

EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS IN KIERKEGAARD'S PERCEPTION OF SELF

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Abstract

We might think that the self's structure and its delineation should always be essentially one and the same, while the content is expected to be the changing ingredient. We think only the self-content is expected to change through "stages on life's way." But in Kierkegaard's philosophy, along with its content, the very formation of the self changes. In this paper I elaborate on Kierkegaard's early view of the self's structure. I then emphasize the dramatic change we find in *Sickness unto Death*, where the self is changed in both structure and content.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, self, will, imagination, humour, death, reflexivity, narrative.

In Kierkegaard's early writings, from *Either/Or* to the *Postscript*, the self is depicted as having at its core one's will. Kierkegaard's view of the self postulates will as an Archimedean point of the self, from which volition shape existence. The will binds together the different aspects of one's self into a whole. In a way, the self *is* its will, or the lack of will. A coherent self relates itself to its will in a concrete way, by addressing directly the actual possibilities while considering its own interests. Additionally, a self incorporates imaginary constructions to produce a tangible picture of the willed situation.

Let us briefly consider a number of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. A, the aesthete from *Either/Or I*, wills pleasure over pain, and wishes to have laughter always on his side. William, from *Either/Or II*, loves his wife and wills with his whole heart, to have "the strength never to want to love any other."² De Silentio wills, in fear and trembling, to understand Abraham. Constantine Constantius wills to be happy again through repetition. Climacus wills to become a Christian and attain eternal happiness. Anti-Climacus *is* Christian. Is he eternally happy? For him, it seems, eternal happiness manifest itself as upbuilding and awakening. In being a Christian, Anti-Climacus *is* eternally happy, and so anybody can be who opens his eyes to see the truth. So, what now? What does Anti-Climacus will?

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² S. Kierkegaard: *Either/Or*, Part II, transl. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987, 9 [EO2, 9].

I want to suggest that he wills nothing much. He wills nothing much for himself, nothing that takes over and dominates his life. Clearly none of his willingness is defined as infinite or eternal. *I want to suggest that he is not constituted by his will as the rest of the pseudonyms are.* His self is transformed so that different psychological building blocks are needed to make this new construct intelligible.

I.

Let's consider Climacus, to see a psychological constitution of self – the building blocks – that Kierkegaard employs before he moves to the special case of Anti-Climacus. Famously, Climacus presents himself in the introduction to the *Postscript* in the following way:

“I, Johannes Climacus, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most folk, assume that a highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one's prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine.”³

Climacus perceives his *self*, the construct and contents represented by his use of the word “I, as something separated from the world; or in the case at hand, something separated from Christianity, which he wants to engage. I'll consider here three elements that constitute this self: will, imagination and self-humour. Together they form a psychological construction that addresses the question: how does the self grasp itself?

The *will* is the determining factor of the self. The answer to: who are you? is not any specific trait, attribute, or characteristic – being tall, dark and handsome. The answer to “What are you?” is translated to the question, “What do you wish for?” What do you will yourself to be? Climacus, by his free choice, wills the highest good. That's the best account we have of who he is.⁴ Passion is transformed into will that defines a purpose: where am I aiming my life? This makes will the decisive component of the self. Within the stages on life's way, this places Climacus in the ethic-religious realm.

Imagination is the second element of the human soul. Climacus regards it as “wings, that were given to human beings to elevate themselves.”⁵ Imagination, unlike fantasy, is constrained and focused by thoughts and feelings. Unlike fantasy, it's not radically opposed to rational or emotional common sense. Imaginary constructions illustrate a possible existence (while fantasy illustrates impossible existence). Climacus' aim towards eternal happiness depends on his ability to imagine

³ S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vol. 1, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982, 15–16 [CUP1, 15–16].

⁴ Some writers distinguish direct from indirect volitionalism. From his opening words, it seems that Climacus presupposes direct volition and that his is the highest level of the power to will.

⁵ CUP1, 361.

what that might mean. He desires an existence that he has not yet experienced and whose reality is not yet his. The possibility of making it his own reality through his actions is dependent on imagining eternal happiness. He weaves the imagined missing links of existence into his well-constructed dialectical thinking. By doing so he creates a fuller and more coherent picture of his life, here and hereafter.

