IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, the self was to some extent described as a fixed structure. However, as the self is always in the process of becoming, development is an essential feature of the self. Kierkegaard's theory of human development comprises three stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.

In order to uncover the mechanisms that egg us on from one to the next, we need to review the stages. In this chapter we consider the first two stages of development according to Kierkegaard.

The early stages he describes as being plagued by sin and anxiety. In this chapter, I first consider his notions of sin and anxiety and then examine the aesthetic and ethical stages. The final, religious stage of Kierkegaard's story is discussed in chapter 3.

**SIN**

According to Anti-Climacus, Socrates equated sin with ignorance. For example, a drunk may think he is living *la dolce vita*. This example is supposed to illustrate that our own perception of our life is not the sole criteria for living the "good life." We could be wrong, that is, in a state of ignorance.

Kierkegaard distinguishes Christian sin from the Socratic conception. Sin, for Kierkegaard, has an ontological place in human existence. He does not shy away from the unpopular idea of "original sin." Kierkegaard holds that this original sin came into the world with sexuality and with women. It was, after all, Eve who is said to have caused the fall of mankind. Christian mythology teaches that it is because of Adam and Eve's actions that we are all born in sin.

Kierkegaard views Adam both as an individual and as an emblem of humanity as a whole: "He [Adam] is himself and the race. Therefore that which explains Adam also explains the race and vice versa." This view has the human race living in the state of sin that was inaugurated by the mythical fall from paradise; this sin is manifested to Kierkegaard in the fact that we have to become ourselves. As such, sin serves as the starting point both of the race and of the individual's development. Simply put in the opposite terms: if mankind did not find itself in a state of sin, we would not have to become ourselves but would just be ourselves. Anti-Climacus writes, "Sin is: having been taught
by a revelation from God what sin is, before God in despair not to want to be ourselves, or in despair to want to be ourselves.”

Anti-Climacus begins his meditation upon the notion of Christian sin by saying that a sin is not just doing wrong but doing it while knowing it to be wrong. There is thus a difference between Socrates’ idea of ignorance and the Christian notion. Kierkegaard, for instance, speaks of a “calling,” in terms of feeling “called” to be a priest, for example. We have to become ourselves, and can go astray by becoming estranged from our existential calling. Sin results from our not confronting the ensuing sense of despair. However, it should be pointed out that sin cannot be altogether avoided. In fact, according to Kierkegaard, the fleeing from despair is an integral part of the process of becoming ourselves. Anti-Climacus remarks that we can maintain ourselves in sin:

In the depths to which he has sunk it is his state of sin which holds him together, wickedly strengthening him with its consistency; it is not the particular new sin which—yes, how dreadfully crazy!—“helps” him; the particular new sin is simply their expression of the state of sin, which is really the sin.

Kierkegaard’s concept of sin can be manifest in many guises, as evidenced by the various types of despair Kierkegaard catalogues. Sin may even seem to help us live, insofar as it offers a familiar, established way of acting. We may only feel like ourselves in a state of sin, just as the alcoholic does not feel “like himself” when he is sober. Anti-Climacus offers an analysis of how melancholia can be the result of persisting in a sinful state. He writes:

Sin itself is the struggle of despair, but when energy is exhausted there has to be a new intensification, a new demonic withdrawal into oneself, and that is despair over sin...Through the sin, in other words, through despairing over the sin, he has lost all relation to grace—and also to himself.

For Kierkegaard, sin “concerns every man.” Sin is an actuality whereas, to use a point of comparison, logic is not. Kierkegaard remarks, “Sin has its specific place, or more correctly, it has no place, and this is its specific nature.” Sin has “no place” because its essential feature is the being out of place, resulting in our not being ourselves. Kierkegaard holds that it is the individual’s task to give birth to himself. However, he also notes that “it is the nature of man to go astray one way or another.”

Anxiety
Anxiety is brought into the world with sin. When we despair not being ourselves (or are ourselves in despair), we persist in a state of anxiety. Kierkegaard’s use of the term anxiety denotes a feeling pertaining to nothing in particular. To compare anxiety to fear: we fear particular things, whereas a state of anxiety
does not have or require a specific object. We can just be anxious in general, without being aware of a particular cause of our anxiety. “The object of anxiety is a nothing.”

