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Kierkegaard and the Modern Search for Self

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Kierkegaard and the Modern Search for Self

The notion of self-realization¹ has become a significant way to understand modern life, and it has a great impact on how we organize social life. Self-realization has become a major success in modern psychology (Jørgensen, 2002) and has spread virtually to all areas of modern society (Brinkmann, 2005). In organizational studies, the notion of self-realization has become a significant part of working life (Bovbjerg, 2005). In education, self-realization is the backbone of student-centered teaching, which is dominant in the Danish educational system (Nielsen, 2006) and has played a significant part in the formulation of lifelong learning and education (Nielsen, 2011; Saugstad, 2005). Self-realization plays a significant role in the ever-growing pile of self-help literature promoted by popular personalities like Dr. Phil and Oprah Winfrey (Jørgensen, 2005). It is even used in commercials; for example, Nike's "Free Yourself" and Microsoft's "Express Yourself" campaigns.

As will be argued below, the notion of self-realization is closely related to a particular version of the self being introduced by humanistic psychologists like Maslow, Rogers, and May in the 1960s and 1970s. Even though the intention was to critique alienation and dehumanization in Western industrial society, the consequence was that human psychologists advanced in understanding the individual as self-contained (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). Self-contained individualism is based on the idea of the subject containing the potentials for agency and autonomy in itself, emphasizing social independence and separateness (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). The idea of self-contained individualism becomes central in modern psychology and is defined as emancipatory, being critical of authorities, and the dominance of shallow traditions (Brinkmann, 2008). However, in later years, the idea of self-contained individualism has been the object of critique.

¹ Humanistic psychologists like Maslow have spoken of self-actualization; however, in this paper I will use self-actualization and self-realization as synonyms.

As Kvale (2003), argues self-contained individualism in psychology fits nicely with the logic of an expanding market economy, where the immediate fulfillment of individual needs is at the center and where the costumer is always right. Furthermore, it has been argued that self-contained individuality as developed by humanistic psychology paves the way for the entrepreneurial self, which becomes conspicuous in neoliberal thinking (Peters, 2001), laying the ground for some of the new strong academic movements in psychology, like human resource thinking (Kvale, 2003), mindfulness (Barker, 2014), and positive psychology (Binkley, 2011).

In this paper, I use Kierkegaard's analysis of the self and despair primarily as it was laid out in *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (1980) to formulate a critique of self-contained individualism. In Kierkegaard's analysis in *Sickness Unto Death*, he analyzes both the despair of not willing to be oneself and the despair of willing to be oneself; his analysis of the despair of willing to be oneself can be read as a critique of the notion of self-realization. As I argue below, Kierkegaard's understanding of subjectivity has been essentially linked to humanistic psychology (Morris, 1979), wherein the notion of self-realization is a central theme. Kierkegaard's critique of the notion of self-realization and the assumption about the subject having a private ahistorical self being detached from social life has often been neglected. In this paper, I argue that Kierkegaard, in his analysis in *Sickness Unto Death* (1980), suggests that the atomistic and individualistic understanding of the self is problematic and that he is outlining a more relational understanding of the self as an alternative in which the notion of the "other" is central. As I outline, it is specifically the consequences of having the atomistic and individualistic self as a normative ideal that prove problematic to Kierkegaard.

Humanistic psychology has laid the theoretical groundwork for the notion of individuality in psychology as being self-contained. Humanistic psychology sprung from a critique of the mainstream psychological schools of the first half of the 20th century for proclaiming a reduced model of human nature mainly formulated by psychoanalysis and behaviorism (Moss, 2001). Despite a number of differences, theorists related to humanistic psychology share a common view of what it means to be human (Bühler & Allan, 1972): To be human is to have a good nature or essence, and the actualization of this essence is the supreme end of human life. To realize human nature is to achieve health, authenticity, and fulfilment. Failure to realize this nature leads to sickness, inauthenticity, and unfulfilment (Maslow, 1962; Moss, 2001). Only fidelity to our fundamental human nature can lead to meaningful and fulfilling lives (Moss, 2001; Rogers, 1961). In many respects, self-actualization is the central concept in humanistic psychology, and it has been most clearly formulated by Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1962). Rogers has been nominated as being among the five most eminent psychologists in psychology's history (Hagenbloom, 2002), yet Maslow has been characterized in humanistic psychology's history as "the single person most responsible for creating humanistic psychology" (Hagenbloom, 2002, p. 142); it has been argued that Maslow's "theory of the self and of self actualization served as a foundation for later humanistic psychologists" (Moss, 2001, p. 15). At the center of Rogers's (1961) view of self-actualization is the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. To be inauthentic is to relate to others in terms of a persona, façade, or role and to be governed by the expectations of others rather than by one's own directedness. Being authentic involves relating to others directly rather than through a mediating persona and living according to one's own advice rather than the expectations of others. The process of becoming authentic, which, according to Rogers, is identical to the path of self-actualization, involves movement

