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The Sickness unto death: Søren Kierkegaard's categories of despair

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THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH
SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S CATEGORIES OF DESPAIR

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of Counseling
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by
Michael A. Harsh

May 1997

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of
Nebraska at Omaha.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines and explicates Søren Kierkegaard's categories of despair as found in *The Sickness Unto Death*, in order to clarify his psychological framework and make his analysis more accessible to practitioners of psychotherapy. In so doing, this dissertation deciphers Kierkegaard's theory in depth and presents and critiques the views of other theorists who have referenced Kierkegaard's categories of despair. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the role and limitations of a therapist who operates using Kierkegaard's schema.

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DEDICATION

To My Friend
Keri Jo Thomas
1959–1995

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I

INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard "gave us some of the best empirical analyses of the human condition ever fashioned by man's mind" (Becker, 1973, p. 67). Yet the study of Kierkegaard from a psychological perspective has centered predominantly around his analysis of the concept of anxiety (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980). However, his "psychological" work (so termed by Kierkegaard), *The Sickness Unto Death*, is much less discussed and referenced in psychological literature. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard outlines his theory of the self in relation to his categories of despair, wherein despair is a "disease" of the self. "Kierkegaard . . . analyzes not only anxiety but particularly the depression and despair which result from the individual's self-estrangement, an estrangement he proceeds to classify in its different forms and degrees of severity" (May, 1994, p. 19). The reason this particular aspect of humanity's condition, as illuminated by Kierkegaard, is less utilized in the field of psychology may be in large part due to the complexity of his extensive categorizing of despair and of all its facets. Kierkegaard is often seen as an inaccessible author because of the complexity of his ideas.

Thus, after providing the reader with sufficient background to place Kierkegaard in time and amongst his contemporaries and followers, this paper will endeavor to accomplish two tasks. First, this paper will present a coherent and elucidating interpretation of Kierkegaard's categories of despair, providing accessibility to Kierkegaard's concepts, especially to those who study psychology rather than philosophy. Because the categories of despair are

related to the nature of the self, the nature of the self and its relation to despair will be explored in section III. This will then be followed in section IV by an explication and interpretation of the categories of despair as set out in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Second, the interpretations of the text by others in, or concerned with, the psychological field will be presented and critiqued.

I think this careful analysis of *The Sickness Unto Death* is an important undertaking because few works touch upon *The Sickness Unto Death* or make sense of the categories of despair from a psychological perspective. It is with this in mind that I (unlike Becker) will attempt to “decode Kierkegaard’s breathtakingly penetrating and often difficult-to-understand analysis of the human condition” (Becker, 1973, p. 68).

II BACKGROUND

Kierkegaard wrote two principle works on psychology, both of which he designated as “psychological” in the subtitle to each of the works: *The Concept of Anxiety, A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation of the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980) and *The Sickness Unto Death, A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980). For Kierkegaard, born almost exactly forty-three years before the birth of Sigmund Freud (and dying just six months before Freud’s birth) the meaning of the term “psychology” was not so much a description of mental states as much as a “philosophical anthropology” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 173). What Kierkegaard called

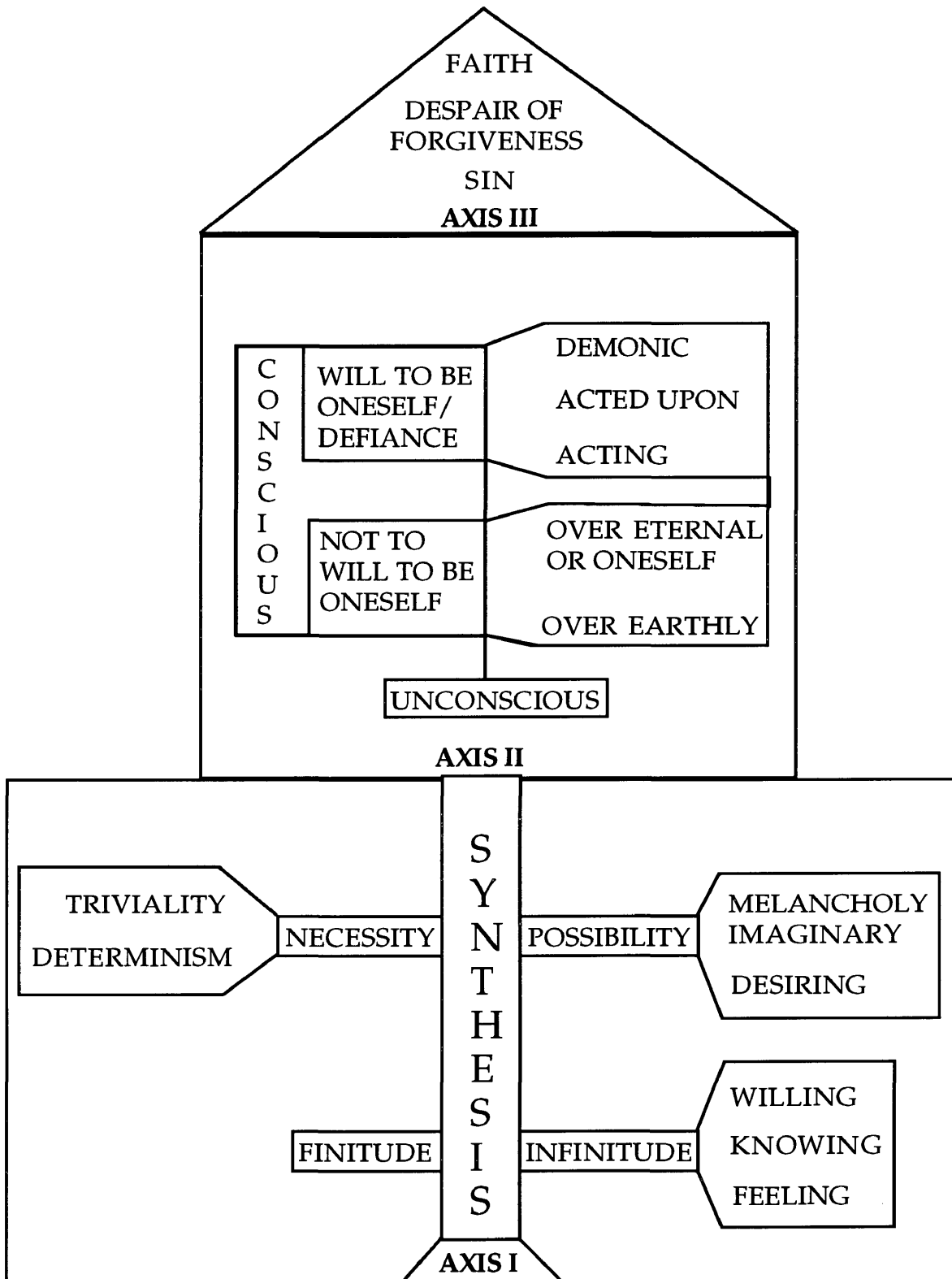
“psychology” we might now call “depth psychology” in the tradition of theorists such as Freud and Jung who were keenly interested, at a deep level, in what it means to have a “psyche” or “self.” Psychology (i.e. the study of that psyche) proceeds from an initial understanding of the very nature of being a human being, with mental states being analyzed in accordance with such understanding.

This is why I think it is important to look at Kierkegaard’s understanding, since it is a foundation for a complete analysis of the human condition. Certainly Kierkegaard did not intend to write a nineteenth century equivalent of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Nonetheless, Kierkegaard’s theory of what constitutes a human being leads to a coherent and useful vision for diagnostic and treatment purposes just as did Freud’s id/ego/super ego vision of the self. “Though Kierkegaard was not a clinical psychologist in the contemporary sense, his primary aims as a psychologist must decidedly be viewed as therapeutic” (Evans, 1995, p. 77). And, while Kierkegaard did not practice any sort of therapy on others, it is interesting that many of Kierkegaard’s ideas appear in the work of Freud, who, though he did not know Kierkegaard’s work directly (May, 1994), was part of the same intellectual climate.

The fact that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud all dealt with the same problems of anxiety, despair, fragmentalized personality, and the symptoms of these bears out our earlier thesis that psychoanalysis and the existential approach to human crises were called forth by, and were answers to, the same problems. It does not detract, of course, from the

genius of Freud to point out that probably almost all of the specific ideas which later appeared in psychoanalysis could be found in Nietzsche in greater breadth and in Kierkegaard in greater depth. (May, 1994, p. 33)

In order to help the reader follow the intricate paths of Kierkegaard's categories of despair, the following diagram has been provided. It shall appear again at the beginning of each of the three principle categories of despair, which I call "axes" to help the reader understand the relationships of the numerous subcategories on each axis.



III

THE SELF AND DESPAIR

Kierkegaard writes of a variety of psychological states, such as anxiety and melancholy. The state or condition he refers to as “despair” is the “highest” of the psychological states in the sense that despair is the state which must be passed through and the very state that must be reached in order to enter a religious state, specifically one of resignation or faith (McCarthy, 1978, p. 48). Kierkegaard holds that every human being has been in despair, and the vast majority continue in despair. Kierkegaard is using “despair” as a term of art, not in the sense of being depressed, hopeless, or anxious (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 26, n, 24), although the two senses are related. Rather, Kierkegaard identifies despair as far worse than any illness, suffering, or even physical death: it is the “sickness unto death” which is far more horrible than any suffering of a merely physical nature. To Kierkegaard, despair is not a suffering of the self, but is a misrelation in the self itself and, therefore, goes to the very core of an individual’s existence. How there can be a misrelation in the self can be seen by examining what Kierkegaard says constitutes a self.

For Kierkegaard, the human self (or what Kierkegaard also called “spirit”) is composed of two parts, physical and mental, neither of which, by itself, is a self. Kierkegaard considers the “mental part” of the human self to be eternal, infinite (i.e. abstract), full of possibility and the “physical part” to be temporal, finite, and necessary. Nor, in Kierkegaard’s view, does a person have a self *simply* because his mental part relates to his physical part, as is

what seems to happen in lower, conscious animals. For example, to feel pain from touching a hot stove is a relation between a physical manifestation and a mental manifestation, but this relationship does not constitute a self.

Instead, the beginning of "selfhood" as defined by Kierkegaard, first appears when the self relates itself to itself, or to put it one way, begins to become self-aware. "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" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980 p. 13). What is being said is that the self in the state Kierkegaard describes has become a synthesis of the infinite (abstract) mind and finite (physical). The self, because it relates itself to itself, is freedom: choosing itself and its actions from this relation. Further, such emergence of the self is not an all-or-nothing proposition, but a progression: "The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 29). Despite the complexity of this formulation it is not so different in structure from Freud's psychodynamic model in which the three components of the self relate to each other to provide the whole. But Kierkegaard is, in a sense, starting one step before Freud, looking not at what constitutes an established self, but what makes a self at all. As Becker points out, Kierkegaard "was a theorist of the open personality, of human possibility. In this pursuit, present-day psychiatry lags far behind him" (Becker, 1973, p. 86).