Anxiety is endemic to human existence due to its kinship with freedom and self-consciousness. If we were not conscious, we would not be aware of feelings of anxiety, which demonstrate a reflective attitude of mind. And, interestingly, without freedom there would be no reason to experience anxiety. Kierkegaard puts it thus:

The actuality of the spirit constantly shows itself as a form that tempts its possibility but disappears as soon as it seeks to grasp for it, and it is a nothing that can only bring anxiety...it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility.

Anxiety “is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not as necessity, but in itself.” The root of anxiety is not freedom constrained by circumstance but, rather, the intrinsic constraint of freedom itself. It is as if we have arrived at a type of paralysis through being confronted with possibility.

Being confronted with freedom can be a vertiginous experience, which leads to anxiety. “Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges, looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.” When we find ourselves lost, estranged from ourselves, there will inevitably be anxiety, as almost anything is possible.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between subjective and objective anxiety. Subjective anxiety refers to the inauguration of sin in the individual, whereas objective anxiety refers to the fact that sin came into the world with the very first chapter of the human race. Objective anxiety refers to a fact about human nature, whereas its subjective counterpart is its manifestation in an individual. “Subjective anxiety is the anxiety that is posited in the individual and is the consequence of his sin...By coming into the world sin acquired significance for the whole creation. This effect of sin in nonhuman existence I have called objective anxiety.”

Anxiety is essentially rooted in a certain relation to time. Kierkegaard refers to temporal time and the eternal. The former is always in a state of flux, while the latter is constant. At one point it seems that Kierkegaard comes close to collapsing the eternal within the temporal world:

The present, however, is not a concept of time, except precisely as something infinitely content less, which again is the infinite vanishing...The eternal, on the contrary, is the present...The present is the eternal, or rather, the eternal is the present, and the present is full...[If] time and eternity touch each other, then it must be in time, and now we have come to the moment...A blink is therefore a designation of time, but mark well, of time in the fateful conflict when it is touched by eternity.
For the intellect, according to Hegelian Platonism, the moment is eternal; it is constantly passing away and being replaced. Yet, in Kierkegaard’s nominalism, the eternal is always in a real conflict with the moment, because the moment is fleeting, whereas the eternal is constant.

In fact, “If a human being were a beast or an angel, he could not be in anxiety. Because he is a synthesis, he can be in anxiety...Anxiety is freedom’s possibility, and only such anxiety is through faith absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness.” As he points out, if we were beasts or angels, there would be no freedom, no sin, no anxiety, and, hence, no need of salvation. The salvation to which we refer and aspire requires recognition of the “deceptiveness” of the finite. “Now the anxiety of possibility holds him prey until, saved, it must hand him over to faith.”

Insofar as sin is to be conquered, anxiety is to be overcome. Kierkegaard writes: “Only in the moment that salvation is actually posited is this anxiety overcome...When salvation is posited, anxiety, together with possibility is left behind.” Kierkegaard is quick to point out that anxiety is never annihilated but comes to play another role after salvation. If we are constantly striving to be ourselves, we are in a state of longing; but when we can reside in ourselves fully, only then, he contends, do we achieve freedom from anxiety.

A Cure

Becoming ourselves will require, according to Kierkegaard, establishing a firm belief in God. The main point in establishing a relationship to truth is not that we have to travel here or there to discover it. Kierkegaard says, “Life is rich enough, if only one understands how to see. One need not travel to Paris and London; besides, this would be of no help if we are unable to see.”

If we picture the individual floating along, as it were, through the continuity of time, which forms his past, while orienting him toward the future, we can conceive of a break in this continuity. The break is called “the sudden.” The sudden is a disruption in the continuity of the self. We become estranged from ourselves, and the effect of this alienation is inclosing reserve. As Kierkegaard puts it:

The sudden is a new expression for another aspect of inclosing reserve...[which] is the effect of the negative self-relation in the individuality. Inclosing reserve closes itself off more and more from communication. But communication is in turn the expression for continuity, and the negation of continuity is the sudden.

The sudden is anxiety about the good, which Kierkegaard terms “the demonic.” “The good signifies continuity, as the first expression of salvation is continuity...The sudden is always due to anxiety about the good.” The break in the continuity of the self is always due to a concern over truth, or the eternal. When there is a break within the continuity of the self, there is an inclosing reserve which is a withdrawal. The sudden breaks our relation with ourselves. “The sudden is a complete abstraction from continuity, from the past and from...
The inclosing reserve, as the effect of this break, brings the self in upon itself (as a withdrawal from the correct way of being ourselves).