away from the façade of “what one is not” toward “being the process which one inwardly and actually is” (Rogers, 1961, p. 175; see also Moss, 2001). Maslow (1962) understands self-actualization as the development and fulfilment of those needs or capacities inherent in human nature. In contrast to Rogers’s (1961) understanding of self-actualization as related to an inner core, for Maslow (1970), human nature consists of a harmonious unity of physiological and psychological capacities or needs that exert constant pressure on the organism for release and fulfilment. Fulfilling these needs leads to growth, health, vitality, and fulfilment, but failure to fulfil these needs leads to illness, neurosis, and diminution. As argued by Maslow,

first of all and most important of all is the strong belief that man has an essential nature of his own . . . that it has some needs, capacities, and tendencies that are in part genetically based These basic needs are on their face good or neutral rather than evil. Second, there is involved the conception that health and normal and desirable development consist in actualizing this nature, in fulfilling these potentials, and in developing into maturity along the lines that this hidden, covert, dimly seen essential nature dictates, *growing from within rather than being shaped from without* [emphasis added]. (Maslow, 1970, p. 269)

To be more specific, for Maslow (1970), there are two sorts of needs: deficit needs and growth needs. Deficit needs (for safety, security, etc.) depend on the environment for their satisfaction. Growth needs do not. Once the deficit needs have been satisfied, the growth needs (for self-actualization, creativity, ego transcendence, peak experiences, etc.) emerge of themselves and press for expression (Lethbridge, 1986; Maslow, 1970). This innermost nature is good or positive—something to be expressed rather than repressed—not because it conforms to an external moral standard but because it forms a consistent and harmonious

whole whose expression and development create a vital and dynamic unity in the subject's life (Geller, 1982; Maslow, 1962).

It is interesting that several prominent humanistic psychologists have considered Kierkegaard to be one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology. Rogers, Maslow, May, Buhler, and Bugental, to mention a few, have all used Kierkegaardian themes and have made explicit references to Kierkegaard's work (Morris, 1979). Specifically, Kierkegaard's analyses of subjectivity and self are important themes that have been used by prominent scholars within the humanistic movement. Rogers (1961) referred to Kierkegaard's concept of subjectivity as fundamental for his formulation of a client-centered approach to psychotherapy. May continuously used Kierkegaard's interpretation of subjectivity when developing his own basic principles for an existential-oriented approach to therapy (May, 1960; May, Angel, & Ellenberg, 1958). Bühler and Allen (1972) emphasized the indebtedness of humanistic psychology to Kierkegaard, especially regarding his interpretation of truth as being contained in the nature of the relationship between the subject and reality (Morris, 1979).

In the following, I argue that Kierkegaard's analysis of the self and the concept of despair introduces another approach to the self that is different from the one found in humanistic psychology. Rather than seeing the self as something organic, something universally and privately given in the individual to develop, he presented a dialectical and a relational understanding of the self, wherein the notion of the other is central. Kierkegaard's analysis of the self in *Sickness Unto Death* (1980) has been termed negative in the sense that Kierkegaard was analyzing modalities of inauthenticity (modalities of despair) to open for reflections on how it is possible to outline how a more genuine subjectivity (Theunissen, 2005). Central to Kierkegaard's analysis are two modalities when it comes to despair: the

despair of not willing to be oneself and the despair of willing to be oneself. In my interpretation of his analysis of not willing to be oneself, Kierkegaard describes a kind of despair, wherein the subject identifies with existing standards to obtain self-knowledge and primarily evaluates him- or herself through achievement and functionality, a kind of despair that I have chosen to call the despair of spiritlessness. The second modality of despair is called the despair of willing to be oneself and is, in Kierkegaard's analysis, the futility of our self-willed striving to posit ourselves as a self by our own power. I have chosen to term this modality of despair self-contained individuality. Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* (1980) is central in the outline below; however, analyses from Kierkegaard's *Concept of Dread* (1967)² are also used.

When it comes to Kierkegaard's inauthenticity analysis, the despair of not willing to be oneself has nearly always been used in existential and humanistic literature (Theunissen, 2005). Heidegger's analysis of inauthenticity ("das Man") is especially strongly inspired by Kierkegaard's analysis of the despair of not willing to be oneself (Theunissen, 2005, p. 29). Heidegger's analysis of inauthenticity (das Man) significantly influences how humanistic psychology understands inauthenticity and authenticity (see, e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). On the other hand, Kierkegaard's analysis of the other modality, the despair of willing to be oneself, has often been neglected. Below, I argue that Kierkegaard's analysis can be read as a critical analysis of the self in humanistic psychology and, hence, a critique of self-contained individualism.

² In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard made an explicit reference to the analysis made in *The Concept of Dread* (Kierkegaard, 1967, p. 44). In both *The Concept of Dread* (1967) and *Sickness Unto Death* (1980), Kierkegaard used the same set of concepts (the enclosed self, the sudden, the defiant, and the demonic). I use examples from both books. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to make a systematic comparison of Kierkegaard's analyses of despair and dread.