However, Kierkegaard goes on to state that a human being is not established by itself, or rather is not self-created. Therefore, the self as a self

must also relate itself to the power which established it, namely God. Owing to being established by another, the self must relate itself to itself and its creaturehood. If the concept of self did not include a relationship to a creator, there would only be one kind of despair: (1) to will not to be oneself. But, because the self also relates itself to an "other," it introduces the possibility of: (2) the despair to will to be oneself. These two forms of despair can both be described by a single formula for despair: to will to be rid of oneself. This is possible because the despair to will to be oneself is despair because it wills to be itself without relating itself to the power that established it. That is to say, the self wills to be rid of its "createdness" in order to become the unreal (i.e., uncreated) self it desires to be (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 20).

From this description of what constitutes a self, Kierkegaard arrives at a concept of the state of the self in which there is no misrelation—is no despair: the state of faith, i.e., "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 14). By "transparently" Kierkegaard means self-consciously or with self-awareness. "The ideal of transparency is rather one of self-understanding, an ability to recognize and understand what needs to be understood about one's self" (Evans, 1995, p. 77). In other words, Kierkegaard is describing the perfectly honest individual. "Kierkegaard has engaged in this difficult and unbelievably subtle exercise for one reason and one reason alone: to be able finally to conclude with authority what a person would be like *if he did not lie*" (Becker, 1973, p. 85).

Kierkegaard views anything less than this state of complete self-conscious honesty before God, i.e. despair, to be a condition worse than death.

Despair is, to Kierkegaard, a state worse than death because a human being contains an element which is eternal, and yet the self wishes to be rid of itself by refusing to be itself. Thus, despair is worse than death because it is “unto” death, the desire of the self to reduce itself to nothing, but being unable to do so, “the torment of despair is precisely the inability to die” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 18). Despair is nonetheless a “good” thing because it is a necessary prerequisite to arriving at the state where there is no despair.

Only that person’s life is wasted who went on living so deceived by life’s joys or its sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self, or, what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that “he,” he himself, his self, exists before this God—an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 26–27)

Kierkegaard’s framework is saturated with Christianity. The only ultimate hope for a human being to live a complete, authentic life is through faith. In the fullest sense, a person cannot exist except “before God.” Though some might object to the relentless religiosity of Kierkegaard’s theoretical approach, nonetheless, he is quoted and referenced often in the secular world.

Though Kierkegaard’s view certainly is grounded in his Christian understanding, he has every right to present it in the marketplace of ideas and try to show its descriptive, explanatory, and therapeutic power. It may well be that the power of such a view will be opaque to non-Christians, though this is by no means certain, and in fact, the

contrary is supported by the strong influence Kierkegaard has had on non-Christian psychologists. (Evans, 1995, p. 78)

Evans is certainly correct. There is no theory which does not have its detractors. Freud has not been driven from the "market place of ideas" by accusations of sexism, nor can it be claimed that Freud has had no influence on psychology because he is sexist. Kierkegaard's theories include Christianity because he believed Christianity to be true, and its essential influence on his theoretical framework follows of necessity.

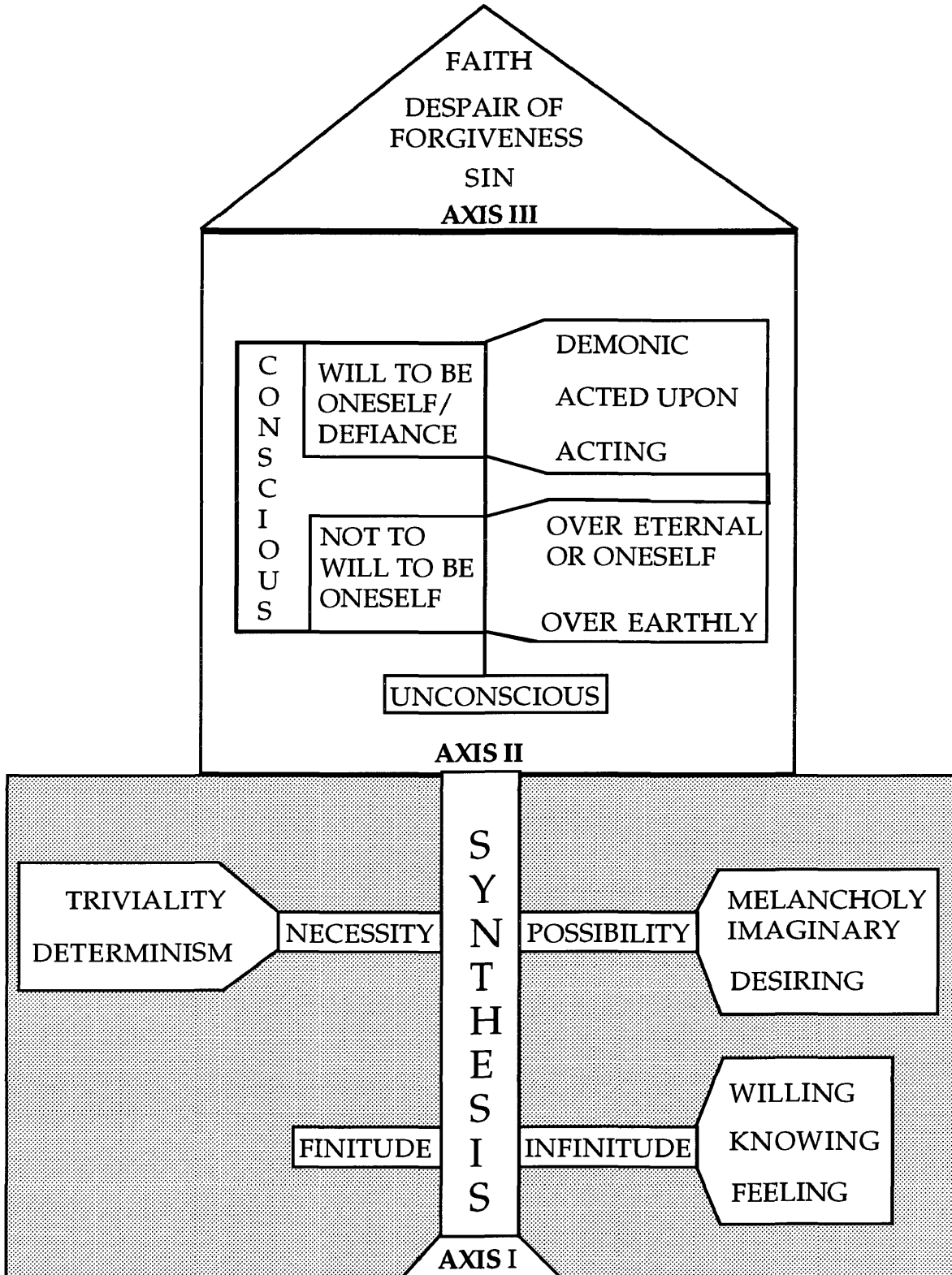
Another possible objection to this view of despair is that people often do not feel as though they are in despair. Are not they the best judges of their own state of well being? Kierkegaard makes two points in this regard. First, Kierkegaard suggests that when one goes to a doctor, the doctor looks at the patient's symptoms and makes a determination concerning the patient's health, even if the patient claims to feel fine. The extrapolation to the human self is then that one may be "ill" with "the sickness unto death" without knowing it, but someone more familiar with the workings of the human self could recognize the problem. Secondly, to be unconscious of despair is itself one of the forms of despair according to Kierkegaard.

The forms or categories of despair follow from Kierkegaard's concept of what constitutes a self just as the various forms of Psychoanalytic neurosis follow from the struggles between Freud's id, ego, and super ego. Or, as one theorist put it, Kierkegaard's analysis of despair based on his theory of the self shows how a person's life can become bogged down and fail when he closes himself off from the reality of his condition (Becker, 1973, p. 83).

IV

THE CATEGORIES OF DESPAIR

Due to the way Kierkegaard envisions the structure of the self, a misrelation or despair can occur along three different axis which provide a method for systematically dissecting the modes of despair. The first axis is defined by how well and to what extent the two aspects of the self, the psychical and the physical, are related to one another. The second axis addresses the extent to which the self relates itself to itself, is self-conscious and free. The third axis illustrates the relation of the self to God. Of course, in reality the despair faced by individuals can usually be viewed from any or all axes, and an individual would rarely occupy only one. Each category shall now be addressed in turn.



A) Despair with Regard to the Relation of the Parts of the Synthesis, But Not with Regard to Its Being Consciousness: Axis I

The first categories of despair are the kind concerned with how the two aspects of the self are related to one another. These are perhaps the categories that seem to be most like other forms of depth psychology. These categories concern the way in which the infinite and the finite, and the possible and the necessary interact each with each other in a way reminiscent of psychodynamic theories such as Freud's, where problems arise because of the interaction of component parts of the self (Kaplan & Miller, 1991). But here Kierkegaard is using an even more "primitive" or "existential" aspect of a human being than did Freud, namely the interaction of the abstract ability and the limitations of a person and the dynamics between the possible and the necessary, the finite and the infinite.

Before beginning with the discussion of these two dialectical pairs (Kierkegaard believes the self can only be understood by compared oppositions) the terms themselves need some clarification. The dialectical pair of the finite and the infinite is the more abstract and general of the dialectical pairs proposed by Kierkegaard in this section (Elrod, 1975). By his use of the term "finitude" Kierkegaard means:

To say that the self is finite is to affirm that it is limited by its *factual* being. The finite aspect of the self is not an empty abstraction. Rather, the self's facticity is a thoroughly concrete aspect of the self which includes its sex, race, personal appearance, emotional stability, talents, interest, abilities, and weaknesses as well as its more general, yet

concrete, natural environment and social, political, and cultural milieu. Moreover, the self does not determine its facticity but, on the contrary, experiences itself as already in it and determined by it. (Elrod, 1975, p. 33)

The dialectical opposite of finitude is infinitude. By this Kierkegaard does not mean completely unbounded, but uses the term "infinite" throughout his many works as a technical term. What is most important about the infinite aspect of the self is that it has the capacity for abstraction, and the means it uses for this is the imagination or what Kierkegaard sometimes calls fantasy.

Imagination is the maker of infinity in the sense that it opens up the self's own horizon of meanings. Imagination ranges free of the self's facticity by positing a multiplicity of meaning possibilities without regard for its finite limitations. The more fertile the imagination, the richer and more multiple are the possibilities for existence which it discloses and explores. (Elrod, 1975, p. 34)

While it is something of a simplification, it could be said that the infinite and the finite are the ways the self is who it is. When the infinite and the finite are synthesized they become what Kierkegaard refers to as "concrete."