The cure for the ailments of the self, or in positive terms the fulfillment of what it is to be a self, comes with the acquisition of truth. "Viewed intellectually, the content of freedom is truth, and truth makes man free. For this reason, truth is the work of freedom, and in such a way that freedom constantly brings forth truth." For Kierkegaard, freedom is opposed to the sudden. He holds that truth makes man free. Yet, what we need to understand is what Kierkegaard means by the word "truth". He does not think that mere facts (truth) set one free. For example, it is "true" that, given certain purities of water and atmospheric pressures, water will boil at one hundred degrees Celsius. Of course, Kierkegaard does not think the realization of this fact or truth will make one free. Rather, truth is something to be attained, actualized, lived. In short, truth is not some objective fact that we can look at disinterestedly, as a spectator in a laboratory. If we mobilize our freedom toward this end, toward self-becoming, we will be using our freedom to bring forth truth. Kierkegaard writes that

truth is for the particular individual only as he himself produces it in action. If the truth is for the individual in any other way, or if he prevents the truth from being for him in that way, we have a phenomenon of the demonic...

Kierkegaard notes that truth has always had its "loud proclaimers" and there has been much talk in modern times of truth, but he is interested in whether we will let truth "permeate [our] whole being" and "vindicate certitude and inwardness...in an entirely concrete sense." Truth has to be something of great subjective, passionate importance to the individual; it has to be a matter of "inwardness...in an entirely concrete sense." As Kierkegaard says, "Inwardness is an understanding, but in concrete..."

Kierkegaard has said that the realization of truth for the individual requires freedom and action. To understand how these terms relate to inwardness, we can consider this passage:

The most concrete content that consciousness can have is consciousness of itself, of the individual himself—not the pure self-consciousness, but the self-consciousness that is so concrete that no author, not even the one with the greatest power of description, has ever been able to describe a single such self-consciousness, although every single human being is such an one...This self-consciousness, therefore, is action, and this action is in turn inwardness, and whenever inwardness does not correspond to this consciousness, there is a form of the demonic as soon as the absence of inwardness expresses itself as anxiety about its acquisition.

Every individual who is conscious of himself is conscious in a very intimate way that never admits full explication. Consciousness reflecting upon itself
Kierkegaard’s Romantic Legacy

is an “action.” It is this action that Kierkegaard deems “inwardness.” When he wants us to relate to truth subjectively, he hopes we will orient ourselves towards the truth by turning inward, toward ourselves. To be self-conscious does not imply contemplation or reflection per se, as if to suggest we can think about ourselves as an object. There is a deeper core to the self, which is self-conscious in such a way that we are not alienated from ourselves. It is in fact reflection that leads to the lack of inwardness.30 Kierkegaard defines inwardness in terms of earnestness:

I am not aware that there exists a single definition of earnestness... but because in relation to existential concepts it always indicates a greater discretion to abstain from definitions, because a person can hardly be inclined to apprehend essentially in the form of definition what must be understood differently, what he himself has understood in an entirely different way, and which in the form of definition easily becomes something else, something foreign to him. Whoever loves can hardly find joy and satisfaction, not to mention growth, in preoccupation with a definition of what love properly is.31

With concepts that are related to human existence, such as the “self,” we can never fully define them as we can a triangle (that thing which has three sides, etc.). Having cautioned our enthusiasm for definitions and explanations, we can now cautiously proceed to consider what Kierkegaard means by “earnestness,” since he equates it with inwardness. Kierkegaard does not use the term earnest to refer to being earnest about this or that thing. There is only one object for earnestness. “This object every human being has, because it is himself.”32 Further, Kierkegaard states: “Inwardness, certitude, is earnestness...Inwardness is therefore eternity or the constituent of the eternal in man.”33 Basically, inwardness indicates a sort of communion with one’s self.

We shall now begin moving beyond the scaffolding of human development, which takes on dialectical form:

(1) problem (sin/despair)
(2) recognition of sin (anxiety)
(3) cure (salvation/becoming ourselves)

We shall turn to the first stage of human development according to Kierkegaard, the aesthetic, where the holy trinity of sin, despair, and anxiety find their unique form of expression.