The third element in this account of the self is *humour*. Thinking and dialectical analysis (in which imagination has a major role) are connected by humour with the actuality of the here and now. In the face of suffering, for example, a laughing (not mocking) self-humour can see the world for what it is.⁶ For Climacus humour is an intermediate bridge between imaginary constructions and perceptions of reality. Why is this bridge of self-humour required? Being able to imagine a desired reality illustrates a possible existence, but this ability is also a source of pain. It is painful to emphasize the gap between the desirable and the existing. Imagination enhances or spotlights all that has not yet been achieved. Imagining what might be creates a gap, a vast abyss, a rift between where Climacus is, and where he wishes to be. At this sensitive point, despair could very well take over. Self-Humour becomes important in monitoring despair.

Climacus says, humorously, that eternal happiness awaits him – just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. The humour is that this most serious, self-important thinker, writer of tomes, suddenly identifies his fate with that of a simple housemaid or a foolishly pompous professor. Here, Climacus demonstrates his ability to laugh at himself and at his situation. Why, in the midst of earnestly confessing, with his soul at stake, does he mention these figures? Is he just being liberal, open-minded, remarking that in assuming eternal happiness he is nothing special? But then we realise that the housemaid and professor are just the opposite, from who he takes himself to be. We also know that even if either could win eternal happiness, we still need to ask, what does eternal happiness mean anyway? Could Climacus, the housemaid, and the professor *all* join the society of the saved? Isn't Climacus more likely to distance himself from such society, to think, with Groucho Marx, "I wouldn't belong to any club that accepts me as a member?!"

Without self-humour, Climacus couldn't seriously will his absurd goal of gaining eternal happiness. If he thought seriously about his goal – surely a remote possibility – his will would be broken; suffering would take over. Humour lets him bridge the abyss between imagination and reality that otherwise would remain in ultimate opposition. Once imagination and reality are fused – one attains faith, when Climacus attains Christianity (if he does), humour is no longer needed.

⁶ J. Watkin: *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*, Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press 2000, 126.

II.

Now let's move to the next pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. Anti-Climacus' view of the self is different from Climacus' view and from the view of previous pseudonyms. It is not enough any more to bring together and harmonize the constitutive elements of the self through passion and will, imagination and humour. What is required now from the self (in order for it to be a self) is a whole new take on death – hence a whole new take on life. In addition, a different psychological formation is required. The self is not an individualistic entity facing the world, apart from it and its desired qualities. Now the self is a self exactly because it does *not* stand “outside” the world, but is absorbed or immersed in it. The world-view is changed. We can see the change emerge 5 years before *SUD* in Kierkegaard's discourse, *The Thorn in the Flesh*:

A person is looking for peace, but there is change: day and night, summer and winter, life and death; a person is looking for peace, but there is change: fortune and misfortune, joy and sorrow; ... a person is looking for peace – where did he not look for it – even in the disquietude of distraction – where did he not look for it in vain – even in the grave!⁷

Peace is not found anywhere, not even in death. This could be seen as the entry-gate to Anti-Climacus' world-view. I'll briefly discuss his approach to death in this discourse, and then move to the new formulation of self.

What makes Anti-Climacus' self different is his new take on death, a new perspective that is required in order for the self to be a self. Anti-Climacus attributes to “the natural man” a standard view of death.⁸ The “natural man” thinks that “Humanly speaking, death is the last of all, and, humanly speaking, there is hope only as long as there is life.”⁹ Death is the boundary to life and the end of everything, including hope. This the view of death of non-Christians referred to as “natural man.”

For a Christian believer, however, death is not the “end of the world,” it is not the greatest threat in and to life. It is not the end, firstly, because the believer has faith in the resurrection and the afterlife.¹⁰ Secondly, it is not the end, because the gravest risk is not death but despair in this life, despair over failing to be oneself.

Anti-Climacus introduces a fear greater than the fear of death, a fear so great that it overcomes a fear of death. The “natural man” knows no fear greater than death. The Christian fears for his immortal soul, which is a fear greater than death. True, the Christian can continue to fear “everything that goes under the name of earthly and temporal suffering ... [that is, all] earthly and worldly matters, death included.”¹¹ But that fear is no longer dominate: “Only the Christian knows what is meant by sick-

⁷ S. Kierkegaard: *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, transl. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, 328.