The other dialectical relation in this section is between possibility and necessity. Kierkegaard uses these terms in the way of common usage: Possibility is what the self could be (at least conceptually) in the future and necessity is what the self is in the present. The self simply is and so cannot be changed (necessity), but as the self flows into the future it can become its possibility based upon the exercise of freedom. Thus, possibility and necessity are synthesized through freedom.

These categories are closely related, and in his discussion of these categories, Ernest Becker, does not distinguish between them, as will be elaborated on later in this thesis. The differences should also become clearer as the modes of despair in each category are discussed. But the ideal way to understand the distinction between them is that the infinite/finite dichotomy concerns the way the self is and that the possible/necessity dichotomy concerns how the self becomes.

1) Infinitude's Despair

The despair of the infinite is to lack finitude. By the infinite part of the self, Kierkegaard means that the abstract part of a self is the aspect which extends the self; it is the aspect which envisions to a person what she is in an abstract sense. "In speaking of the infinite as an expanding factor, he is essentially speaking about the power of imagination to carry one beyond oneself towards a 'something more'" (McCarthy, 1978, p. 91). But unless the process of becoming draws itself back into the finite—the present reality and limitations of the person—the self becomes abstract, fantastic, unreal. This is a constant, dynamic process, since at every moment the self is becoming. "For the self is the synthesis of which the finite is the limiting and the infinite the extending constituent" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 30). Thus, the proper relation between the finite and the infinite is this dynamic interaction between the two. But, despair occurs when the "fantastic" leads a person into the infinite in a way that prevents her from coming back to herself as a synthesis.

Being carried away into the infinite can occur at the level of feelings, thinking, or will. When feelings become fantastic they may be carried away by some abstract sentimentality, a high pitch of feeling for something so abstract that it never can become finite or find its place in the concrete. For example, Ted loves humanity so much it makes him weep, its just his boss he cannot stand. The feelings of such a person have been carried away into the abstract, the infinite, and have lost their relation to the finite, the concrete. Such a person lacks a self insofar as there has been a failure to maintain the synthesis, this particular failure being the despair of the infinite. As later era terminology might put it, Ted has an inauthentic existence.

Knowledge can likewise be "dragged off" into the infinite by the fantastic, by a quest for knowledge which leads the person into abstract contemplation rather than to deeper self-knowledge. This could be the scholar who uses his study to escape self-knowledge, thus making his knowledge "inhuman." Ted may be a great scholar of theology or ethics, yet not know he does not seriously practice his religion or lead a life of virtue. For Kierkegaard, the self is squandered unless the more one knows, the more one knows oneself (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 31).

The will is also subject to becoming fantastic. It is quite possible for the will to become so caught up in abstract "willing" that it never returns to the finite. For example, Ted is so in love with humanity that he wills (wishes!) for the worldwide redistribution of wealth. Such a task is so abstract and out of Ted's control that there is no reason for Ted to worry himself over the messy business of redistributing his own wealth. Unless the abstract will can be returned to the finite, to will action that can take place in this moment,

then there is a misrelation in how the self is in relation. When the will amounts to nothing, so does the self. When the will is fantastic:

Willing, then, does not continually become proportionately as concrete as it is abstract, so that the more infinite it becomes in purpose and determination, the more personally present and contemporary it becomes in the small part of the task that can be carried out at once, so that in being infinitized it comes back to itself in the most rigorous sense. . . . (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 32)

Therefore, when the willing, knowing, or feeling of a person becomes fantastic, so does his very self, either by actively plunging headlong into the fantastic or perhaps in the more passive manner of being carried away. But in either event it is the self which is to hold the relation together, the self which has failed in its responsibility. "The self, then, leads a fantasized existence in abstract infinitizing or in abstract isolation, continually lacking its self, from which it only moves further and further away" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 32). On the other hand, such a person, lost in the fantastic may carry on a "perfectly normal life," working, marrying, raising a family, joining a golf club. . . . In fact, "the world" would pay no attention at all to this form of despair, and in fact desires it because it does not result in any unnerving commitments to high-minded ideals. "The world" would be much more concerned if Ted were to leave his despair and begin to take action with regard to the redistribution of wealth. A person is viewed as safe so long as he is abstract. "For a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 32).

Kierkegaard's theory of the self and infinitude's despair have been compared with certain aspects of Carl Jung's theoretic framework (Sobosan, 1975). It is suggested by Sobosan that the finite aspect of the self for Kierkegaard approximates what Jung meant by the two terms "body" and "consciousness," and the infinite aspect of the self approximates what Jung meant by the collective unconscious. For Jung, as with Kierkegaard, the self is a "third" relation relating the two "sides" of the self, yet transcending the mere relation.

The whole self also emerges from a conscious relationship between both of Jung's components: the ego, especially the collective conscious, and the collective unconscious. He prescribes what he calls a "middle way" as the way to the whole self. By it the ego assimilates the collective unconscious into consciousness by specifically relating it to the collective conscious while yet recognizing this unconscious as an entity in itself. He calls this process the process of individuation, and the new component in the psyche which emerges from it he calls the self. (Sobosan, 1975, pp. 32-33)

Corresponding to Kierkegaard's infinitude's despair, states Sobosan, is Jung's notion that if the ego cannot control the collective unconscious, the result is schizophrenia. Sobosan, further linking Jung's theory of schizophrenia to *The Sickness Unto Death*, notes Kierkegaard's description of the self being lost in the eternal and also suggests that it is related to the "delusions of grandeur" form of schizophrenia. As noted later in this paper, Becker is another who associates schizophrenia with the extreme form of infinity's despair.

While Sobosan's description of Jung's theory seems analogous to Kierkegaard's theory, a reading of the text of *The Sickness Unto Death* makes it clear that it is only an analogy, and not two interpretations of the same concept. For example, there is no correspondence between the concept of a collective unconscious to any concept in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

2) Finitude's Despair

Finitude's despair is the despair of the infinite, the dialectical opposite of infinitude's despair. In other words, Kierkegaard is saying that just as the person can be carried off into the infinite, the life of unbounded fantasy, just so, a person can be too grounded in the finite aspects of the self, have no extending aspect of herself, and be unable to see herself as an unique individual. Because the person is so submerged in the finite, she does not abstract out of the mundane aspects of everyday life. She eats, sleeps, carries on business, but never asks herself why she should bother to do so. She simply carries out her daily tasks with about the same reflection as that of a cog in a machine that carries on its task day in and day out as well. Such a person lets her self be "ground down" out of fear of being different, becoming absorbed in forgetting herself through worldly, secular matters (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, pp. 33–34). She becomes little more than a number.

Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. Here there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling

stone, as *courant* [passable] as a circulating coin. He is so far from being regarded as a person in despair that he is just what a human being is supposed to be. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 34)

Ted is a lawyer because his father was and his father's father was. He stays married, not because he loves his wife or holds high ideals of the permanent commitment of the marriage vow, but because he worries what the neighbors might think or what possessions and public stature he might lose in a divorce. Ted belongs to a number of benevolent organizations because they are good for marketing his law practice, not because he is passionately committed to their goals—in fact, if he thought belonging to them would harm his business, he would leave them in a heartbeat. Ted is as passable as a coin.

Finitude's despair is the despair of the person who feels herself lost in the crowd, the person who only exists as a member, not as an individual.

The despair of finitude, in contrast to that of infinitude, represents narrowness of feeling, knowledge and will. Rather than expanding himself in growth of these faculties, a person stays as he is and merges into the crowd and never develops as an individual. And no one is potentially as insensitive, ignorant and weak-willed as the crowd.

(McCarthy, 1978, p. 93)

Finitude's despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. In fact, it is prudent to not take risks in life. Yet, in the silent complacency of that security, one can lose oneself without ever an outward sign. On the contrary, a person in finitude's despair could very likely be a great success in the world, using all his capacities, becoming wealthy. Yet, "they have no self, no self for

whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God—however self-seeking they are otherwise” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 35).

In addition to applying Jung’s theory to Kierkegaard’s views on the self and on infinitude’s despair, Sobosan also proposed that Kierkegaard’s concept of finitude’s despair corresponded to Jung’s views on the inhibition of freedom and self-awareness through immersion into the “crowd” (Sobosan, 1975). For Sobosan, Kierkegaard’s concept of finitude’s despair is similar to Jung’s view that when the consciousness fails to integrate the collective unconscious, which is then suppressed, the collective consciousness is given primacy. If the collective consciousness is given primacy, then that “makes the individual subordinate to various ‘isms’ or abstract social values, so too does Kierkegaard say that his sickness makes him just a ‘cipher in the crowd’” (Sobosan, 1975, p. 33). In other words, Jung and Kierkegaard agree that one condition of many people is that they join the “crowd” at the cost of themselves. However, as discussed earlier in this paper, Sobosan’s argument is at best only analogous to Kierkegaard’s analysis, and the Jungian analysis involving the failure to integrate the collective unconscious does not itself correspond to anything in the text of *The Sickness Unto Death*.

3) Possibility’s Despair

Possibility and necessity are also components of the person that relate to the emergence of the self. While possibility and necessity seem quite similar to the infinite and finite aspects of the self, they may be distinguished by the way they function in the self. The infinite is concerned with who “I”

am right now, such as “I am a great humanitarian.” The possible aspect of the self is concerned with following a goal or avoiding a dilemma, both of which are future oriented. The finite/necessity relation follows the same present/future relation. Possibility and necessity, looking forward to the future of what can and might be, are the “becoming” aspect of the self: it is the task of the self to become itself in freedom (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 35). Just as the finite limits the infinite part of the self, necessity is the limiting factor with regard to the self’s possibility. “Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980 p. 35).

Possibility’s despair is to lack necessity. The self, insofar as it is possible, reflects itself in imagination. The self sees what it could be—what it could make itself to be in freedom. It is through the imagination that the possibilities for the self become manifest. Yet, potentially the self is as necessary as it is possible, because it is both itself (necessity) and yet has the task of becoming (possibility) itself. Thus, possibility’s despair is when the self ventures so far into possibility that it simply becomes abstract possibility and cannot “go anywhere” because it is so far away from necessity, which remains static—where it is. This is because necessity is the place where the self is, and possibility only manifests by entering the moment of existence, where necessity is. “Necessity in the human self means that the self which one is influences the self one can become” (McCarthy, 1978, p. 94). But if possibility grows further and further away from the necessity of the self, the self cannot ever become. “Eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 36).

When the self has been swallowed up in what it could be, then the person becomes a mirage. Possibility wipes away the individual's self-consciousness of her limitations, of her necessity. She becomes lost in all the possible selves she can imagine, not the ones she could become by grounding them in necessity (McCarthy, 1978, p. 94). Such a person is only half a self, failing to allow her particular necessity to define her self more specifically.