The Self as Dialectical and Relational

Only in one place in his work does Kierkegaard provide a concise definition of how to understand the self: in *Sickness Unto Death* (1980). The definition of the self is described at the beginning of the book:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, a short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self. (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 13)

As argued by Theunissen (1981), Kierkegaard's concise definition of the self with which he begins *Sickness Unto Death* (1980) is the presentation of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair's result. It is not the investigation itself. An account of the investigation is given in the next paragraph. Kierkegaard's definition of the self is complex and has given rise to multiple interpretations. My aim is not to discuss all the various, already-existing interpretations but to develop an interpretation of the central components of Kierkegaard's definition of the self. The self is not a possession of the individual, a substance or an essence, but is fundamentally a dialectical relationship between opposite existential elements. In the above definition by Kierkegaard, the human being is not described as a self but as a synthesis

of opposite elements (the finite/the infinite, temporal/eternal, etc.). Despite the fact that the concepts of the synthesis were taken from idealistic thinking (e.g., from Fichte), the opposite elements of the synthesis should be regarded as the individual's conditions of existence (Moe Rasmussen, 1983).³ At the same time, the opposite elements of the synthesis hold a description of the human conditions for living and their embedded possibilities.

I will briefly outline my interpretation of these opposite elements (for further elaboration, see Moe Rasmussen, 1983; Theunissen, 1981). The human being is bodily founded (the physical), though it has a psychological part as well (here interpreted as the ability to think, remember, imagine things, etc.). Furthermore, we as human beings have certain skills, we are born into certain social positions, and so on (the finite/necessity); however, by means of our imaginative skills, we have the opportunity to go beyond this finiteness. We have the ability to imagine that things could be different, the ability to reflect, and so on (the infinite/freedom). Last but not least, we exist in time: We are existing human beings who live in time (temporality), but we are in a position to go beyond the concrete time by reflecting and by imagining ourselves in the future, being what we would like to become or what we might have become (the eternal). My point is not to scrutinize the contents of this relationship but to maintain that it is all about opposite relations. This opposite structure of possibilities is a double-edged sword because it allows the possibility of neglecting one of the opposite elements. The point of departure for Kierkegaard was that we find ourselves as subjects "in this specific concretion of relations" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 68). Like other existential thinkers (e.g., Heidegger), the subject finds itself influenced by the subject's history; however, Kierkegaard's analysis has a stronger focus on the dispositions and

³ It is important to understand that Kierkegaard's project of the self was not about self-consciousness; rather, it must be seen as a project of existential character (Theunissen, 1981, pp. 414–415).

potentials of the subject compared to, for example, Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein* (Theunissen, 2005, p. 7).

The Self and Despair and the Misrelation

The paradox in Kierkegaard's analysis of the self is that it is primarily an analysis of despair, which Kierkegaard defines as not being a self or, more precisely, the misrelationship between the opposite existential elements mentioned above. In his approach to analyzing the self, Kierkegaard uses the negativistic method, meaning that he spends most space in *Sickness Unto Death* (1980) analyzing different ways of explaining how it is not possible to realize oneself (Theunissen, 2005). If we should try to translate Kierkegaard's methodological approach to analyzing the self through despair to contemporary thinking, his analytical strategy can be compared to using deconstruction as an analytical approach, though at an existential level. The concept of deconstruction has been used among others, such as by Derrida, as a way to destabilize and suspend what we take for granted about language and experience (Norris, 1982). Even though Kierkegaard does not use the notion of deconstruction, his analysis has the same character of destabilizing or suspending what we take for granted about autonomy and self-contained individuality. As is outlined below, to Kierkegaard, the analysis of despair is the deconstructive process of destabilizing ideas about self-contained individuality. It can be argued that the aim of Kierkegaard's project is developing a premise for openness to the other and to the relation with the other, hence making genuine dialogue possible (Theunissen, 1981).

It is important to underline that when Kierkegaard talks about despair it is not, first and foremost, an emotional state he is talking about. Our everyday understanding of despair seems to involve an emotional state, but this is not necessarily what Kierkegaard addresses. Despair is misrelating the self's relation to itself. As Theunissen (1981) and Habermas (1992)

argue, Kierkegaard is strongly influenced by Hegel's understanding of the self. According to Theunissen (1980), a central dimension of Hegel's understanding is that "Hegel grounds the entire logic on the hypothesis that all that can be itself only in relation, indeed exists only as this relation to 'its other'" (p. 29). Thus, a central contrast for Hegel (and Kierkegaard) is between the understanding of the self as having the potential for developing the self by itself—as indicated by self-contained individualism—and the understanding of the self as being constituted in relation to the other. In Kierkegaard's work, the notion of despair is closely related to the fundamental dimension of the self as being constituted by something other than itself. Kierkegaard argues that one can only be oneself if the individual recognizes that the self is given by something other than itself. The fundamental structure of the self is a self-relationship with a fundamental structure of the being-in-oneself-in-another (Habermas, 1995, 1992). In Kierkegaard's case, it is the constitution of God that is the center of the being-in-oneself-in-another. As Kierkegaard puts it,

where, then, does the despair come from? From the relation in which the synthesis relates itself, inasmuch as God, who constituted man a relation, releases it from his hand, as it were—that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself. (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 16).