⁸ S. Kierkegaard: *The Sickness unto Death*, transl. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

ness unto death.” It means a sickness concerning the state of one’s soul, not a sickness at the fact one will die. In facing this soul-sickness, a Christian gains “a courage that the natural man does not know.” He gains this courage by “learning to fear something even more horrifying, than death.”¹²

Psychology that is based on “human nature, and on prevailing norms will not understand Anti-Climacus. Normal human beings are supposed to fear death. Existential psychotherapists, like the American, Irvin Yalom, write that death is the extinction of consciousness, and so the extinction of everything.¹³ Psychologically speaking, consciousness is all that we have and death is the extinction of consciousness. Thus death is the extinction of everything. For a healthy psychological profile, *some* fear of death is not just normal but is also *required*. Anyone who doesn’t fear death to a reasonable degree should be regarded as dangerous to himself and/or to others. This represents the common thought in the field of existential psychotherapy (other realms of psychotherapy may not place such an emphasis on the normal dread of death).

Anti-Climacus does not accept these psychological presuppositions. He does not seriously fear death; nevertheless, he is not a danger to himself and poses no danger to others. On the contrary: he testifies that he enjoys consummate health and vitality.¹⁴ Thus it’s clear that we need a new psychological exposition, a Christian one, and Anti-Climacus provides it.

Franz Kafka takes an approach to death that could help us to understand Anti-Climacus. He writes:

“one of the first signs of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die. This life appears unbearable, another unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one only in time will come to hate. In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: ‘this man is not to be locked up again. He is to come to me.’”¹⁵

Kafka writes these insightful thoughts on death in his *Blue Octavo Notebooks* (1917–1919). He may have been reading *Sickness unto Death* at this time. He mentions Kierkegaard explicitly on the same day that he writes:

“The lamentation around the deathbed is actually the lamentation over the fact that here no dying in the true sense has taken place... Our salvation is death, but not this one.”¹⁶

¹² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, op. cit.

¹³ I.D. Yalom: *Momma and the meaning of life: Tales of Psychotherapy*, New York: Harper Perennial 2000.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ F. Kafka: *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, Cambridge, MA: Exact Change 1991, 72.

¹⁶ Ibid., 99–100.

He distinguishes death observed “around the deathbed” and true death. Every death that is not *my* death is irrelevant to my salvation. So “Salvation is death, but not this one,” for this one is only an observed death. We are accustomed to think of death as the end of all, the absolute cessation and termination. But Kafka reminds us that this is true only in the case of our own death, and that any other death could bring “the real sorrow of the end, but not *the* end.” In his Kafkaesque way he turns sorrow against us in saying that we cry and lament around the deathbed *not* because the person died, but because his death is not enough – for us his death is not the end of all, so we still have to face it, and this is a cause of sorrow, that the end has not come.

III.

We need a new psychological exposition to understand the new take on death that emerges with Anti-Climacus’ Christian constitution of self. The new concept of self in *Sickness unto Death* takes an unexpected point of departure. The self is no longer an individualistic entity facing the world, apart from it and its desired qualities. Anti-Climacus doesn’t even start with the self because the self is not yet *there*. At the start, the individual is *not* a self. The self is formed through relationships that at the start are not-yet-a-self. He focuses on what he calls “spirit”.

Once a self is formed, it does *not* stand “outside” the world, but is immersed *in* it. *Will* is no longer the Archimedean point. The starting place is not a point, but a field that encloses and composes a number of opposed existential poles. Of course will, imagination and self-humour still play a part in the dynamics of this field. But their presence is less pronounced. They are not the dominating force or centre of the self. In the new construction, they are subordinate factors.

Imagine Anti-Climacus’ vision of what precedes the formation of self as a shadow presented on the wall of a cave. The self is not yet in that picture, first, as a matter of theory: When we take a theoretical stance, we stand back from the object that is viewed. Thus the viewer giving a theoretical account does not include his role as viewer or theorist. And second, the self is not in the wall-picture because the self at issue is a practical or existential self, and that self has to be the unique individual, Anti-Climacus, not a wall-map of abstract relational polarities. These polarities must become synthesized, glued together as his own self, as the field of his existential living or being. That won’t happen on the wall of a cave.

Nevertheless this is his abstract account of the world of self-relations seen objectively as something outside my self. The projected picture provides an array of existential poles or axes that prompt a broad construal of the aesthetic and the ethical-religious world-views. The poles of finite/infinite, temporal/eternal, necessary/ possible, physical/psychical, are synthesized in a particular way in the formation of any particular self.