The Aesthetic Stage

The essential characteristic of the aesthetic stage is temporality, whose flower is pleasure. It is not entirely surprising then that Kierkegaard uses “women” to symbolize the aesthetic stage of existence. The aesthete is a “seducer” of women. Kierkegaard contrasts the man of ideas to those who “hanker after
a skirt." Whereas ideas are eternal, women represent the temporal world of pleasure in Kierkegaard's philosophy. He writes:

A woman comprehends the finite; she understands it from the ground up... the finite can presumably make a person happy, infinite per se never... Woman explains the finite, man pursues the infinite... woman bears children in pain, but man conceives ideas in pain... But because woman explains the finite in this way, she is man's deepest life, but a life that is supposed to be hidden and secret, as the life of the root always is.34

Kierkegaard also says of women: "[S]he is the immediacy. Only in this immediacy is she a goal for his desire, and therefore I said that he desires immediacy not spiritually but sensually."35 Similarly, pleasure focuses us upon the moment, it does not dwell on the past or future. For Kierkegaard, women represent the aesthete's desire: the constant seeking of pleasure.

Language is a medium that negates the sensuous.36 Language entails reflection and thus moves us away from the "now". Language is thought. Whereas language annuls the immediate, music, by reflection, lives in the immediate. The ideal of the poet-existence is music, in that it exists in the same categories as the sensuous-erotic, immediacy.37 The essential aesthete is one who lives the poet-existence. Kierkegaard writes, "What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music."38 Generally speaking, the aesthetic mode of existence is linked, in many of Kierkegaard's examples, to youth, a time when we are generically assumed to be preoccupied with the pleasures of the temporal world.

Kierkegaard's cursory remarks on mysticism crystallize in the complaint that the mystic tries to exist by mood and makes the mistake of choosing metaphysical, and not ethical, repentance.39 The mystic denies the world as an illusion, and hence cannot maintain an ethic. Kierkegaard paints the mystic much like the poet, as someone with a hankering for the moment of rapture.

It is not surprising that Kierkegaard values language over music. Although he recognizes that music intoxicates us in the ecstasy of the moment, he does not see it as providing a lasting cure to anxiety. Music may free us from anxiety by immersing us in the present, but it does not do this permanently.40

In fact, according to Kierkegaard, when people are born, there are two classes, the masses (others) and individuals (the nobility). Kierkegaard says that when God created Adam and Eve, he created others (the masses) to cure boredom. (In fact, he thinks it is out of boredom that man entertains himself by trying to build the tallest tower, which only becomes a testimony to his boredom.) The sensualist is always trying to achieve pleasure, which means, de facto, avoiding boredom.41

The aesthetic stage of development is represented in Kierkegaard's edifice by the seducer. The aesthetic existence is, ultimately, an unhappy existence in that it is never satisfied. The "unhappy one" is the person who locates his essential nature outside himself.42 Yet, in the end, the aesthete is absent from himself
by being lost in the past (recollection) or future (hope). Either he recollects past pleasures (the old man), or hopes for future ones (the seducer), but can never reside in the present—and therefore in the forever. Either way, there is an imbalance within the self. Recognition of our sickness is experienced as a blow. The mistake of the seducer, or poet-existence, the Don Juan, is to try to exist in the moment alone.

When we discover the ephemeral nature of such an existence, we are confronted by the emptiness left us by fleeting pleasures. It is significant that the epigram for Either/Or I, reads: “Greatness, knowledge, renown, Friendship, pleasure and possessions, All is only wind, only smoke: To say it better, all is nothing.” Indeed, given the ephemeral nature of the world and all its voluptuous pleasures, it could be likened to smoke. The world has no substance for Kierkegaard as it is not permanent. Thus, Kierkegaard will speak of “the glittering bondage of pleasure,” “desires shameful fraud,” and being “ensnared by the world.” Kierkegaard is convinced that the temporal world can never provide fulfillment, only ephemeral happiness, and this leads him to take flight from the world. The world is something that offers all sorts of enticing pleasures, yet these are “frauds” that “ensnare” us, in that they lead only to despair, and to stay in such a state is a sin, which in turn results in anxiety. The theme of abandonment, resignation, and flight from the world is ubiquitous in Kierkegaard’s thought. His own personal break with Regine Olsen becomes a necessary step in the flight from the world to a more secure foundation.