Kierkegaard suggests that possibility's despair can take many forms, but considers the two which are the most common. First is the form of desiring. In this form, the person chases after possibility, following her desired possibility further and further. Perhaps one example of this is the person who never wishes to commit to anything. Such a person is obsessed with possibility, desires and craves an open universe of possibility. Any hint of limiting possibility is frightening to her. Yet, in never bringing her possibility into her necessity, she loses track of herself, never enters a state of becoming in the moment of necessity. Her self always wants to keep the options open and so never becomes one of the options. She may drift so far into possibility she may not be able to find her way back to herself.

The second form of possibility's despair is the melancholy/imaginary. This is the opposite of the desiring form of possibilities despair, but in the same relation to possibility. Here the person is obsessed with what possible miseries may befall her. The possible problems in her life stretch out before her like an endless horizon. This concern for the possible leaves her in such anxiety that she is led away from herself, from her necessity. She becomes so lost in the future she cannot change, she does not bring her anxiety into the present necessity where it can be acted upon in preparation or discounted as

unlikely. Her anxiety does not lead her back to necessity where she can then become herself, but leads her into possibility where she loses her self, trapped in the fear of what might happen.

In his assessment of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Ernest Becker does not distinguish between the rather similar states of infinite's despair/possibility's despair. Becker expands on Kierkegaard's ideas in terms of psychology. He suggests there is a continuum which runs from the rather commonplace Walter Mitty type of person who escapes into fantasy to a form of despair which is full-blown psychosis, "the complete and utter breakdown of the character structure" (Becker, 1973, p. 75). In the extreme form of this despair, the person loses all her grounding in the concrete, her own body, her dependable experience in the everyday world, and becomes completely abstract, with unlimited possibility: she becomes schizophrenic. "The full-blown schizophrenic is abstract, ethereal, unreal; he billows out of the earthly categories of space and time, floats out of his body, dwells in an eternal now, is not subject to death and destruction" (Becker, 1973, p. 75). The schizophrenic has quit his body and renounced his limitations. Of course, this is the extreme. Like Kierkegaard, Becker acknowledges that the world is filled with "fantastic" people, the "Walter Mittys" who are quite separated from reality and yet carry on a "normal" life. They carry on their life without possessing a self. The fact that schizophrenia and "Walter Mitty" can be placed on the same continuum demonstrates "the cogency of Kierkegaard's analysis" (Becker, 1973, p. 77).

4) Necessity's Despair

Necessity's despair is to lack possibility. "To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 40). Thus, necessity's despair divides into two categories. The first, where everything has become necessary, is the person who is a determinist—a person who believes that human beings do not have free will. Determinism is a belief that is relatively widespread. Religious determinism is found in the followers of Calvin. Even the rather abstract philosophical position of "hard determinism" or "logical determinism" can be found in such popular works as *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, 1973). However, determinism (usually "physical" or "scientific" or "soft" determinism) is also found in the field of psychology, in the theories of Sigmund Freud (Kaufmann, 1992) and B. F. Skinner (1971), for example. But from Kierkegaard's point of view, a determinist who really believed in determinism and lived his life thereby would have only necessity in his life, and therefore would lack a self. Kierkegaard compares the existence of a determinist to the life of a "lower animal," trapped in the necessities of his existence (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 40). In fact, one determinist, B. F. Skinner, does make this comparison: "The traditional view supports Hamlet's exclamation, 'How like a god!,' Pavlov, the behavioral scientist, emphasized 'How like a dog!' But that was a step forward." (Skinner, 1971, p. 201, referencing another quote). On the other hand, Shakespeare provides an excellent description of a determinist point of view—and its rejection—by Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Earl of

Gloucester, a believer in astrology. Edmund is an excellent example of someone who refuses to fall into finitude's despair.

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under *Ursa major*; so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.

(Shakespeare, n.d., *King Lear*, Act 1, Scene 2)

The second type of necessity's despair is the person for whom all is trivial. Kierkegaard describes this person as having a "philistine-bourgeois mentality" where the person has such a complete lack of imagination as to be spiritless, basing his life on probability, what is likely to happen, instead of on any real possibility (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 41). Such a person reassures himself with the obvious and the trite, thinking he can control possibility

with probability, locks the “prodigious elasticity” of possibility in the “cage” of probability, “. . . imagines itself to be the master, does not perceive that precisely thereby it has imprisoned itself in the thralldom of spiritlessness and is the most wretched of all” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 41–42).

Bereft of imagination, as the philistine-bourgeois always is, whether alehouse keeper or prime minister, he lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens. In this way, the philistine-bourgeois has lost his self and God. In order for a person to become aware of his self and of God, imagination must raise him higher than the miasma of probability, it must tear him out of this and teach him to hope and to fear—or to fear and to hope—by rendering possible that which surpasses the *quantum satis* [sufficient standard] of any experience. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 41)

The security of a well-ordered, predictable life is the appeal of this kind of despair. It is tempting (and accurate) to think of this type of despair in terms of the Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, the Russian bureaucrat who worried about little else than convention, playing his odds in life. “Ivan Ilyich’s life had been most simple and commonplace—and most horrifying” (Tolstoy, 1886/1981, p. 49). Most horrifying, because Ivan did everything just as he should, blending well into society, with no concerns except what were the “right” connections to make, how to make them, what marriage would be considered a “good” marriage—and so horrifying because Ivan failed to exist.

Kierkegaard compares possibility’s despair and necessity’s despair. “The person who gets lost in possibility soars high with the boldness of

despair; he for whom everything became necessity overstrains himself in life and is crushed in despair; but the philistine-bourgeois mentality spiritlessly triumphs" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 42).

Kierkegaard uses necessity's and possibility's despair to point out that one reason both are forms of despair, or misrelation in the self, is because part of the self is to stand in relation to God. In so doing, Kierkegaard shows the interplay of two axes of despair. In relation to God, Kierkegaard notes that "for God all things are possible" (The New American Bible, Lk 1:37). Thus the crisis of despair comes to the trivial person when she has an experience which is too frightening to fit into her "parrot wisdom of routine experience" and she despairs because she lacks possibility, does not believe that for God all things are possible (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 41). Once again, it is difficult to not recall the general satisfaction with life felt by Ivan Ilyich until he fell ill, and ultimately became gravely ill, when his "parrot wisdom" of social "shoulds" began to fail him. Yet, for Kierkegaard, it is this collapse into despair that is in fact movement toward the leaving of despair. For Kierkegaard, the only way out of despair is through God, through faith. The absence of despair, by its nature, includes the individual's relationship to God since "he who does not have a God does not have a self, either" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 40). But it is only those who have been confronted with the impossibility of salvation, humanly speaking, that permits a believer to escape the despair of possibility because he knows that for God all things are possible. Faith resolves the contradiction that, humanly speaking, a person's ruin is certain, yet there is a possibility of something else occurring. Thus, this despair is a necessary step since "only he whose being has been so shaken

that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is possible, only he has anything to do with God" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 40).

Ernest Becker also provides an analysis of finitude's despair and necessity's despair. As with infinitude's/possibility's despair, Becker does not distinguish between the similar finitude's despair and necessity's despair, but discusses them as a unit. Again, Becker sees a continuum between one extreme and another, with less extreme manifestations in the middle. At the opposite end of the spectrum from schizophrenia (the extreme form of infinitude's/possibility's despair), Becker thinks that there lies the extreme form of finitude's despair/necessity's despair which can be described as depressive psychosis—when someone has too much necessity, too much finitude.

This is how we understand depressive psychosis today: As a bogging down in the demands of others—family, job, the narrow horizon of daily duties. In such a bogging down the individual does not feel or see that he has alternatives, cannot imagine any choices or alternate ways of life, cannot release himself from the network of obligations even though these obligations no longer give him a sense of self-esteem, of primary value, of being a heroic contributor to world life even by doing his daily family and job duties. (Becker, 1973, p. 78)

Such a person is too connected to the world, just as the schizophrenic is not connected enough.

Closer to the middle from this extreme of depressive psychosis, Becker sees what he calls the "culturally normal" person who lives as an imitation of others, is a number in the crowd who is fearful of asserting his own

individuality and has no meaning of his own. Becker views the trivial person from Kierkegaard's schema as the person who uses triviality as a defense against the wide possibilities of experience in life, the fear of freedom, necessity, and possibility. He interprets Kierkegaard's expression of this person carrying possibility around in a cage of probability (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 41–42) as the trivial person's defense against the possible by doing what is "socially possible" (Becker, 1973, pp. 74–75).

Becker goes further than Kierkegaard in his analysis of finitude's despair/necessity's despair. Kierkegaard describes two possible states of a person in necessity's despair, namely states in which the individual sees everything in life as necessary (determinism), or as trivial. But Becker thinks a person can be in a state where all becomes necessary *and* trivial, a state in which the person does not even have the illusion of meaning in the depressive psychosis. Such a person chooses the "slavery" of determinism (which Becker here interprets as a kind of social/psychological determinism of depressive psychosis rather than a form of philosophical or scientific determinism as Kierkegaard surely intended) because it is safe, it protects her from having to face up to the realities of life. But even when this enslavement becomes meaningless to her, she fears to move out of it, and thus her world becomes both necessary and trivial (Becker, 1973, p. 80).

Becker states that most people do not end up at the extreme ends of the continuum in schizophrenia or depressive psychosis, but instead remain in the "safe" area of the philistine-bourgeois, what Becker calls "normal neurosis" (Becker, 1973, p. 81). This is what Becker describes as the person who lives safely in the probabilities of a given set of social rules. "The