1. The aesthetic view of existence give stress to the finite, the temporal, the necessary (or factual), and the physical poles, neglecting the opposite poles.

2. The ethical-religious view of existence gives stress to the infinite, the eternal, freedom, and the psychical poles, neglecting the opposite poles.

3. When the opposed poles are more appropriately balanced, neither pole dominating, there is the possibility of a self that overcomes the primal fear of death.

Remember that whatever Climacus wants, he wants with infinite striving passion. Anti-Climacus, in contrast, doesn't *strive* to better his life, but is struck by something prior to striving or wanting. Instead of a striving will being active, one's will is overcome by the sense of already being immersed in the world, by the sense of will, imagination, and humour now being shifted to the background. When *striving* dominates, the vividness of a world retreats except as a field of struggle. If there is a world ready to intervene, to strike him, to disrupt him, the frantic will, bent on mastery, leaves no room for it to arrive. Anti-Climacus is immersed in a world whose vividness puts the striving will to one side.

Anti-Climacus dies to the world that Climacus tried to master. The world Anti-Climacus is immersed in is not the world others find to be a world inviting the conquering self. In leaving mastery behind, Anti-Climacus finds himself open to a new world saturated by what he will call Absolute Power. The non-striving exemplified by Anti-Climacus provides space for Absolute Power to speak and create. This Power unifies existential polarities and their background and the newly formed self finds itself immersed in a new world-landscape.

IV.

There is a contrast, as I mentioned, between the abstract, theoretical wall-picture of self-factors, on the one hand, and the actual existential formation of a self, on the other. Getting this picture of self-synthesis theoretically correct, both the loss of striving and the new world then available focused in an Absolute Power, is an accomplishment one can take pride in. But getting the picture right doesn't quite earn a life-time achievement award. Getting it theoretically correct is only half the challenge. To actually *live from* the picture, to be an *exemplar* of what the picture puts in focus, requires an existential *willingness to live in accordance with it*. One can get the picture right, seeing correctly that what is needed is a dying to the world. But "getting the picture right" objectively is irrelevant, and pride in ones intellectual achievement is beside the point. To *live from* or *embody* the truth of the picture correctly, existentially, practically, is an *infinite* task, one that can never be accomplished.

For Anti-Climacus the task of embodying this truth is not a matter of striving (as Climacus would have it) but a task of submission, of *yielding* to a power that constitutes the self. Despair holds a place for a complex existential demand: one is prompted to stay immersed in the world, not

the world of human, worldly affairs, and striving, but the world offered by a transcendent, absolute Other. The dynamic in which that despair is assuaged incorporates viewer and vision, human being and world-view, and enfolds the dynamic of selfhood.

There is one more matter to explore. This account of the new psychological construction is not quite enough, since it is not clear what makes the self dynamic *mine*? What gives *me* authority over this self? And what makes it *continuously* mine?

If we were to draw a simple picture, we might imagine, for Climacus, a circle with a small “w” at the centre for “the will” – knowing that nevertheless there is no “place” within the self where the will resides. Perhaps the image of a seedless grape self would do for something without an ontological centre. The self in Anti-Climacus’ is centre-less self, but less like a seedless grape that like an old rambling city, a painting with detail strewn all over, or a piece of music, say an overture with several motifs. These images help to show how something (a self) can be more or less unified and organized, a functionally unfolding entity, yet without a discernable centre.

V.

Let’s imagine Anti-Climacus’s self as a musical work, a set of lines unfolding in time for the ear. In *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, Edward Mooney explains that: “self is like the tonal centre that defines a musical key.”¹⁷ The self unfolds as the piece unfolds. A musical key can exfoliate, form fluently through time, moving as the music weaves and rounds out, without there being an ontologically separate centre. There is no *one particular* source of its unified authority. This music, like the self of *Sickness*, has no “independent *choosing* centre (or faculty of will).”¹⁸ And there is no one particular source of Its unified authority is not found in any one place but is dispersed through the piece as it is played.

