MY JOURNEY WITH KIERKEGAARD: FROM THE PARADOXICAL SELF TO THE POLARIZED MIND

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Abstract

The article investigates how radical, or paradoxical, experience (such as loss, death anxiety etc.) forms an essential dimension of human's relation to existence, and how this very relation could become fruitful in case of proper attitude. The author defines human experience as constrictive/expansive continuum only degrees of which are conscious: denial or avoidance of these polarities cause disorders and suffering, whereas coexistence with it associates with vital living. In this regard the author discusses implications of Kierkegaard's conception of self as a synthesis of finitude and infinitude and its manifold relations to itself and the world, and relevance of his works to clinical psychology.

Keywords: paradox, self, suffering, death, finitude/infinitude polarity, groundlessness.

How is it that I have followed Kierkegaard throughout my professional career and throughout my most intimate writings?

How is it that Kierkegaard has been my philosophical muse ever since that first day at Ohio University when, over a seven hour period, at a local MacDonald's restaurant (!), an exuberant graduate student introduced me to Kierkegaard's life and work?

It has to be more than the similarity of our names – That is "*Kierk*egaard" and me. (Although some call me "Captain *Kierk*egaard!" – echoing the television show "Star Trek".) Yet as I ponder it, I think my resonance with Kierkegaard has to do with the similarity of our experience with death. Death and its resultant shattering of a sense of self began very early for me with the tragically premature death of my brother of seven years, when I was barely three.

From there, and like Kierkegaard, I've always been fascinated by the contradictoriness and ruptures of our lives. This was illustrated in part by my increasing fascination with science fiction – with peculiar states of mind, strange worlds, and with new possi-

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bilities (including those of alien beings). For example, there was an early episode of the CBS television series *The Outer Limits* (1963) which made a particular impression on me as a budding youngster. In that episode, an electrified being from another galaxy became caught in the electromagnetic fields of a local radio tower. From there it began to amble toward the center of a small town. Just as in classic B movies of the past, many of the town citizens and the national guard gathered in the square in anticipation of the "monster." The citizens had their guns drawn, and the national guard readied canons. As the monster approached though something very atypical occurred: The towering monster looked down upon the scene, stood tall and said to the effect – "Put down your guns, go home, and contemplate the mysteries of the universe!" Now this was an object lesson for me on many levels but I think what stood out most was that life's paradoxes – the radically other and by implication death anxiety – does not have to be all bleak; they could on the other hand be a portal to another way of seeing, another way of being that has intriguing or even fascinating possibilities.

But it was in 1982 (I recall the exact year!!) when I was introduced to the work of Ernest Becker that my occupation with life's paradoxes began to soar. In Becker's *Denial of Death*[2] – which was a recasting of psychoanalysis in existential terms – I found a remarkable path to apply what I learned from philosophy to the therapy arena – which was my main interest.

Becker helped me to see the tremendous potential for both understanding and healing psychological suffering through the lens of Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*[3], arguably his most penetrating work. I found this material so rich and so relevant to my work as a clinical psychologist and to my experience as a human being that I made it the cornerstone of my first book, *The Paradoxical Self: Toward an Understanding of Our Contradictory Nature*[4], as well as to just about everything else I have written since. It was also the foundation for my increasing kinship with Rollo May, who generously provided the Preface to *The Paradoxical Self*.

My basic thesis in *The Paradoxical Self* is that human experience can be understood on a continuum of finitude and infinitude, and that many of the so-called psychiatric disorders, from depression to obsessive compulsive disorder (on the "finitizing" side) to conduct disorders, narcissism, and mania (on the "infinitizing" side) can be explicated on this basis. Even some forms of substance abuse, such as drugs that sedate or on the other hand drugs that stimulate can also be viewed in such light.

I reframed the finitude/infinitude polarity as the "constrictive-expansive" continuum (which implies indefinite potentialities at either

2 E. Becker: *Denial of Death*, New York: Free Press 1973.

3 S. Kirkegaard: *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*, transl. W. Lowrie, Princeton, N.-J.: Princeton University Press 1954. (Original works published in 1843 and 1849.)

4 K. Schneider: *The Paradoxical Self: Toward An Understanding of Our Contradictory Nature*, Buffalo, N.-Y.: Prometheus Press/Humanity Books 1990/1999.

extreme). I did this because it seemed to me more in keeping with a clinical rather than philosophical portrayal. That is, I found the polarities of constriction (drawing back and confining…) and expansion (bursting forth and extending…) more clinically and phenomenologically relevant to what I observed in myself and my practice, than the rather abstract conceptions of "finite and infinite" sides of self… although it's clear that Kierkegaard intended for his concepts to be phenomenologically, experience-near as well.