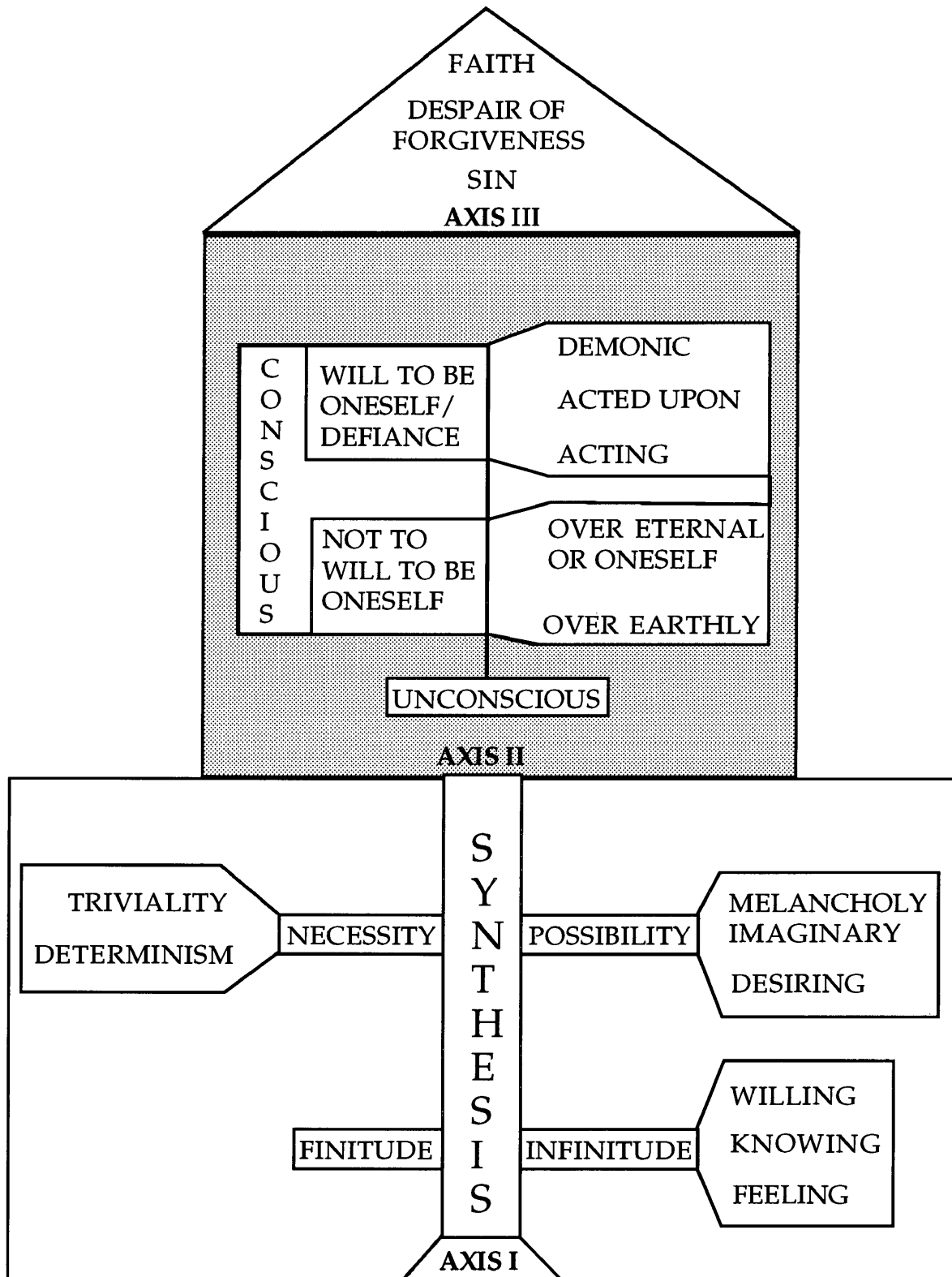
Philistine trusts that by keeping himself at a low level of personal intensity he can avoid being pulled off balance by experience; philistinism works, as Kierkegaard said, by ‘tranquilizing itself with the trivial’” (Becker, 1973, p. 81).

In his existential analysis of Ellen West, Ludwig Binswanger also proposes that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair is an analysis of schizophrenia.

When Ellen West states that fate has wanted her to be fat and robust, but she herself wants to be thin and delicate, and when she asks the Creator: “Create me once again but create me differently,” she reveals that throughout her entire life she has suffered from that sickness of the mind which Kierkegaard, with the keen insight of a genius, described and illuminated from all possible aspects under the name of “Sickness Unto Death.” I know of no document which could more greatly advance the existential-analytic interpretation of schizophrenia. One might say that in this document Kierkegaard has recognized with intuitive genius the approach of schizophrenia; for at the root of so many “cases” of schizophrenia can be found the “desperate” wish . . . not to be oneself, as also can be found its counterpart, the desperate wish to be oneself. Even the physician of the soul who does not concur in the purely religious conception and interpretation of this “illness,” who does not regard “the self” as eternal in the religious sense, does not believe in the religious sense in the power which posited it, who does not see in the human being a synthesis of the temporal and eternal in the religious sense, but rather conceives existentially of despair in the sense of the sickness unto death—even such a physician,

too, is deeply indebted to this work of Kierkegaard. (Binswanger, 1994, pp. 297–98)

Binswanger here associates schizophrenia with all of Kierkegaard's forms of despair without attempting to distinguish which forms, if any, specifically relate to schizophrenia or other forms of psychoses (as Becker does). It is clear, at least in his analysis of Ellen West, that Binswanger attributes more to Kierkegaard as an inspiration than as a source of clinical technique and assessment. It is Binswanger's primary use of Kierkegaard as merely inspiration which explains the complete implausibility of his interpreting *The Sickness Unto Death* as a description of forms of schizophrenia rather than what it is by Kierkegaard's own assertion—a critique of the whole of humanity. Becker has taken an approach much more in keeping with the sense of *The Sickness Unto Death* as a whole, that it is about the progress of every person to wholeness, with only the extremes of Kierkegaard's categories describing psychoses. It is not being suggested here that Binswanger did not understand the broader sweep of *The Sickness Unto Death*, but only that his presentation of it is very limited.



B) Despair as Defined by Consciousness: Axis II

Up to this point in this thesis, Kierkegaard's concept of despair has been discussed with no reference to the degree with which the person suffering from the despair was in fact conscious of her own state of being in despair. But Kierkegaard, in a second division of his categorization of despair does discuss despair in reference to the degree to which the person is conscious of the despair, holding that the more conscious the despair, the more intense the despair. But given what despair is, a misrelation of the self, any rise in the consciousness of one's despair is also a rise in the consciousness of the self (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 49).

1) Unconscious Despair

At one end of the scale is the person who is ignorant of being in despair, of being ignorant of having a self. Kierkegaard suggests that this is the state of people who live at a sensate level. For Kierkegaard, when a person is not conscious of despair, her life can take two different paths: either a vegetative life or an intensely energetic life. By taking one of these two paths the person can insure that she need not worry about having a self, or having a self before God. Such people are not interested in being called into a life that contains spirit, self-consciousness. Otherwise, these people would have to notice that their sensate lives that they thought were happy were really lives of despair. Instead, they prefer to have little concept of themselves. These are the people who, when asked what their core values

were, what they lived for, would not even quite know what the question meant. But not knowing that one is in despair does not mean one is not in despair, it simply means one is in despair and mistaken about not being in despair. Sometimes their despair only becomes evident to such people when problems arise in their lives, "when the enchantment of illusion is over, when existence begins to tatter" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 44). In the categorization of despair in reference to consciousness, the despair in ignorance is the worst, because the very ignorance of its existence prevents the subject from beginning to overcome it.

Kierkegaard's description of the human quality of being ignorant of a deeper, underlying issue (for Kierkegaard it is the ignorance of being in despair) has associated unconscious despair with the Freudian categories of repression, denial, and displacement (Kaplan & Miller, 1991). This and the remaining forms of despair which have increasing degrees of consciousness have been associated with Freud's concept of the "dynamic unconscious." The dynamic unconscious is the "willed" unconscious, the part of the psyche a person actively resists confronting through various forms of self-deception (Evans, 1995). Rollo May has suggested that unconscious despair is the same neurosis described by "Freud's symbol of the ego as weak and passive, 'lived by the Id,' having lost its own self-directive powers" (May, 1994, p. 29).

2) Despair which is Conscious of Being Despair

For Kierkegaard, to be conscious of being in despair is the same as to be conscious of having a self with something eternal in it and yet still have a

misrelation within the self. Thus this categorization breaks down into two primary categories: first, being conscious of having a self and in despair not willing to be oneself, and second, being conscious of having a self and in despair willing to be oneself. To be in despair not to will to be oneself is despair in weakness, while to be in despair to will to be oneself is defiant despair. Further, it need not be assumed that either a person knows she is in despair or not, but consciousness should be seen as a continuum.

Kierkegaard suggests that few people are in the extreme positions of having no consciousness at all of their own despair or of being completely aware of their own despair, with complete ignorance of having a self as the lowest form of despair in the category of despair in relation to consciousness (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 48). Just as with a serious physical sickness, the "sickness unto death" will usually make itself known in its symptoms which give hints of its presence, a subtle knowing that something is wrong, but a something that can still be denied or ignored or suppressed beneath a pile of work or other activity. By Kierkegaard's definition of a self, it is even more clear what role consciousness plays in what Kierkegaard considers the "healthy" self: the self that in relating itself to itself and willing to be itself rests transparently (self-consciously) in the power that established it. For Kierkegaard this is also the definition of faith (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 49). As follows from this definition the first category of despair in relation to consciousness is the despair of the self which does not will to be itself.

a) In Despair Not to Will to be Oneself

The despair not to will to be oneself, what Kierkegaard refers to as the despair in weakness, is divided into two forms, the despair over the earthly or something earthly and the despair of the eternal or over oneself.

i) Despair Over the Earthly or Something Earthly.

Kierkegaard places the “man of immediacy” in this form of despair. The man of immediacy is the person who only has a self insofar as it accompanies something worldly, something filled with temporality and the secular. Kierkegaard uses this “man of immediacy” as a focal point to explicate this form of despair. Such a person is “in immediate connection with ‘the other’” and has only the illusory appearance of anything eternal (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 51). The “man of immediacy” is “bound up in immediacy with the other in desiring, craving, enjoying, etc. . . .” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 51). But this person does have some sense of himself, and so also a sense of his state of despair. When life strikes him a blow he will have some self-reflection forced upon him, and so he will become aware of despair. But when life does give him such a blow, he thinks he is in despair over something earthly, not over something eternal. Such a person thinks he is despairing over some earthly object when in fact he has only lost an earthly object, not an eternal one which is the source or real despair (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 51). The irony is that this person really is in despair, really does sense the despair, yet misinterprets it as despair over

something earthly and temporal, not something eternal, existential. This is because the man of immediacy is totally dependent on externals for his sense of life. If life goes badly for him he feels he is in despair, if his life “turns around,” then he feels as if he has been given a new life. Yet it is precisely this sense that despair is over an external that is despair.

Thus when the man of immediacy claims to be in despair, he is in fact just “playing dead,” his life at the mercy of externals, going back to where he started if his life improves, yet “a self he was not, and a self he did not become, but he goes on living, qualified only by immediacy” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 52). Instead of seeking to become more a self when “fate” has caused a problem in his life, such a person usually begins to imitate others, noticing how they make it through life and following their example. But in so doing he is not a self, and a self he does not become.

This form of despair is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be a self. Or lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else, or wish for a new self. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, pp. 52–53)

Because immediacy does not have a self, it usually ends up in fantasy. “When immediacy despairs, it does not even have enough self to wish or dream that it had become that which it has not become. The man of immediacy helps himself in another way: he wishes to be someone else” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 53). This occurs because the man of immediacy does not know himself and so completely identifies himself by externals, can quite literally identify himself by the clothes he wears.

To emphasize his point Kierkegaard relates the story of a poor peasant

who came into some money. Being shoeless, he bought some new shoes and stockings, then got drunk and fell asleep on the road home. Someone driving a carriage woke him and told him to move his legs before they were run over. But looking down, the peasant did not recognize the shoes and stockings and told the carriage driver to proceed, because those were not his legs (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 53). Just so, says Kierkegaard, the man of immediacy so relates his self to externals, he would not recognize himself if the externals changed.

