climacus’s meditation on despair creates a kind of analytic phenomenology of despair, which can ultimately be reduced to the despair of not wanting to be ourselves. Kierkegaard would have it that despair as such is a universal phenomenon. Anti-Climacus says:

There is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little, in whose innermost being there does not dwell an uneasiness, an unquiet, a discordance, an anxiety in the face of an unknown something, or a something he doesn’t even dare strike up acquaintance with, an anxiety about a possibility in life or an anxiety about himself...

Even in happiness, we can be in despair. Anti-Climacus states that deep within good fortune’s most hidden recesses, there dwells also the dread that is despair...for that is where despair is most cherished, its choicest dwelling place: deep in the heart of happiness...It is most in dread of nothing.

Happiness is ephemeral and despair has a purpose. It will be through despair that we will come to be ourselves before God. Anti-Climacus thus writes:

Eternity asks you, and every one of these millions of millions, just one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not, whether so in despair that you did not know that you were in despair, or in such a way that you bore this sickness concealed deep inside you as your gnawing secret, under your heart like the fruit of a sinful love, or in such a way that, a terror to others, you ratted in despair. If then, if you have lived in despair, then
whatever else you won or lost, for you everything is lost, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you, or, still more dreadful, it knows you as you are known, it manacles you to yourself in despair!

It is through freedom that we can either perpetuate our despair of not being who we are, or become ourselves. "The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself, whose task is to become itself, that can, furthermore, only be done in the relation to God. To become ourselves, however, is to become something concrete." The despair of the eternal is precisely to desire to be boundless when we are in fact shackled to the limits of necessity. Thus: "The self is only healthy and free from despair when, precisely by having despaired, it is grounded transparently in God."

Now, we have anticipated Kierkegaard's cure for despair. We can be free from despair (but not free from suffering) by finding our foundation in God. An explication of the God-relationship must be deferred to chapter 3, in order to first further examine the dynamics of the self.

ANALYSIS
When Anti-Climacus began his meditation upon the self, he said that the greatest danger was that of losing the self. With possibility, we can trace one set of ways in which we can lose ourselves. Possibility is a movement away from necessity. One type of despair is focussed upon the possible. We may wish for things that free us from necessity. To wish that we could be free from the very necessities of living is a form of metaphysical rebellion. For example, a person may pay little attention to reality. We can think of the image of "the fool" on tarot cards. This person, usually depicted as a youth, is looking into the distance while walking toward a cliff. The youth is so enchanted by the possibilities of the future that he does not see the necessities; by looking into the distance he misses the very real danger close at hand.

Another type of despair moves in the opposite direction, away from the possible, and hides away in necessity. Anti-Climacus uses a helpful analogy to depict the situation of the self. Necessity is like the parents who give the "okay" to a child's wish, the possible. Some people always think, however, "I cannot do that," because they do not see "that" as a possibility for themselves; they exist within the despair of necessity. The person who denies the possible is prone to melancholy. He is always in fear of danger, thinking of losing security (economic, emotional, and so on) by venturing into the possible (a new job, a new relationship, etc.). Ironically, his melancholic paralysis ensures that he achieves his greatest fear, despair: "He perishes in the dread, or perishes in what it was he was in dread of perishing in." The melancholy person wants to avoid despair of necessity, which may cause losing what is required (e.g., economic security), but dies in despair, albeit a particular variety, the despair of the possible, thinking "nothing is possible." Anti-Climacus writes:

But while one kind of despair steers blindly in the infinite and loses itself, another kind of despair allows itself to be, so to speak, cheated of its self
"by others". By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name, dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, become a copy, a number, along with the crowd.\(^\text{30}\)

The goal, in the most general and basic sense, is to have some balance between these two facets of the self, necessity and possibility. Anti-Climacus puts the situation well:

For the purpose of becoming (and the self must become itself freely) possibility and necessity are equally essential. Just as infinitude and finitude belong to the self, so also do possibility and necessity. A self that has no possibility is in despair, and likewise a self that has no necessity.\(^\text{30}\)