It is noteworthy that Kierkegaard’s orientation toward the world exemplifies several passages from the New Testament. For instance, in Romans we read, “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace.” In the Psalms it is written, “Man is like mere breath; His days are like passing shadows...Surely every man at his best is a mere breath. Surely every man walks about as a phantom.” According to Kierkegaard, the first step towards building a coherent self is to progress from the aesthetic to the ethical.

**THE ETHICAL STAGE**

Whereas the aesthete attempts to live solely in the here and now, the “ethical” individual goes beyond the immediacy by a commitment to duty. Kierkegaard admits that the seducer’s diary was to mark the move to the ethical, which is lasting. When we commit to something, such as duty, we are bound to something beyond the present. The prototype of duty is marriage. In marriage, we are committed to something that requires us to act not on how we feel in this or that moment but in relation to a duty. “The person who lives aesthetically...is always living in the moment...in the ethical I am raised above the moment, I am in freedom.” In the ethical mode of existence we are still actualizing our commitment to duty in the present. Yet, what is guiding our actions this moment is an idea, like marriage, which goes beyond the now.

Kierkegaard uses many analogies from human existence to depict his conception of human development. He uses the vivid image of the “first love”
to represent the aesthetic stage of existence. It is not that the aesthetic is eclipsed by the ethical, but transfigured rather. The aesthete’s love is preserved in the ethical, manifest as commitment and duty.

The movement from the aesthetic existence to a moral one requires a “determination of will.” An aesthetic life will sooner or later force us, through despair, to seek an alternative. In order to escape the despair of constant craving, we commit our self to an ethical mode of existence. The ethical and ensuing stages are the fulfillment of an inner teleology of the self, where there is a sublimation of the intentions of the previous stage. For example, the duty involved in marriage, claims Kierkegaard, allows us to love fully, which ironically was precisely the aesthetic goal. As Kierkegaard puts it:

If this [duty] does not already exist in embryo in the first love, then its appearance is naturally very disturbing. But such is not the case with marital love, which in the ethical and the religious already has duty within itself, and when duty manifests itself to them it is not a stranger, a shameless outsider... No, he comes as an old intimate, as a friend, as a confidant whom the lovers both know in the deep secrecy of their love.

At times, Kierkegaard views the self as a house, wherein the basement is the “low” place where the erotic dwells, and the “high” place is where the intellect dwells. In the aesthetic mode of being we live by mood. Yet, in the ethical stage of development, mood is a characteristic or attribute of the self (but not co-extensive with the self). The world exists for humans, according to Kierkegaard, by the grace of God. It is the ethical that works toward our fulfillment. He says, “The individual has his teleology within himself, has inner teleology, is himself his teleology; his self is the goal toward which he strives.”

Duty, thus, does not just range over relations to others. Our own work, for instance, is duty. As Kierkegaard writes, “In respiration the organism enjoys its freedom, and thus I, too, have enjoyed my freedom in this writing, the freedom that is mine everyday.” Kierkegaard speaks at length of finding one’s vocation in life; he terms it one’s “calling.” As he also writes, “The duty to work in order to live, expresses the universally human, and in another sense expresses the universal also for it expresses freedom.” Kierkegaard’s concept of duty, one may wish to notice, does not just apply to others in what has become the typical modern (Christian) conception of ethics, which Kierkegaard would call civil morality. Neither, however, is duty understood in the ancient sense of attaining virtue, as perfecting ourselves. Both views complement each other.

Kierkegaard was frustrated with the philosophies of his own day, which seemed to try to explain the entire world yet offer no advice for the individual. The metaphysicians of Kierkegaard’s day (e.g., Hegel), are on Kierkegaard’s reading submerged in necessity, fatalism, the logic of history, and so on, and thus divorce themselves from possibility. Without possibility there would be no question of ethics, because there would be no freedom.
The negative expression of freedom, according to Kierkegaard, is suicide. Here, we are obviously using our freedom, yet we are using it in a revolt against ourselves. It would seem that suicide would be the most natural expression of asceticism. Yet, Kierkegaard does not suggest we kill ourselves, and this is significant. We are asked, rather, to live in the world, ethically, and this task, he tells us, is the actualization of truth. To actualize truth is to come back to what we are. As Heraclitus had put it, "The soul has a logos which increases itself." Yet why cannot self-becoming terminate at the ethical stage? I turn to this question in the next chapter.