In a way the man of immediacy is like an animal who sees food or a predator, he simply reacts to his environment with no self-reflection. It is not difficult to find such people who behave this way under most circumstances. In fact, there is even an idiomatic expression for this state when such people are described as being of the knee-jerk variety. Such a person would adopt the latest fashions without ever actually asking himself whether he really liked these clothes or that food. One manifestation of this despair follows the advice of the familiar bumper sticker: "He who dies with the most toys wins." Or the same person can while away the hours based on how "she" would be so much better off if only she were a famous rock star or president or tycoon. She would be happy so long as she were someone else, just not her. Or she can adopt a completely different self for purposes of a first date with someone, never worrying that at the end of the date her love interest would in effect have kissed someone else good night. She could not conceive of it any other way.

Irvin Yalom (1980) has associated the lack of consciousness with fusion in relationships. Yalom believes that when a person experiences the

existential isolation of being an individual, it can lead to such a person trying to give up his self, will not to be his self, in order to escape the pain and fear of the isolation. A person can try to lose his self in fusing with another, giving up his identity to see his self only in reference to the other, dependent upon and merged with the other self. Or, to use Kierkegaard's terms: the more fusion, the less self; the less self, the less despair (Yalom, 1980, p. 380).

But when the man of immediacy does venture into some reflection, then there begins to be some consciousness of self and so consciousness of despair. For the man of immediacy, the despair is the despair to will not to be oneself. Here, despair can be brought on simply by reflection, not necessarily external factors, because once the self reflects it begins to see itself as separate from externals and somehow essentially different from its environment and influence the environment has on the self. But when the self wills to be responsible for itself but then encounters some necessity or possibility in the self that makes a greater break with immediacy than his reflection on himself is willing to tolerate, then in confronting such a difficulty he despairs. Yet, because he does possess some reflection, he does not completely collapse in the face of this unfortunate event because he knows he has a self which is not lost in the external event. However, he still does not have a concept of his self as abstract from all external events and therefore free and infinitely responsible for his actual self. Thus he despairs because he does not make a total break from immediacy, he despairs not to will to be himself. He treats his self as if it were a vacation home which he can visit when it is safe, but simply move away from when he finds it unpleasant, and then return again when the unpleasantness is gone. Yet he will not will to be himself.

Such a life is very hard to maintain because it keeps his despair too close at hand and unless some change is made he must begin to seek ways of avoiding his reflecting altogether. This he does by taking his capacities and talents and begins to apply them outwardly, not inwardly, in order to forget himself. In this way he can join the dynamic people who are skilled and successful in worldly matters, basing his own conduct on how others will regard him, on what his social position needs to be. He might even consider himself a Christian, but would only consider himself a Christian in the same way he would consider himself an American. In the end, if successful, he will have lost all remnants of a self. It would seem that a large part of the American economy is driven by goods of distraction, from television to shopping malls. The person of immediacy is a person “confined by culture, a slave to it, who imagines that he has an identity if he pays his insurance premium, that he has control of his life if he guns his sports car or works his electric toothbrush” (Becker, 1973, p, 74).

Kierkegaard thinks despair over the earthly or something earthly is the most common form of despair. Also, Kierkegaard believed that the more despair is thought through, the more conscious it becomes, the rarer that form of despair is to be found among people. “There are very few persons who live even approximately within the qualification of spirit; indeed, there are not many who even try this life, and most of those who do soon back out of it” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 57). If this form of despair remains unchanged, not allowing the eternal in the self to break through, then the self cannot begin to intensify the despair into still higher forms of despair which can eventually lead to escape from despair—to faith.

ii) Despair of the Eternal or Over Oneself.

In the last section, when the self despairs over something earthly (i.e. something in particular) with infinite passion, the self is turning the particular into the world as a whole such that the concept of totality becomes part of the despairing person. But this concept is only a thought, since one cannot actually lose the entire world. Instead, what is actually happening is that the despair is over oneself and the eternal. In fact, the despair over oneself and the eternal is the formula for all despair. Therefore, it is more accurate to say of the last discussed category of despair that it is “to despair *over* the earthly (the occasion), *of* the eternal, but *over* oneself” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 60, n.).

People who despair always despair *of* the eternal, but *over* many different things which bring people to despair. For example, a person might despair *over* some misfortune. But it is despair *of* that which can release her from despair, namely despair of the eternal, of salvation. Because of the dialectical nature of the self, being a relation of infinite and finite, possibility and necessity, a person can both despair *of* and *over* herself. Another way to put this is that the despair of the despair over the earthly or something earthly was despair *in* her weakness, whereas the despair over the eternal or over oneself is despair *over* her weakness. This is because the despair over the eternal or over oneself is a step forward to a new consciousness that she is in fact weak to make the earthly so important, but instead of seeing this and turning to faith in humility, she entrenches herself in her despair and despairs over her weakness (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980. p. 61). Thus she moves

beyond despairing *over* the misfortune and despairs that she is so weak as to despair over the misfortune and despairs *over* herself. She also despairs of any possibility of being saved from her weakness over which she despairs, and in so doing despairs *of* the eternal.

Despair of the eternal or oneself is a step into a deeper, more intense and therefore rarer form of despair. This is because it presupposes a concept of self and something eternal in the self that in turn gives a greater consciousness of despair. Further, because of the heightened consciousness there is now too much self to slip into the loss of self, which intensifies the despair because now there is no hope of getting rid of oneself. It is important to keep in mind that because the state of despair is a function of the relation the self is engaged in, "despair is not merely a suffering but an act" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 62). Despair includes the act of choosing to become the self (McCarthy, 1978, p. 91).

A person in the despair of the eternal or oneself has a quality called "inclosing reserve." According to Kierkegaard the person of inclosing reserve is the opposite of the person of immediacy, and in fact has great contempt for immediacy. For the person of inclosing reserve, the self sits behind a closed door, watching itself, preoccupied with willing to not be itself, and yet has enough self that the self can love itself (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 63). One of the hallmarks of the despair of the eternal or oneself is that there is now enough self knowledge that the person will pursue solitude, while those who are in the despair over the earthly or something earthly avoid solitude. Another characteristic of the person of inclosing reserve is that he longs to have a confidant, but knows that once he has confided, he could not bear the

fact that he had exposed himself. Kierkegaard quips that the ideal position for a person in inclosing reserve is to be a king who can confide in someone and then have them executed (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 66–67).

Thus, the person in the despair of the eternal or oneself finds himself in a very difficult position, too conscious of self to escape, but still in despair not to will to be himself. Because of this intense internal conflict it is at this stage Kierkegaard thinks a person is most likely to commit suicide in despair (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 66). Trying to avoid this intensified despair, he may try to immerse himself in sensuality in order to try to return to immediacy, “but always with the consciousness of the self he does not want to be” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 66). At the wake of Ivan Ilyich, his wife, a woman of immediacy, seemed sorrowful over Ivan in such an externalized way it is almost as though she had lost a prized piece of furniture. But one of Ivan’s “friends” who seems more in the state of inclosing reserve felt the corpse had the expression of a reproach or of a reminder for the living—but somehow it did not apply to him and hurried off to play cards at the earliest opportunity (Tolstoy, 1886/1981, pp. 35–47).

In his analysis of Kierkegaard’s categories of despair, Becker thinks that inclosing reserve is what is now called repression (Becker, 1973, p. 71). Repression is necessary because, unlike the immediate man who has no sense of self, the person of inclosing reserve notices he has a self, but is afraid to be himself and so must settle for being different, seeking more solitude, becoming an introvert, amusing himself in private with his beginning consciousness of self, but repressing that knowledge publicly. Becker agrees with Kierkegaard that this is a very difficult position to remain in, and it is

quite possible such a person will try to lose himself in suicide or immersion in experience (Becker, 1973, pp. 82–84).

For Kierkegaard, if the person of inclosing reserve does not take the route of immersing herself in sensuality, then she might take “desperate measures” to avoid her internal tumult and the despair might become defiant, the next stage of despair, the despair to will to be oneself (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 66).

b) In Despair to Will to be Oneself: Defiance

For Kierkegaard the next step in the intensification of despair is to be in despair to will to be oneself, also called defiance. This form of despair is more conscious of self and of despair, and understands that despair is an act coming from the self, not from external factors such as some worldly misfortune. Defiance “is really despair through the aid of the eternal, the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self to will in despair to be oneself” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 67). Thus in defiant despair the person is using the eternal in herself and so is very close to the truth, but is at the same time very far away. This is because the despair which leads to faith, and so release from despair, comes through the eternal which aids the self in losing itself in order to gain itself (i.e. faith). But the person in despair willing to be himself is unwilling to begin losing itself and instead wills to be itself.

The defiant self has consciousness of the infinite, abstract possibility of the self, which is what the defiant person wants to be, yet still does not have any connection or relation to the power which established it. “With the help

of this infinite form, the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 68). The defiant person has a concrete self with its necessity and limitations, is a specific person with natural capacities, predispositions, and relationships. Yet the defiant person wishes to use his infinite form to take the concrete form and make it the self he wants, he wills to be himself.

Therefore, the defiant person is much more "himself" than in the previously cited forms of despair. But for Kierkegaard, there is still missing a crucial element which prevents the person from escaping despair, namely the lack of a relation to the power which established it. Thus:

[The defiant person] wants to begin a little earlier than do other men, not at and with the beginning, but 'in the beginning'; he does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task—he himself wants to compose his self by means of being the infinite form. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 68, quoting Genesis 1:1)

There are two subcategories of defiant despair: first, acting, and second, being acted upon or affected. In both of these forms the self is relating itself to itself. In other words, the despair consists in willing to be oneself under two different circumstances.

The self which is *acting* in defiant despair relates itself to itself through imaginary constructions. But because she does not recognize any power over herself, she cannot be earnest in her attention to these imaginary constructions, except in appearance.