Anti-Climacus’s faithful non-despairing self unfolds just as a piece of music unfolds. The power of music seems to bequeath to the piece an elusive sense of authoritative tonal centre. The self is revealed as “a network of relationship that makes up a (perhaps incomplete) whole that relates to itself. This whole or self ensemble then relates [receptively] to something outside itself, a power that grounds or founds it.”¹⁹

Now what makes this complex, dynamic phenomenon, *mine* in particular? What makes it *continuously* mine? I can’t peer into my inner space and see the elements of self unmistakably branded with my name on them. So at best, we can argue from the analogy of music. We can explore how the presence of *reflexivity*, *gravitational force*, and *narrative*

¹⁷ E.F. Mooney: *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard’s Moral-Religious Psychology From Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, New York and London: Routledge 1996, 98. The image for the self provided by Mooney in his book, seems just right for the concept of self under discussion.

¹⁸ Mooney, op. cit., 92.

¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

centre serve to give a piece of music its signature identity. By analogy, the presence of these three can provide the sense that the dynamic “self-relating self-relations dependent on Another” is mine, and continuously mine.

VI.

Through *reflexivity*, the complex bundle of relations exerts authority just in the way it comes together as *this very field* of its relationships, relating to itself, and to a grounding power.

“No one element in this field dominates, or even easily separated out from the other, for each element is defined in terms of its polar opposite.”²⁰

Each element belongs to the others, recognizing the other element as “mine,” and the totality as “mine.” The way a particular a piece of music becomes what it is, each element belonging to the whole, and the whole claiming the parts as “mine,” is just the way self-factors in a field of unfolding relationships belong together in a whole, where any one element can say “mine” of the others to which it belongs.

Through reflection we are self aware of our self, “we make sense of a self ... by specifying the relational, reflexive field it constitutes. This means sensing its connections to various persons, institutions, and projects; it means sensing values, ideals, points of aspiration that, in the nature of the case, a self will fail to live up to. So sensing a self or sphere will also mean sensing its forms of failure or despair.”²¹

The self, sensing itself, can trace itself and become aware of itself either in inward or outward cues, in an inner sense of delight or in “outer” sense of Godly presence. The latter, outer sense of divine presence, provides the grounding power that “roots us” by “rooting out” despair.

Let’s briefly consider the last two principles. Beyond reflexivity, self is a centre of gravitational force, and a narrative centre. As a centre of gravitational force, “The vectors of self are infused, activated, empowered, from without.”²² For Anti-Climacus it is mostly the grounding power of faith, and “attaining faith is not at last an act of choice. It is, as Anti-Climacus has it, being grounded in another.”²³ Other elements that place the self as a centre of gravitational force are family, friends, work relations, institutions, projects, values, ideals, aspiration and will.

As a *narrative* centre, the self creates and maintains its particularity and continuity, by being and becoming the story that it tells about itself. As a narrative centre of gravity, a self “...is something of outmost importance for stability and function, unmistakably present, yet tantalizingly difficult to isolate.”²⁴ It’s difficult to isolate because it is not an item or element, but a pattern discerned, or felt, as an elusive dynamic.

²⁰ Mooney, op. cit., 98.

²¹ Ibid., 95.

²² Ibid., 93.

²³ Ibid., 97.

²⁴ Ibid., 99.

The story that Anti-Climacus is narrating is the story of the truly religious self, the Christian self, that contains an important truth:

“The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing [giving away] to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”²⁵

To sum up: The self in Anti-Climacus’ work is distinctive because will and striving for goals are diminished; the world of striving retreats to be replaced by a new world in which the self is serenely, receptively, immersed. The new world is theologically the world of God’s dominance – the striving self is displaced. Both self and the world, Christianly speaking, are sustained by God, are immersed in powers the self does not control or confront oppositionally, but yields to receptively, willingly. It is a world where I do not will X to be done, but pray that “thy will be done.” Non-theologically, the world that the non-despairing self is dependent on and immersed in, is a world of intricate social and natural relations: one is dependent on bread and butter, cows and grass, sun and rain, mothers and fathers, chieftains and prime ministers, sheriffs and school teachers. Escaping despair means acknowledging this dependence, and while willing to achieve certain goals, also yielding to the support that cows and butter, teachers and sisters, will provide.

Two psychological constructions are found in Kierkegaard. One has will as its centre, and employs imaginary constructions and self-humour. The other overcomes fear of death, has no centre, and is a field of dynamic self-relations. It is subjected to reflexivity, dependent on Another, held by gravitational force, and centred by its narrative. Elements are held together, by recognizing their belonging together, which makes this unfolding psychological construction continuously mine.

²⁵ Mooney, op. cit., 99.