Kierkegaard is a Christian religious thinker, and he introduces an existential, religious, and dialectical analysis of our existence in the world. My interpretation of Kierkegaard will elaborate on the religious Christian dimension as a part of Kierkegaard's critical analysis of our existence in secularized modernity.⁴ This interpretation of Kierkegaard (Theunissen, 1981, p. 389) is in the tradition of Hegel, Marx, and critical theory, wherein despair is closely linked to alienation characterized by capitalist rationalization and of the

⁴ See Fletcher, 1982; Kierkegaard, 1978; Nielsen, 2003; Nordentoft, 1977; and Shrag, 1995 for a discussion about Kierkegaard and modernity.

individual particularized in secularized modernity (Habermas, 1995, p. 189). Inspired by critical theory (Habermas, 1992, 1995), a more worldly and secularized interpretation of despair wherein the relationship that is fundamental in despair (the misrelationship) is not (only) to God but to the self as embedded in intersubjectivity.⁵ If we follow the notion of Kierkegaard's understanding of the self as being-in-oneself-in-another, the self can succeed in being its own self only insofar as its self-position relates to another through which it has itself been posited: One escapes despair only to the extent that one rests oneself transparently in the power that has established it (Habermas, 1995, 1992). If we turn to the notion of despair, it can be argued that Kierkegaard analyzes a deep-rooted understanding in Western modernity about the self as having the potential for constituting itself. Through a critical analysis of despair, Kierkegaard argues that this understanding of the self, and how the modern self is constituted, is problematic in many ways.

The Dynamic Process of Despair

In the following, I shortly move deeper into the dynamic process of despair and the two basic modalities that Kierkegaard (1980) presents to clarify his analyses a bit more. The central idea is that what Kierkegaard defines as dialectical oppositions (the finite/the temporal/necessity vs. the infinite/the eternal/freedom) are being divided into two separate ways of living, whereby only one part of the opposite existential dimension is being lived while the other is being "repressed," to use a Freudian term. One line of despair, the one I call the despair of spiritlessness (the despair of not being willing to be oneself), is the kind of despair wherein persons identify with the finite, bodily, and so on, as well as parts of the existential opposites, yet the despair of willing to be oneself involves persons identifying with a solipsistic and fantastic self that is not grounded in everyday life.

⁵ See the critique formulated by Habermas (1995) of Theunissen and Kierkegaard's solely Christian interpretation of the "other" (p. 190; see also Theunissen, 1981, pp. 403, 419).

Functional Sociality: The Despair of *Aandløshed* (Spiritlessness)

It is in his identification of the despair of not willing to be oneself or the despair of spiritlessness with the values of present society that Kierkegaard finds his starting point. It is important to underline that Kierkegaard analyzes despair by focusing on developing an ethical selfhood as a fundamental dimension of human existence being constituted through a relational understanding of the self, and in that respect, spiritlessness understood as being governed by social conformity is problematic (Marsh, 1995). Kierkegaard's concept of spiritlessness describes a special relationship that an individual has with the world and to the self. In this understanding of the world, the individual experiences the world as already constituted. This also means the individual associates with immediate possibilities and stays unaware of the potential and the possibilities embedded in existence. The individual identifies with existing standards to obtain self-knowledge and primarily evaluates him- or herself through achievement and functionality. Thus, the object of self-knowledge is how the individual lives up to the functional standards offered by various institutions, such as the state, the nation, the workplace, and so on. The individual's self-knowledge is in this way easily connected to the institutions that apparently offer points of identification for the self. Furthermore, Kierkegaard stresses that an individual evaluates him-or herself on the basis of achievement in connection with these institutions. Therefore, in this context, spirit should not to be confused with achievement.

Spiritlessness, which is Kierkegaard's designation of social functionality, is the point zero of despair, so to speak, because the standards made for our self-knowledge do not include a connection to the concrete human existence and its possibilities for transformation. In some ways, this is an inhuman sociality. Kierkegaard very appropriately names such a spiritless human being "a talking-machine," "a current coin," and so on (Kierkegaard, 1967,

p. 85). These metaphors disclose that the relationship with the surrounding world is unproblematic, functional, a mechanical matter of course, and that everyone is exchangeable and flexible. The motivation of the spiritless individual is a search for security and convenience (i.e., a search for something that the person in question can identify without having to confront his or her existence; this may be a job, a marriage, or artistic or intellectual performances). In this way, modern culture makes strong identification objects available so the individual is “protected” from being confronted with him- or herself and personal despair (Kierkegaard, 1980, pp. 43–44).

If we follow Kierkegaard’s analysis of this matter, the problem with functional sociality is that it is negatively grounded. Basically, functional sociality is negatively constituted by the fact that the individual tries to escape relating to existence and the transforming potentials embedded in relating to the basic existential conditions. Therefore, Kierkegaard describes modern society as a sort of dead silence wherein all internal life is extinct, despite the functionalities continuing (Kierkegaard, 1978). An individual can identify with work, with being married, or with being a parent or a consumer; however, the problem is that these positions do not appear as positive possibilities that the individual has chosen as active possibilities in the individual’s own life. The point is that functional sociality is vulnerable to events that cannot obviously be explained within a functionalistic discourse; particularly, events involving a loss are meaningless in a functional perspective.