Like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, this is stealing from God

the thought—which is earnestness—that God pays attention to one; instead, the self in despair is satisfied with paying attention to itself, which is supposed to bestow infinite interest and significance upon his enterprises, but it is precisely this that makes them imaginary constructions. For even if this self does not go so far into despair that it becomes an imaginatively constructed god—no derived self can give itself more than it is in itself by paying attention to itself. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, pp. 68–69)

For Kierkegaard, no human, because of the very nature of existence, can give herself meaning. To do so is to be like Prometheus, to steal meaning (i.e. “earnestness”) from God. That earnestness is that God is concerned with the individual, and the individual therefore cannot be a true self until there is a relation between the individual’s self and God. In other words, the very meaning of the individual’s self depends upon his relationship to God, the only steadfast and non-created eternal person. When a person tries to give meaning to himself, he steals what only God can give. So instead of becoming itself, the defiant person is really becoming no self because there is nothing eternally steadfast in the self it is becoming. Because there is nothing the defiant self will strive for that is eternal, then the self is simply arbitrary, always able to stop becoming and start again. Such a self is never more than a hypothesis and so does not continue to become more and more itself. On the contrary, the self is its own master, which is its pleasure, delight, and despair. But upon closer examination such a self is a king without a country, ruling nothing, because rebellion is always at hand, the rebellion being as legitimate as the king (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 69). A person in this kind of despair

might be like the stoic philosophers, who by use of their infinite self would “think” their way to contentment. If tragedy befalls them, they interpret it in such a way that it does not effect them. This is the extreme of the “self-made man,” in fact so “self made” there is no self which has any criteria besides that which is made. Such people make their self their will, their self becomes whatever they choose with no external reference. But at the same time their self is nothing, because whatever they are this minute, they may be different the next, because their will is all they look to for their self.

The self which is *acted upon* in defiant despair is a self which, when it encounters some difficulty, the infinite self might try (unsuccessfully) to reject the difficulty or pretend the difficulty does not exist. In fact, to try to abstract out of suffering, since it is part of the self, would also be despair (Nordentoft, 1978). The defiant self refuses to hope that what it is in need of (in an earthly sense), or the difficulty it is facing, will ever come to an end. Because the self cannot abstract away from the difficulty (because it is part of its necessity), the self accepts it forever. In reality, it is not the difficulty that is offending the defiant self, but rather the defiant self is offended by all reality. Therefore, the defiant self does not will to be himself in spite of the difficulty, or without the difficulty, but instead, in defiance of all existence, she wills herself to be with the difficulty, to take it along with her life, to flout her suffering. Again, Shakespeare shows us such a person in the character of Richard III:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty

To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
 I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
 Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity:
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determined to prove a villain
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

(Shakespeare, n.d., *King Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 1)

The defiant self does not want to hope in the possibility of help—from God or anyone else. This is not to say the defiant self who is acted upon will never accept any help at all. She is willing to accept the kind of help she wants, under the conditions she decides. But she is not willing to accept unconditioned help from a superior or even supreme helper for that would require giving herself up to the helper, and that would not be tolerable to the defiant self (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 71).

The acted upon defiant self can go one step further in increasing consciousness, and so the intensification of its despair, results and ultimately

becomes what Kierkegaard calls “demonic despair”. For the defiant self that is acted upon, it sometimes happens that the difficulty that is acting upon the self becomes the object of all its passion. Kierkegaard gives an extraordinary example of a person in demonic despair:

It usually originates as follows. A self that in despair wills to be itself is pained in some distress or other that does not allow itself to be taken away from or separated from his concrete self. So now he makes precisely this torment the object of all his passion, and finally it becomes a demonic rage. By now, even if God in heaven and all the angels offered to help him out of it—no, he does not want that, now it is too late. Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony, but he was kept waiting; now it is too late, now he would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life, and it is of particular significance to him to make sure that he has his torment on hand and that no one takes it away from him—for then he would not be able to demonstrate and prove to himself that he is right. This eventually becomes such a fixation that for an extremely strange reason he is afraid of eternity, afraid that it will separate him from his, demonically understood, infinite superiority over other men, his justification, what he wills to be. He began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and now he has finally become so concrete that it would be impossible to become eternal in that sense; nevertheless, he wills in despair to be himself. What demonic madness—the thought that most infuriates him is that

eternity could get the notion to deprive him of his misery.

(Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 72)

Kierkegaard thinks that such people are only rarely found in reality, and examples of such people are mostly found in the characters in poetry.

Perhaps one of the best examples of such a person does come from literature, namely Ahab, in the final moments of his obsession with the whale that took his leg, when at last he confronts Moby Dick with his harpoon:

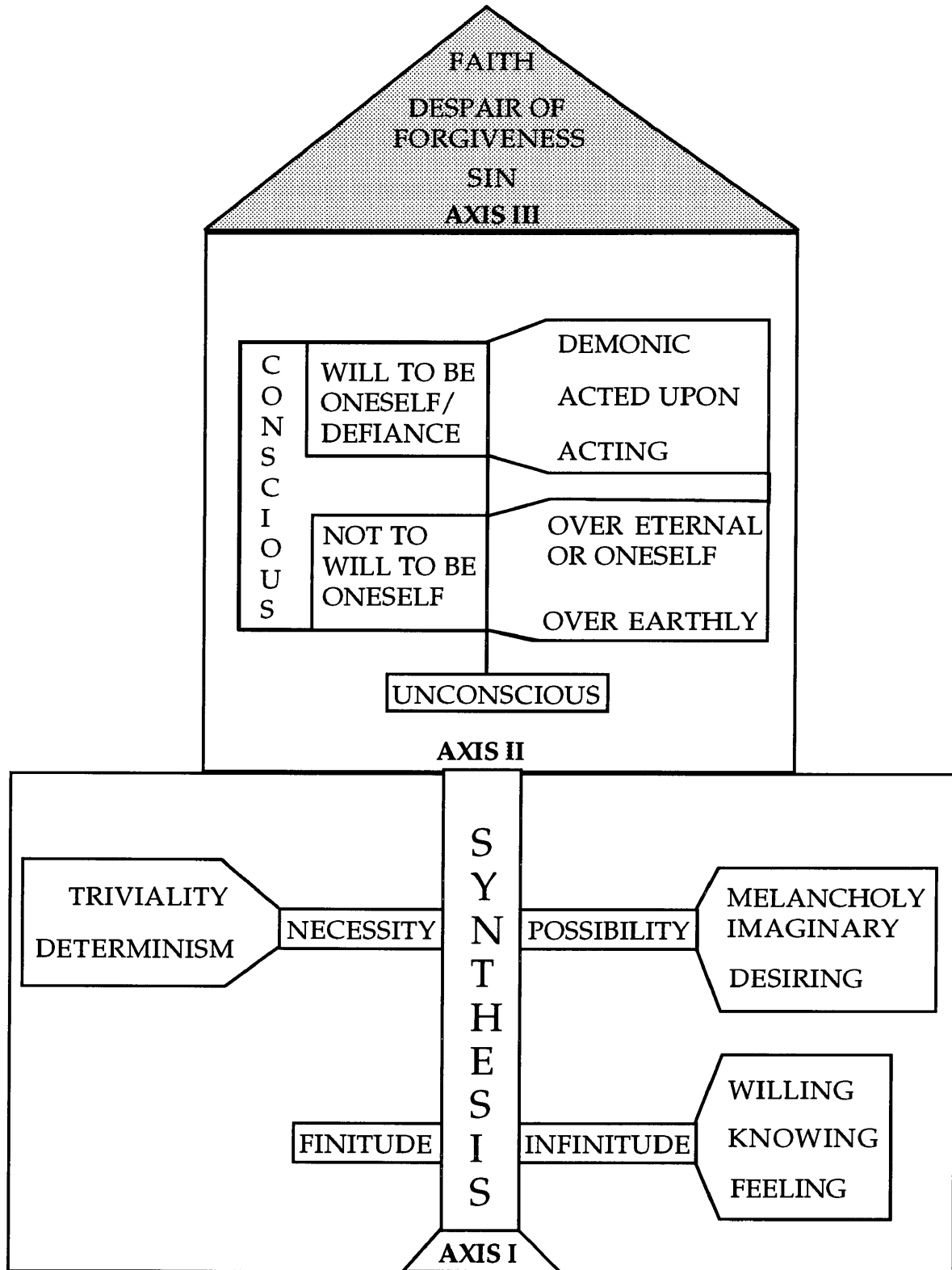
I turn my body from the sun. . . . Oh! ye . . . death-glorious ship! must ye then perish, and without me? Am I cut off from the last fond pride of meanest shipwrecked captains? Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. . . . Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear! (Melville, 1851/1980, p. 534)

The lower the form of despair—the less self and the less inward reflection. The higher the form of despair—the more self and the more inward reflection. The higher the form of despair—the less important are the external attributes despair uses to conceal itself and the more inward reflection begins to become its own peculiar world of inclosing reserve. The more spiritual the despair becomes the more it closes itself up in inclosing reserve and eliminates any external signs, or perhaps the self has an externality which it uses to hide behind where no one will look for it so it

may have a world “ex-clusively” for itself “where the self in despair is restlessly and tormentedly engaged in willing to be itself” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 73). Demonic despair is the most intense form of despair, “in hatred toward existence, it wills to be itself, wills to be itself in accordance with its misery” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 73). Demonic despair wills itself out of spite for existence, in spite wants to force itself on the power that created it. The person in demonic despair thinks she is evidence against the goodness of existence, and she wants to be that evidence, and so she wants to be herself, herself in torment, to be a protest against all existence, a denunciation of God as creator (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, pp. 73–74).

The way Becker interprets Kierkegaard’s defiant despair is considerably more social than what is apparent in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Becker views defiant despair as the defiance of the person who considers herself to be a self-creation, the person who sees herself as the master of her own fate. Such a person may be the kind of person who lives only for the day, with a certain animal vitality of sensuality. Yet she lacks reflection, and so is not self possessed. Demonic rage is rage against existence itself. In a social context, Becker states that peoples’ defiance takes on the form of the production of consumer goods and military hardware as a way to defy accident, evil and death. This human capacity for defiance and demonic rage is against a world that cannot be within our control. Becker asserts this defiance against our limitations gave us Hitler and war; because if we cannot be omnipotent as gods, we can destroy like gods (Becker, 1973, pp. 84–85). Certainly this thesis has shown that *The Sickness Unto Death* can be interpreted as a commentary on culture, as is apparent from the very criticism Kierkegaard makes of the

individual merging with the masses. Some have even seen *The Sickness Unto Death* as a carefully laid out criticism of the Danish culture of the time (Kirmmse, 1981). But to go so far as cultural defiance giving us Hitler is clearly an extrapolation by Becker.



C) The Theological Self: Despair, Sin, and Faith: Axis III

In this examination of Kierkegaard's work on despair, despair has been illustrated on two different axis, first with regard to how the self relates itself to itself (infinite/finite, possibility/necessity) and without regard to consciousness, and, second, with regard to consciousness (not to will to be oneself/to will to be oneself). Lastly, Kierkegaard introduces a third dimension in relation to the other two, the religious dimension. Once again this follows from his definition of the self, part of which is the relating of the self to the power that established it. But it is not just the establishment of the relation, because there was in fact a relation between God and the person who in despair willed to be herself. This new dimension is a whole new way of looking at the self from the religious category where despair is related to sin:

Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself.* Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair.