Through my personal and professional investigation, I found that this dialectic of constriction/expansion operated in a three-part model that I called *the Paradox Principle.*

The Paradox Principle is defined as follows: The human psyche is a constrictive/expansive continuum only degrees of which are conscious. Denial or avoidance of these polarities associates with extreme or polarized counter reactions (for example, "disorders," violence); whereas the encounter with, integration of, or coexistence with the polarities associates with more vital and dynamic living – a form of living that I've since termed the "fluid center"[5]. The fluid center is structured inclusiveness, pliability and constraint, and humility and boldness as context and circumstance demand. (It is no accident that the fluid center is akin to Kierkegaard's notions of "vital energies" and "self as synthesis").

Now this Paradox Principle – as a cursory perusal of my writing will show – pervades just about every major work I have published – from *The Paradoxical Self* to *Horror and the Holy*[6] *to my works on Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy*[7]*, Existential Humanistic Therapy*[8]*,* and my more recent writing on *The Rediscovery of Awe*[9] *and Awakening to Awe*[10] *to my latest volume The Polarized Mind*[11]*.* These are all reflections and applications of that basic Kierkegaardian problem of the finitizing and infinitizing self and its manifold relations to itself and the world. So you see, it's no mistake that I am present here – I owe a great deal to this man!

In my just published book *The Polarized Mind*, I show how the denial of the paradoxes and mysteries of life is not merely an individual problem but a harrowing cultural and social problem as well – indeed I see it as the self-induced "plague" of humanity, which we have a knack of

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5 K. Schneider: *Rediscovery of awe: Splendor, mystery, and the fluid center of life*, St. Paul, MN: Paragon House 2004.

6 K. Schneider: *Horror and the Holy: Wisdom-Teachings of the Monster Tale*, Chicago: Open Court 2003.

7 K. Schneider: *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy: Guideposts to the Core of Practice*, New York: Routledge 2010.

8 K. Schneider & O. Krug: *Existential-Humanistic Therapy*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press 2010.

9 Schneider, *Rediscovery of awe*, op. cit.

10 K. Schneider: *Awakening to Awe: Personal Stories of Profound Transformation*, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson 2009.

11 K. Schneider: *The Polarized Mind: Why It's Killing Us and What We Can Do About It*, Colorado Springs: University Professors Press 2013.

repeating over and over again. No generation, at least in my experience, seems to learn the lesson very well.

From the beginning of recorded time, people have been cutting off their paradoxical nature, and suffering horribly as a result. Consider, the Babylonian myth of the Enuma Elish, where the creatrix of the world, Tiamat and her husband Apsu create what they think is a perfect world order, only to have it upended and upset by their children. These children soon grow so rebellious that Tiamat's husband Apsu puts a contract out on one of them but before he can carry out his plan, he ends up getting killed by one of the children himself!

In essence, Apsu and Tiamat failed to adhere to the Paradox Principle, and by implication Kierkegaard's "self as a synthesis of finitude and infinitude;" on the other hand, what they did end up pursuing was a turning away from their paradoxical nature, a cutting off of their vulnerability, and an unintended self-collapse.

As recent studies in "terror management" show, the denial of one's vulnerability – or in the parlance of depth psychology, one's sense of groundlessness (insignificance, helplessness) before creation, tends to lead to overcompensatory strivings to do everything one can to assert significance, infallibility, and ultimately ironically self and other destruction. The denial is based on trauma, whether individual or cultural, in which one's raw relationship to existence is exposed without supports to deal with this exposure.

We see this pattern in leader after leader and culture after culture, following Babylonian myths, from ancient Greece to Rome, from the Crusades to the French Terror, from Napoleon to British colonialism, from Stalin to Hitler, to Mao, and many epochs and figures in between – as well as succeeding! The pattern seems to comprise a "perfect storm" of convergence between self-devaluing, brutalized leader and self-devaluing, brutalized culture, which then leads to tyranny (fascism, despotism, or totalitarianism) to compensate.

The whole crux of this polarization cycle is anticipated by Kierkegaard; indeed, I would go so far as to say that the whole crux of what we call today "psychopathology" is driven largely by the Kierkegaardian dynamics of groundlessness (infinitude), terror, and defense (or overidentification with one point of view to the utter exclusion of competing points of view, to deny the groundlessness). Think about how this operates in the oppressive judgmentalism of depression to avoid the risk of venturing out, the exacting pedantry of obsessive compulsion to repel the peril of lack of control, and the crippling guardedness of anxiety disorder to staunch the risk of standing out or being bigger in the world. Or on the other hand, consider the equally disabling polarizations against the groundlessness of dissipation and smallness – such as narcissism, conduct disorders, and certain forms of mania. In either case, the person becomes locked up in the prison of one-sidedness, terribly avoidant of the other side, which invariably associates with the abyss and bottomlessness, as our clinical patients so often remind us.