The Leap: Despair in Weakness

The dynamic of despair is disclosed when something happens that makes an individual incapable of identifying with a world that appears obvious and unproblematic. The individual begins to regard him- or herself as something different, something that does not

necessarily fit into the given functional settings. Kierkegaard describes the beginning of this dynamic process as being related to the individual's experience of a loss.

It is important to emphasize that the leap Kierkegaard describes is a leap away from relating to one's existence in a concrete manner. The person chooses to carry the loss and make it subject to identification. The individual no longer identifies with given performances, as in the functional sociality, but with the loss or the experience of loss. The individual becomes reserved and withdraws with his or her loss (in despair over the person's own weakness). Thus, to Kierkegaard, *indesluttethed* (enclosing reserve) becomes a central category. Enclosing reserve has no substance because the individual identifies with the loss as an event and not with the contents of the loss. The experience of loss actually covers another layer of despair. Here we have a description of the self as escaping from the conditions of functional, everyday life. Therefore, Kierkegaard (1967) characterizes enclosing reserve by saying that it "does not shut itself up *with* something, but shuts *itself* up; and in this lies the mystery of existence, the fact that unfreedom makes a prisoner precisely of itself" (p. 110). This quotation describes enclosing reserve as a condition of isolation. Thus, the point of enclosing reserve is that the individual creates the self-enclosedness because it constitutes a defense against being open and relating to existence and the individual's surroundings.

The problem of the self-enclosed individual is the unwillingness to open up to or to be engaged in a communicative relationship with the immediate surroundings. Kierkegaard regarded enclosing reserve as dumbness (i.e., a variant of noncommunication, like the spiritlessness), and it can therefore be considered another kind of monologue: "We say of a person that he will not come out with it. The shut-up is precisely the mute; the spoken word is precisely the saving thing, that which delivers from the mute abstraction of the shut-up"

(Kierkegaard, 1967, p. 111).⁶ The self-enclosed individual does not engage in a dialogue with the immediate surroundings but keeps in the background. Naturally, a kind of conversation takes place, but the self-enclosed individual does not engage in this dialogue. According to Kierkegaard, the negativistic dialectic of despair—of which the enclosed reserve is a part—develops itself to the next dimension, which is self-sufficient individuality.

Self-Sufficient Individuality: The Despair of Willing to be Oneself

The last step of the dialectic of despair is how despair potentiates itself into self-sufficient individuality. This potent kind of self-sufficiency is somewhat close to the self-image cherished in modernity and close to the self-realized version's ideal of humanistic psychology. According to Kierkegaard, self-sufficiency is the absolute kind of despair and the absolute kind of self-deception, as the individual cannot reach a self-image on the basis of the self alone. Pleasurable autonomy and self-worship is based on nothing. Kierkegaard (1980) describes self-sufficient individuality like this:

The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and delight. On closer examination, however, it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment. Ultimately, this is arbitrarily based upon the self itself. (p. 69)

The phrase “a king without a country” underlines the duplicity between self-overestimation and self-nihilism. This means a very potent self-image can be completely reversed to self-destruction. The point Kierkegaard was making is that despairing develops a

⁶ In this quote from Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Dread* (1980), *det indesluttede* (the enclosed self) is translated as “shut-up.” In Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* (1967), *det indesluttede* (shut-up) is translated as “the enclosed self.” In this article I use the term “the enclosed self” for the Danish *indesluttede*.

self-image that only regards the surroundings in relation to itself and in relation to the desires and pleasures of this self-image. This is a self-image for which the only frame of reference is the individual itself.

Consequently, the self in despair is always building only castles in the air, is only shadowboxing. All these imaginatively constructed virtues make it look splendid; like oriental poetry, they fascinate for a moment; such self-command, such imperturbability, such ataraxia, etc. practically border on the fabulous. Yes, they really do, and the basis of the whole thing is nothing. In *despair* the self wants to enjoy the total satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself; it wants to have the honour of this poetic, masterly construction, the way it has understood it self. (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 69)

In Kierkegaard's analysis of the despair of willing to be oneself (self-sufficient individuality), one can find the basic gestalt of self-contained individuality, namely, the self insisting on being its own master. Kierkegaard uses the gestalt of the demonic when he characterized what the consequences of self-sufficient individuality might be. In this context, Kierkegaard uses the ancient Greek meaning of the word demonic as denoting the *overmenneske* (superhuman).⁷ According to Kierkegaard, the demonic consists of two dimensions: *det pludselige* (the sudden) and *det indholdstomme* (the vacuous; Kierkegaard, 1967, pp. 115–119).