Just as finitude is the constraining factor in relation to infinitude, Anti-Climacus holds necessity to be the constraining factor for possibility. Whereas the past is a necessity, the future presents itself as a possibility. If someone says "Tell me about yourself," it is no coincidence that you are bound to refer to the past, "I did this, went here, and so forth." Our past is part of ourselves, the people we met, the friends and lovers we had and lost, the joys and traumas: all these things are part of ourselves. Yet, we are also what we are not yet, in the sense that we strive into the possible. Anti-Climacus says:

To the extent that it is itself, it is necessary; and to the extent that it must become itself, it is a possibility. Now if possibility outstrips necessity, the self runs away from itself in possibility so that it has no necessity to return to. This then is possibility's despair... Surely what the self now lacks is actuality; that at least is what would normally be said, and indeed we imply this when we talk of a person's having become unreal. But on closer examination what the self really lacks is necessity.\(^\text{31}\)

Actuality, according to Kierkegaard, links the necessary and the possible. At this moment, we are actual and as such are a synthesis of the necessary past and possible future, which reflects back upon itself in self-consciousness.

Kierkegaard's Christian philosophy proposes a remedy, which is necessarily born in the imagination as a possibility: eternal life. Although there is said to be a time, perhaps youth, when we are rich in hope, Anti-Climacus uses hope in two ways. We can distinguish this secular hope from profane hope whose object encompasses all individual things. We are brought into recognizing hope, in the strong sense, when we have hit rock bottom, attained pure despair. According to Kierkegaard, we only experience hope when we are in the depths of despair; only then can hope have any meaning. Anti-Climacus says:
The decisive moment only comes when man is brought to the utmost extremity, where in human terms there is no possibility. The question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will have faith. But this is simply the formula for losing one’s mind; to have faith is precisely to lose one’s mind so as to win God. 32

When all things look like they have come to an end, to believe in possibility is the only way to heal ourselves. As Anti-Climacus puts it:

Salvation, then, is humanly speaking the most impossible thing of all; but for God everything is possible! This is the struggle of faith, which struggles insanely, if you will, for possibility. For only possibility saves...But for someone who is on the point of despair it is: get me possibility, get me possibility, the only thing that can save me is possibility! A possibility and the desparer breathes again, he revives; for without possibility it is as though a person cannot draw breath. 33

For example, Kierkegaard's entire meditations upon the stories of Abraham and Job underscore the meaning of faith: believing against all odds. It is for this reason Anti-Climacus says, “to have faith is precisely to lose one's mind.” It is by hope that we can believe we can become ourselves, when we are lost. Anti-Climacus again reiterates the centrality of possibility:

The believer possesses the ever-sure antidote to despair: possibility; since for God everything is possible at every moment. This is the health which resolves contradictions...Health in general is to resolve contradictions...To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary or that everything has become trivial. The determinist, the fatalist is in despair, and in despair he has lost his self because everything is necessity...possibility is for the self what oxygen is for the body. 34

For Kierkegaard, we are both free and determined; possibility coexists with necessity. 35 Finding the right balance requires ethics.

The project of ethics, in fact, remains the same for Kierkegaard as it did for Aristotle, to make what we now are into what we ought to be. Anti-Climacus likens the becoming of ourselves to coming home. 36 In ancient times, ethics was about how to live so as to fulfill our nature. Kierkegaard is likewise preoccupied with the question, “How should I live my life?” 37

Many have not been able to fully appreciate Kierkegaard's ethical stance because he has been stereotyped as an existentialist. The English world consumed the post–World War II existentialist movement, after all, largely through the translated writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism could be summed up as the following notion: “Man makes himself.” Kierkegaard disagrees:
To have individuality is to believe in the individuality of every other person; for individuality is not mine but is God's gift by which He gives me being and gives being to all, gives being to everything. It is simply the inexhaustible swell of goodness in the goodness of God that He, the almighty, nevertheless gives in such a way that the receiver obtains individuality, that He who created out of nothing nevertheless creates individuality so that creation over against him shall not be nothing, although it is taken from nothing and is nothing and yet becomes individuality.

According to Kierkegaard, the origin of the self thus rests in God: the "inexhaustible swell of goodness." He had a traditional scholastic understanding of creation and would have been at odds with Sartre on the issue of whether or not we have a basic nature or are entirely a product of our own creation. The next chapter explicates Kierkegaard's theory of human development.