To put this in a theoretical form, I propose that most of our troubles as human beings are traceable to *our suspension in the groundlessness, the radical mystery of existence.* Again, think of how loss, disruption, illness, rejection, and abandonment open us to this raw truth of our human situation, and think of how devastating these dimensions can be in the absence of therapeutic intervention.

On the other hand, I would also propose, and following Kierkegaard's "knight of faith" and "truth as objective uncertainty held fast in the most personal passionate experience"[12] that most of our joys, breakthroughs, and liberations are also traceable to our suspension in the groundlessness of existence!

And this is where presence and the sense of awe, or the humility and wonder, sense of adventure toward living become so central to human vitality. I believe what Kierkegaard is saying, and Tillich, Rank, Becker, Laing and others have elaborated, is that by staying present to our sense of groundlessness (the "truth" or "angst" of the human situation), grappling with it, learning how to co-exist with and even revel in its many dimensions, we can become paradoxical selves; fluidly centered, many dimensional yet (ironically) grounded individuals – individuals who find "ground within the groundless." This is precisely what I feel I found following the tremendously important psychotherapy I received following my brother's death. I don't remember a thing that my analyst said to me, except what I do remember was his rock solid presence, which helped to ground me. I felt that he understood me at some profound level, had been there himself, and had survived and indeed thrived in the wake of it.

This grounding, bridging, or embracing of ostensibly contradictory sides of myself helped me to open to the "MORE" of my experience – beyond my paralyzing terrors. From there on, I was able to engage my terrors with a sense of growing intrigue and eventually fascination, and this, ultimately, led to an entire career journeying through the corridors of the unknown, stumbling upon and yet expanding and deepening in the face of my anxiety. Freedom is the flipside of anxiety[13], as Rollo May put it, and anxiety the flipside of freedom.

Recapitulating then, Kierkegaard, showed that most of our (psychological) troubles are traceable to our suspension in the groundlessness, the radical mystery of existence. Please take some time to meditate on this a moment. Reflect once again on great loss, on disruption or change, on illness and abuse. Consider how powerfully they associate powerfully to this groundlessness – and are precisely why our therapy clients speak to them with references like "black holes," "shatterings," and "bottomless pits" of their experience. This experience *is* in fact a partial state of *all* our experiences, of humanity's condition – and if you don't believe it, just consider how we're all suspended right now on this tiny ball whirling through the universe. We just don't think of that condi-

[12] P. Tillich: *Kierkegaard's Existential Theology*, Part 2, (CD recording T577 123, *Paul Tillich Compact Disk Collection*), Richmond, VA: Union PSCE 1963.

[13] R. May: *Freedom and Destiny*, New York: Norton 2008.

tion very much until we're traumatized, and then, more often than not, become panic-driven. But Kierkegaard recognized that this dis-ease is only a *part* of our relationship to existence; the other part of that relationship recognizes that groundlessness opens to choice, possibility, and transcendence. It opens to participation in the *opportunity* that a non-fixated, evolving universe affords.

This was also the great insight of existential thinkers such as Viktor Frankl[14], who found possibilities in the most depraved circumstances imaginable (the Nazi death camp) – and who set the bar thereby for all despairing people everywhere to potentially meet. And it was also the great revelation of Ernest Becker, the author of *The Denial of Death* – and the marvelous contemporary expositor of Kierkegaard, who on his deathbed was asked to speak about *what death means to him*? And he said in effect, "well it means giving myself over when there's nothing left to the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos, to be used by powers we don't understand, and to be used by such powers, even if we feel somewhat misused, is one of the most exhilarating experiences a person can have."

If there is a better illustration of Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith," I'd like to know about it!

In closing, I think of Søren Kierkegaard similar to the way I think of William James[15] – as a seminal psychologist/philosopher of our past who is at one and the same time a seminal psychologist/philosopher of our future. His vision, like that of James', has barely begun to be tapped, is applicable to the broadest ranges of humanity, and has revolutionary implications for our day-to-lives; as lovers, leaders, functionaries, and those who will raise the next generation of our children. How are we going to respond to these challenges – as panic-driven robots? As ideologues and bullies? Or as pliable and disciplined mortals, flesh and blood creatures – knowing that one day we will dissipate, but also knowing just as adamantly that we are now living, that we have incredible resources for that living, and that our care and cultivation of those resources are the qualities that endure.

For the self as Kierkegaard reminds us, is a synthesis of finitude and infinitude that relates itself to itself and whose task is to become itself[16] – anything less, in my view, is less of a life.

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14 V. Frankl: *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston: Beacon Press 2006.

15 W. James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Modern Library, 1902/1936.

16 Kirkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, op. cit.