Det pludselige (the sudden) describes how an individual's self-understanding is guided by that individual's moods, sudden impulses, and loose thoughts when acting and

⁷ In this context, it is interesting that Nietzsche's work was significant in Maslow's work (see, e.g., Maslow, 1970, p. 201; 1971, p. 37). Like Nietzsche, Maslow was concerned with integrating the Apollonian and the Dionysian sides of human existence (Maslow, 1971, p. 346). In May's (1969) historical and psychological analysis of the daimonic in "Love and the Daimonic" (pp. 122–154), he was inspired by Plato's "Eros is a daimon" and argued that "The daimonic refers to the power of nature rather the superego, and is beyond good and evil" (p. 124).

making decisions. Kierkegaard (1967) writes the following about the sudden: It is “completely detached from continuity, whether it be with the past or with the future” (p. 117). The sudden results in an apparent commitment to the situation. This should be understood as meaning that, at discretion, the individual sometimes takes part in life and sometimes not. Kierkegaard (1967) designates this kind of commitment “apparent continuity” (p. 115). Apparent continuity and the sudden depict a kind of atomic autonomy, which is an essential characteristic of the self-sufficient individuality described by Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard seems to be close to describing the self-actualized human being as it is portrayed by Maslow (1968), who summarizes the self-actualized person as follows: “. . . he has within him a pressure toward unity of personality, toward spontaneous expressiveness, toward full individuality and identity, toward seeing the truth rather than being blind, toward being creative, toward being good, and a lot else” (p. 155).

The other dimension of the demonical is the vacuous. However, in Kierkegaard’s (1980) analysis of this concept, there seems to be a part of what he terms the *Indesluttethed* (enclosed reserve; p. 119). According to Kierkegaard, the vacuous describes that the demonic has a strong focus on form rather than content. This is similar to Kierkegaard’s (1967) analysis of the despair of weakness (see above), where the enclosing reserve “does not shut itself up *with* something, but shuts *itself* up” (p. 110). According to Kierkegaard (1980), “Now when I take into account the vacuous, the tedious, this in turn reflects upon the content, and shut-upness indicated the form which corresponds to this content” (p. 119). I return to the vacuous in the next paragraph.

Kierkegaard and the Private, Atomistic Self

Kierkegaard’s critique is aimed at a critique of the self as being atomic, private, and having the potential to actualize by itself when it comes to the despair of willing to be oneself

or self-contained individuality. This kind of understanding of the self is central in humanistic psychology. For both Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1962), certain features of the atomic individual become the model for normative psychology's foundation and goal of (Geller, 1982). The fundamental problem, according to Kierkegaard, is that the self is neither an authentic true self, as suggested by Rogers (1961), nor the fulfilment of positive needs, as outlined by Maslow (1962); rather, it is the negation of a relational self whereby the individual is constituted by the other (humans or God). When Kierkegaard outlines that the consequence of self-sufficiency is the sudden, he is arguing for taking oneself as the sole premise for one's decisions and activities. If we take a critical perspective on this idea, it can be argued that the ethical dimension of individuality disrupts social life, as it does not provide any shared ethical ground for human activities (Løvlie, 1984). If every subject has personal ethical standards and personal perspective on what action might be ethical, a shared dimension is lacking to enable subjects to evaluate what action might be ethically right. MacIntyre (2004) baptizes this tendency where the self is its own master and rules based on its own "pleasure and delight" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 69), emotivism. Emotivism is a doctrine that proclaims all moral judgements are nothing but expressions of preferences; expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character (MacIntyre, 2004, p. 12); and argues that emotivism has been embodied in our culture. As indicated in the quotes above, Kierkegaard agrees with MacIntyre's (2004) notion of emotivism, arguing that the legitimacy of the individual's activities would be "... arbitrarily based upon the self itself" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 69). The other consequence Kierkegaard outlines as a central dimension of the process of willing to be oneself is *det indholdsløse* (the vacuous). In his analysis of despair, self-sufficient individuality is in reality nothing but the negation of a central dimension of the subject's existence. A central dimension in

Kierkegaard's analysis is that this striving for willing to be oneself is in reality defiance or negation of a fundamental structure of the being-in-oneseif-in-another. The rock bottom of despair is defiance, which is actually the basis for all of the steps of despair. It is defiance in relation to understanding the self as relationship of the self's fundamental structure as being-oneseif-in-another. From this perspective, self-actualization does not include a concern for others, but insofar as these relationships are important to the journey of self-actualization, they are valuable only as a means to this end. The other exists only as a vehicle for one's fulfilment. Thus, through the despair of willing to be oneself Kierkegaard provides a description of the strained search for a self (i.e., a foundation) that does not exist. The numerous contemporary self-actualization discourses characterized by a search for something that could be described as a self are misguided according to Kierkegaard's analysis. In these discourses, the self is an inscrutable object for worship, research, legitimacy, and aim for a great deal of human activity. According to Kierkegaard's analysis of despair, the foundation of the atomistic self is actually based on a negation of the being-in-oneseif-in-another. This search for a self and the ambition to actualize the atomic self as a private and individual process is futile. Hence, it is a fire that cannot be extinguished but is where the search for self is potentiated, if we are to stick to Kierkegaard's terminology.

Kierkegaard's Christianity and Despair

A critical dimension to Kierkegaard's analysis of despair is related to his understanding of Christianity. To Kierkegaard, Christianity and living faith hold a critical potential for transgressing self-contained individualism by developing a possible understanding for otherness. How Kierkegaard sees Christianity as having critical potentials will be outlined shortly, and in that relationship, a more secular perspective on Kierkegaard's claim will be outlined.