The emphasis is on *before God, or with a conception of God*; it is the conception of God that makes sin dialectically, ethically, and religiously what lawyers call "aggravated" despair. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 77)

Thus, sin adds a new dimension or axis to the ways the self can despair. "Sin is a new 'qualification' of despair, and not simply the intensification of a previous state or condition. It is a genuine transition" (Ferguson, 1995, p. 144). Because the self can simultaneously despair on all three axes at once, the emerging self can be examined on all three axes. A person may be in despair

of the infinite, despair to will to be himself and also in a state of sin because it is before God.

But, for Kierkegaard, once the analysis turns to sin, it leaves psychology behind. For that reason, the religious forms of despair shall only be discussed briefly. Although the transition into the religious sphere requires at least the beginning movements of faith, leaving the realm of what can be grasped by human reason, Kierkegaard nonetheless continues to add some insights into the psychological aspects of the despair. While Kierkegaard makes the distinction between psychology and religion, it is clear that he makes this distinction based on the limits of reason, not the importance of religion to the self. He is clear that health of the self depends on the addition of the religious aspect. Becker agrees the distinction is artificial with regard to an understanding of the self. "Psychiatric experience and religious experience cannot be separated either subjectively in the person's own eyes or objectively in the theory of character development" (Becker, 1973, p. 67).

Kierkegaard begins his religious discussion by reconsidering his psychological discussion. "Who cares about these high-powered psychological investigations to the nth degree" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, pp. 78–79)? Kierkegaard states that his purpose in the psychological discussion was to point out gradation in the consciousness of self, "within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 79). The consciousness of the self is intensified depending on its criterion, and the "criterion of the self is always: that directly before which it is a self" whether that be a child before its parents, the citizen before the state, or the individual before God (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, pp. 79–80). "By a 'criterion'

he means that by which a self measures itself. To be a self is to be a being who is striving toward a certain ideal; that ideal provides the 'measure' for the self" (Evans, 1995, p. 85). Thus when the self is before God, the ultimate and infinite reality, the self takes on a new quality of infinite reality because God is the self's criterion, and so sin as despair becomes infinitely magnified. On this new axis then are two more forms of (religiously oriented) despair, sin and to despair over (i.e. not accept) the forgiveness of sin. To go beyond these two forms of despair, the self must be given over, lost, so to speak, by willing to be itself, resting transparently (self-consciously and honestly) *before God*, which is faith. Therefore, Kierkegaard points out, the opposite of sin is not virtue (a merely human criterion), but faith: "that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 82). In this fully actualized self, the person of faith, the individual is free of despair.

Despite all of Kierkegaard's focus on despair, the person who arrives at faith has a most extraordinary life, because it is life. The person of faith is in complete communion with the present moment, self aware and aware of her environment, because she has nothing to hide behind anymore. In terms of existential psychology, the goal of a person is to be authentic, and for Kierkegaard to be authentic is "the willingness to be oneself, standing 'transparently' before God" (Sahakian, 1976, p. 62-63). She is fully alive. This is hardly a bleak picture of human beings.

Becker believes that Kierkegaard hit upon a vital truth of psychology which, by its nature, transcends psychology. Once a person fully realizes the truth about herself and her life, eliminating her defenses and repressions,

then "salvation" can only come by way of "the destruction of the self through facing up to the anxiety and terror of existence" (Becker, 1973, p. 89). In agreement with Kierkegaard, Becker thinks the self must be given up so it can begin to relate itself to a power beyond itself. It is that refusal to give up the self to the power that established it that keeps the self in defiance, but if given up can lead to the elimination of despair in faith. But once a person rids herself of all her earthly supports she can then relate herself to her creator, which is a real source of creative power, not a merely intermediate power or a concocted "power" used as a defense. Once a relation has been established to an Ultimate Being, then a person has unlimited possibility and true freedom, which is faith (Becker, 1973, p. 90).

To Becker, the keystone of Kierkegaard's structure of the self is faith. Without faith, the dropping of a person's defenses would simply leave her exposed to her aloneness, helplessness, and constant anxiety. If a person is to be completely self-aware, not ignore the truth of her own limitations, isolation, responsibility, meaning, and ultimate oblivion, then her only hope is faith, which gives her life ultimate value, not just social, cultural, or historical value (Becker, 1973, p. 91).

Other psychological perspectives have been given to Kierkegaard's concept of faith. Lorraine (1995) has suggested that the fundamental transformation found in faith may be similar to the transformation found in the psychoanalytic process utilized by Julia Kristeva.

Evans (1995) has compared Kierkegaard's views on the God-relation to certain versions of the object-relations form of psychoanalytic theory. These object-relations theorists also postulate a divided self, usually based upon a

failure of having a proper, loving relationship with the “other” (usually one’s mother) during infancy. If this is the case, it results in a fractured or “schizoid” personality. Kierkegaard’s view is similar in that he also believes the self is fragmented, has a misrelation, if it fails in its relationship to the “other.” Only for Kierkegaard the “other” is ultimate, is God. While Kierkegaard thought that the God-relation would only start to take form after childhood (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 49, n.), he is not necessarily contradicting an object-relations view and, in fact, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard considers some of the issues that effect children and their future “despairing” within the context of original sin. Because Kierkegaard and this object-relations theory are dealing with fundamentally different “others,” it is no surprise they take place at different ages. However, they also have a similar core, namely that a person’s mental health, at a very fundamental level, depends on its relation to another person and how that relationship unfolds.

But Kierkegaard also has a fundamentally different view from these object-relations theorists of how the necessary relationship can be worked out. For these object-relations theorists, if the child has a schizoid personality problem because she had inadequate love from her mother in infancy, then the way to deal with this is for the therapist to “become” that necessary source of love. Therefore, the goal of therapy is for the therapist to be accepting and non-judgmental. But for Kierkegaard, despair is deeper and more universal: a therapist can never provide the ultimate relation of meaning which can only be provided by an ultimate being through a relationship of faith.

But even if the therapist is a model of love and acceptance, the

fundamental problem, from Kierkegaard's perspective, is that such a therapist would still provide an inadequate "criterion" of the self. The therapist would still be an inadequate substitute for the person whose love and acceptance can genuinely form the basis of selfhood.

This is not to say that therapy cannot be helpful for individuals who are psychologically crippled. Though I am not sure Kierkegaard has room for this idea, the therapist may indeed help a troubled individual move toward wholeness, much as a relationship with a good friend may help an individual. It may even be in some cases that therapy is part of what makes faith possible, since for some people the pre-self may be so broken that the idea of a loving, accepting God is literally unbelievable. . . .

In the final analysis, however, the ultimate cure is not human therapy but faith in God, at least as Kierkegaard sees it. My identity or non-identity cannot be rooted in the acceptance or non-acceptance of another self struggling towards wholeness. Only the absolute love of God can provide the security which allows the self to accept itself completely as it is, while recognizing the possibility and responsibility for becoming what it may fully be. The cure for the human condition is simply faith. . . . Such a faith [resting transparently before God] would mean that the unconscious as that part of myself which I cannot and will not recognize has been blotted out. I would know myself, even as I am known. (Evans, 1995, pp. 95–96)

While therapy cannot bring the ultimate goal of wholeness, the complete throwing off of despair, it can help to lead a person along the path. Thus,

Evans' assessment seems accurate. Kierkegaard himself describes *The Sickness Unto Death* as a work of psychology, and places the first half of the work within the realm of reason, not faith. Therefore, I think Evans is quite right in this respect: The forms of despair which deal with the misrelations of the infinite and finite, the possible and necessary, and of the consciousness are all found within the realm of reason and therefore can be brought into therapy. They do not require faith.

V

CONCLUSION

In the third canto of the *Inferno*, Dante sees countless souls being buffeted about by the wind, gathered together in huge groups, first following one banner, and then another.

The sorry souls who lived without disgrace and without praise. The heavens, that their beauty not be lessened, have cast them out, nor will deep Hell receive them--even the wicked cannot glory in them . . . their blind life is so abject that they are envious of every other fate. . . . These wretched ones, who never were alive. (Alighieri, 1980)

In this thesis I have explicated and interpreted Søren Kierkegaard's psychological work *The Sickness Unto Death*. In so doing I have attempted to make this work more accessible to those working in the mental health professions. In performing psychotherapy it is impossible to help the client move in any direction unless there is some assumption concerning the ultimate purpose of therapy. Counselors do not commit random acts of

therapy. Given Kierkegaard's framework, it is possible to use it as a foundation for the analysis of where a client is in his need for therapy. Further, I have presented and discussed the views of others in, or concerned with, the mental health field. I have provided these additional authors as examples of how Kierkegaard can be integrated or understood from diverse understandings of therapy.

Having laid out Kierkegaard's theoretic framework in *The Sickness Unto Death*, I will now suggest what I think is the role of the therapist within this schema. In this regard, I think analysis of Kierkegaard found in this thesis provides two important concepts for the therapist: authenticity and the limits of therapy.

Near the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard presents a good case example of what he means by the absence of self and how it manifests in everyday life.

A young girl despairs of love, that is, she despairs over the loss of her beloved, over his death or his unfaithfulness to her. This is not declared despair; no, she despairs over herself. This self of hers, which she would have been rid of or would have lost in the most blissful manner had it become "his" beloved, this self becomes a torment to her if it has to be a self without "him." (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 20)

What, then, can a therapist do for such a person when the therapist is thinking in Kierkegaard's terms? Kierkegaard did not give any techniques or prescriptions for helping such a client, but instead gives the client and therapist a definition of what it means to help. Certainly the only direction the therapist can go is to help the client become free to be herself. Thus,

Existential therapists simply use a variety of techniques to help their clients, the techniques being secondary to the understanding of where the therapy needs to go (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 383). In the case of the young woman above, the therapist would need to look at which axis might be most profitable to work from first. If her desire to get rid of her self has moved from her absent beloved to the fantastic, then the therapist needs to look at helping her become more concrete. It seems from the description that she is not very self-conscious, and so the therapist and client may need to work on her becoming "an individual." For example, Gestalt techniques would be possibilities for both issues. In summary, the role of the therapist is to help the client become her self, so she does not become like Dante's "wretched ones" who never were alive, envious even of the damned. Kierkegaard may not have provided techniques, but he did provide a map.

On the other hand, according to Kierkegaard, there are very definite limits to what the therapist and client can accomplish together. Kierkegaard's understanding of what human existence is about, what it even means to exist, are radically Christian. But Kierkegaard leaves psychology behind when he enters the religious arena, the arena of sin and faith. From Kierkegaard the therapist learns that at most he can help his client to the brink, to what might be called "sin-consciousness" (McCarthy, 1981), on Kierkegaard's path to selfhood, but no further. For Kierkegaard, faith is the same thing as to have a self: "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 131). But faith, as a gift which can only be given by God, is clearly not within the abilities of either the client or therapist. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, complete

“mental health” is not within the grasp of any human being by his own effort. With this in mind, the therapist needs to understand his client’s and his own abilities and limitations. Or as Kierkegaard said, paraphrasing Plutarch: “From man, man learns to speak, from the gods, to be silent” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 127).

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