If we go through some of the psychological literature dealing with Kierkegaard, there has been a variety of different interpretations of the relationship between Kierkegaard's psychological analysis and his Christian thinking. To Kierkegaard, psychology and Christianity are two sides of the same coin. Christianity and faith are the solutions to the problem of human existence, and according to Kierkegaard, most of his contemporaries did not understand Christianity because they did not comprehend human existence profoundly enough (Evans, 1990). In this respect, the psychologist becomes important as a "spiritual physician" who cures self-deception and helps the patient move toward greater self-understanding. However, a greater self-understanding does not necessarily lead to Christian faith because self-understanding can lead to defiance of God as easily as it can lead to the living faith (Theunissen, 1981; Evans, 1990). Different positions within psychology have read Kierkegaard's psychological analysis, and hence Kierkegaard's Christian perspective, differently. Mainstream positivistic psychology has mostly ignored Kierkegaard's psychological analysis, being repelled by both Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity and Christianity as being biased and unscientific (Reber, 2006). In later years, various psychological researchers were critical to the strong influence of positivism in psychology, and in this context, Kierkegaard's psychological analysis and his Christian approach has been used to make the argument that values (e.g., being a Christian) are always a part of psychology, and we as psychologists need to make explicit which values inform our approach to psychology (Slife & Reber, 2009). In this respect, Kierkegaard's example is an example to follow because he is explicit about the values that inform his analysis (Slife & Reber, 2009). Inspired by Sartre and Heidegger's use of Kierkegaard (Theunissen, 1981; Podmore, 2009), as mentioned above, humanistic psychologists like Maslow, May, and Rogers introduce Kierkegaard to psychology through focusing on subjectivity, autonomy, and the idea of

realizing the person's authentic self. However, the Christian side of Kierkegaard's psychological methodology is often marginalized as either being a historical coincidence or being neglected altogether (Nordentoft, 2006; Theunissen, 1981, see Oath for an exception).

In line with this paper's focus on the relational and intersubjective dimensions of Kierkegaard, I will shortly outline how the relationship between religion (Christianity) and psychology (science) can be understood as a premise for developing an understanding of the relational self and dialogue self. In that endeavor, Derrida⁸ and Theunissen's (1981) analysis of Kierkegaard's relationship with Christianity will be used. Even though Derrida and Theunissen are very different researchers, they both see the critical potentials in Kierkegaard's religious thinking, and they both seem to acknowledge that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair is aimed at developing an openness to the other. As will be outlined below, for Derrida, Kierkegaard's Christianity points at paradigmatic paradox in human existence that potentially transcends self-contained individualism.

Kierkegaard makes a strong differentiation between Christianity and Christendom. To Kierkegaard, Christendom is the institutionalized version of Christianity being dolefully influenced by Hegelianism, where it takes no personal effort to become a Christian. However, Christianity based on the living faith is an entirely different matter. The essence of Kierkegaard's understanding of faith is outlined in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1983), where the biblical story of God testing Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his and Sarah's only child Isaac to God is described. The narrative about sacrifice is the central theme in *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham is caught in an unresolvable dilemma between being faithful to a societal-based principal ethic where Abraham will be considered a murderer if he

⁸ Both Derrida and Kierkegaard are critical about Hegel's totalizing dialectic, and they both have an affection for the singular and the fragment-like (Caputo, 1995, p. 216).

scarifies his son, and, from a religious perspective, if Abraham does not comply to the call of God, he will sacrifice his faith. In the dilemma Kierkegaard outlines in *Fear and Trembling*, faith cannot be legitimized by giving good reasons, and hence it is also written by the pseudonym *Johannes de Silentio* (Johan the silent). It is not possible in any way to rationally legitimize sacrificing your own son. This religious narrative being central to Kierkegaard's understanding of faith has been interpreted in numerous ways; however, in this context, Caputo's Derridian-inspired interpretation will be used to make more sense of how Kierkegaard's approach to faith can be accessible for us today (Caputo, 1995; Derrida, 1992). According to Derrida, Kierkegaard's biblical God does not need to mean God in a strict religious sense but should be understood as an image of the wholly other. The image of God's mind as the wholly other to Abraham can be compared to the mind of every other we meet in everyday life: It could be our friends and family whose otherness transcends us like Kierkegaard's image of Yahweh's transcendence of Abraham (Caputo, 1995). In this interpretation developed by Derrida, what Kierkegaard thinks is religious is not confined to religion, but is more profoundly related to questions about ethics and responsibility. In Caputo's (1995) interpretation, the story of Abraham is the story of my obligation—in my singularity—to the absolute singularity of the other and in a person's singularity as being the very core of what can be considered ethical (Derrida, 1992). Through Kierkegaard's story about Abraham and faith, Derrida argues there is another lesson to be learned about the ethical. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard (1983) argues there is different understanding of ethics at play, namely that the call being raised by the individualized other is as fundamental as the claims founded on an ethics based on general principles being rationally validated and justified in the public realm. According to Derrida's analysis of *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1983), ethics understood as a set of general rules does not necessarily apply

when faced with the call of, or request by, the other. According to Derrida, what Kierkegaard is claiming by the narrative of Abraham is that every other is wholly other and that we as individuals stand in the same position as Abraham in our everyday life: We are caught in the paradoxical dilemma between following ethics as a set of rules for how we should act on the one hand and responding to the call or request from the individualized other in a particular situation on other hand. The paradox in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1983) is that both ethical approaches relativize each other and call for responsible actions in relation to the other. The central idea is that the paradox, which for Kierkegaard is constituted by Christianity, develops the potential for an openness to the other. It is in this perspective that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair should be seen where the misconception of individual self as being self-contained is always present and is ready to rule how we understand ourselves and others. In Kierkegaard's analysis, we must constantly deconstruct the idea of self-containment in everyday life. According to Kierkegaard (1980), to realize oneself is to be in the process of constantly annihilating the possibility of despair: "if it is to be true that a man is not in despair, he must annihilate the possibility every instant" (p. 145). Therefore, being oneself succeeds exclusively in constantly carrying out the annihilation of the possibility of despair. Theunissen (1981) has argued that Kierkegaard's psychological analysis of despair as an ongoing deconstructive process of self-containment is the decisive premise enabling intersubjective space to be the dynamic in dialogical self-becoming of the self and the other (Theunissen, 1981).

Kierkegaard and Communication

Kierkegaard's main focus is analyzing despair, and he does not deliberate on communication and dialogue as a coherent theme in his work; however, he hints at revelation through communication as an important aspect of human self-actualization. This is in line

with Kierkegaard's basic understanding of the self as relational and being-in-oneself-in-another. According to Kierkegaard, the self can be successful at being its own self only insofar as its self-position relates to another through which it has been posited. This self-position as a kind of self-realization is only achieved through communication:

Freedom is constantly communication (it will do no harm to take into account even the religious significance of this word) The shut-up is precisely the mute; the spoken word is precisely the saving thing, that which delivers from the mute abstraction of the shut-up. (Kierkegaard, 1967, pp. 110–111).

According to Kierkegaard, the fundamental structure of being-in-oneself-in-another means that one can only free oneself from a narcissistic, self-enclosed selfhood and return to one's own selfhood by engaging in a Christian faith-inspired communication with the other. Again, from a more mundane perspective, it is interesting that Kierkegaard sees freedom (and, hence, self-actualization) as realized through communication with the other and not through turning away from sociality. In Kierkegaard's (1967) words,

revelation in this context is the good, for the revelation is the first utterance of salvation. Here applies the old saying, that if one dare utter the word, the enchantment of the magic spell is broken, and hence it is that the somnambulist wakes when his name is called. (p. 113)⁹

It could be argued that Kierkegaard establishes a position from which it is possible to take a critical stance to understand alienation as something that has its own logic and not

⁹ In Kierkegaard's Danish text, there are no quotation marks around the word *Aabenbarelse* (revelation). However, for unknown reasons, there are quotation marks around revelation in the English translation. I have left out the quotation marks. In a note, Kierkegaard (1967) emphasises that other words could have been used in place of revelation: "I have used the word revelation deliberately. Here I might have called the good transparency" (p. 113).

merely a consequence of something happening in social practice. However, it is not something that can be understood as being separate from a specific cultural practice.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard's analysis of self and despair might appear to be a narrative of decay. However, this is not the understanding I have tried to communicate here. On the contrary, the process of despair should be understood in the way that the individual should come to terms with being-in-oneself-in-another; that is, to come to terms with the conditions that genuinely and concretely constitute the basis for the individual's existence. Therefore, the dynamic center of rotation in the dynamic process of despair is different from the traditional idea of *bildung* (education) in which the individual collects new sensory experiences and thereby continuously expands the recognition of the self and the surrounding world. According to Kierkegaard, the process of self-realization describes a tendency to deal with the concrete conditions of existence, which precisely consist of a number of discrepancies. The understanding of the self Kierkegaard introduces is closely connected to a kind of radical and critical existentialism (Matustik, 1995). Here, the choice of the self is a matter of choosing oneself as a socially situated individual in a concrete practice. Thus, the point of the dynamic process of despair is that the individual comes to terms with being a concrete creature already existing in a certain concrete society. As a result, in a real and concrete way, the individual has the potential to develop the conditions for personal existence. The relationship between using (or not using) the given options places the individual in an ethical dilemma, meaning that the individual faces the opportunity to do the right thing to the concrete other. By a radical self-choice, which is the potential opportunity for the negativistic process of despair, a subject is not positioned as a substantial but as a performative ethical creature. The individual can only be ethical through action. This means the individual has to connect concrete societal

participation with ethical individual reflection. The concrete dialectics between the basic categories (the obvious, the traditional, and the societal vs. the individual, the particular, the exceptional, etc.), of which the negativistic dialectics are expressed by despair, give the individual the opportunity to genuinely come to terms with oneself (i.e., constituting the self as a category of action). Kierkegaard's point was that ethical action cannot be legitimized by an already existing practice. In this case, ethics cannot be based on the existing morality in society or a predisposition in the individual; it can only be based on action and its consequence in relation to the concrete other. In other words, ethics implies a choice in which we have to act with great uncertainty or, in the words of Kierkegaard (1983), where one needs to act with "fear and trembling," because there is no (prior) given social or individual legitimacy for the actions made by the individual (p.92).

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