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# The Dialectic of Sin and Faith in “Being Able to be Oneself”

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**Abstract:** Kierkegaard understands the human self as a process of becoming that is situated in a dialectical relation between sin and faith. The chief task of each human being is to become a true self, instead of assuming a fraudulent identity. This authentic selfhood is grounded in the possibility to be oneself, a condition that is established in faith. Yet this achievement of true selfhood presupposes a state of sin in which the self is regarded as necessarily existing. Thus the aim of this essay is to demonstrate how Kierkegaard argues for a novel modern conception of the self as a dynamic interplay between possibility and necessity, sin and faith, in his attempt to respond to the spiritlessness of his age by vindicating the truth of Christianity.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard, authenticity, self-knowledge, paradox, possibility, Christianity

## 1 Introduction

In our present age a widespread phenomenon, found particularly but not exclusively among young people, is the quest for self-discovery, or expressed more colloquially, “finding oneself”. This becomes an issue for many because of a sense of disorientation and confusion in one’s station in life and is pursued through various means, such as personal relationships, the education system, career choices, family situations, leisure activities, and so on. Human beings want to discover their place in the world, a situation which bestows meaning and value on their lives, but more importantly they are in search of realizing their true selves. Finding an answer to the question “who am I?” – the perennial Socratic challenge – lies at the basis of this modern form of restlessness. It has been observed that the overriding ethical value in contemporary western culture is authenticity, understood as being true to oneself.<sup>1</sup> The moral ideal, as Charles Taylor puts it, implicit in our pluralistic and fragmented modern civilization is no longer to live in obedience to certain normative principles or dogmas, as expressed paradigmatically in religious traditions, but has been conceived, since the Romantic period and inspired by the rise of individualism, as one’s striving to be genuine, as actualizing one’s potential, as fulfilling and developing oneself—in short, to become who one truly is. As admirable and pervasive as this ideal of authenticity is, there are two considerations that must be addressed if this ideal is to be a coherent one.

In the first place the existential situation of being true to oneself necessarily implies that it is possible *not* to be oneself. After all, the only reason why anybody would identify authenticity or genuineness as one’s goal in life is because one perceives a deficiency or fault in one’s character. Here we are dealing with the inescapable judgments of value that need to be made with respect to one’s own life and person. However, the assessment of oneself as being true or false, complete or incomplete, a success or a failure, requires some standard or criterion according to which this assessment is made. Put simply, it is not possible to

<sup>1</sup> See Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 25-29.

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evaluate one's own existence in the absence of all normative standards that pertain to what constitutes the true and fulfilled life. Therefore, the typically modern task of being oneself requires some criterion of truth in order for it to be a viable option.

The second consideration touches upon the enabling forces in this enterprise. To be oneself presupposes that one *is able* to be oneself. The individual must possess an original ability, a primordial possibility, to be an authentic self. Yet paradoxically this ability must already be grounded in an apprehension of what the authentic self is and should be, otherwise the project of self-fulfillment becomes a surd. This is the age-old problem, first presented in Plato's *Meno*, about the impossibility of seeking anything. Meno's Paradox can be put in the following terms: if you know what you are seeking, then there is no need to seek it, since you manifestly know it, and conversely, if you do not know what you are seeking, then seeking is pointless because you do not know what to seek and would not even recognize it if you found it; therefore, seeking anything is impossible.<sup>2</sup> This paradox can be transposed into the present discussion as follows: if one does not know what authentic selfhood is then one would not be able to begin developing oneself towards this goal, and on the other hand, if one *knew* what authentic selfhood is, meaning that one *was* an authentic self, then there would be no need for self-improvement since one would already be embodying one's ideal.<sup>3</sup> Another way of expressing this idea is to pose the question: what does it mean *to be able* to be oneself? One of the central concerns of this paper, therefore, is to elucidate the nature of this ability to be a true self, which is a highly complex puzzle.

Søren Kierkegaard introduced a novel understanding of the self into modernity which tackled the intriguing idea of living a true life. As Jürgen Habermas argues, "Kierkegaard was the first philosopher who answered the basic ethical question regarding the success or failure of one's own life with a postmetaphysical concept of 'being-able-to-be-oneself'".<sup>4</sup> Instead of relying on traditional metaphysical concepts to describe the good life, principles that are no longer universally acceptable, according to Habermas' philosophical outlook, Kierkegaard provided a formal, or in Habermas' words, "postmetaphysical" doctrine of the self which could apply to a pluralistic framework. The striking feature of Kierkegaard's account of the self, however, is that it remains thoroughly theological, a fact which demonstrates Kierkegaard's overt rejection of the secularized portrait of human nature taking hold since the Enlightenment. For Kierkegaard, the self is a spiritual being who is engaged in a dialectical movement between sin and faith. God's interaction with the human being, as revealed in Christianity in the Incarnation, penetrates to the core of what it means to be a true self. In presenting this Kierkegaardian view of being-able-to-be-oneself I shall first discuss his notion of sin, followed by that of faith, and finally arrive at the synthesis of both in the self.

## 2 The seriousness of sin

Before one investigates an object to determine its essence and properties it is imperative that one have an understanding of the adequacy or commensurability of the adopted approach to the constitution of the object. For instance, if I desired to know why Tom is so violently ill, I would naturally avail myself of the expertise of the medical profession by calling upon a physician instead of turning to, for example, the good intentions of an artist. To be sure, a potter as a potter is no reliable guide to the diagnosis and treatment of a physical ailment. By contrast, it would be equally foolhardy to seek counsel from a physician when the goal is to become a skillful painter. When we analyze an object, therefore, we need to be aware of just what kind of an object it is and to approach its study in an appropriate manner, such as by posing suitable questions and by recognizing its incompatibility with certain types of inquiry. It is precisely this hermeneutical

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Meno and Other Dialogues*, 113 (80d). For a discussion of Meno's Paradox see Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave: Moral Inquiry in Plato's Meno*, 52-57.

<sup>3</sup> The tacit assumption at work in this proposition is the standard ethical principle, espoused by the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, that knowing and being are identical, or to use medieval terminology, they are convertible with each other. To know the good is in fact to be good. Expressed negatively, it is impossible to maintain that one could actually know the good *without* being good at the same time.

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 5.

problem that leads Kierkegaard to assert that sin cannot be analyzed scientifically, but belongs to a wholly different order of investigation.<sup>5</sup>

Kierkegaard, through the mouthpiece of Vigilius Haufniensis,<sup>6</sup> repeatedly stresses in *The Concept of Dread*, also translated as *The Concept of Anxiety*, the work most centrally devoted to the problem of sin, that science can neither understand nor explain sin and that if one adopts a scientific methodology and point of view one will undoubtedly misinterpret and misrepresent the very nature of sin. By the term “science” Kierkegaard explicitly singles out metaphysics, ethics (what he will eventually call “first ethics”, that is, the naïve Greek ethics), and psychology as examples, but it is unmistakable that he has the Hegelian definition of science in mind. For Hegel, science is the system of absolute knowing, which is what philosophy is to become.<sup>7</sup> There are two important difficulties with a scientific analysis of sin. First, since Aristotle, science has been conceived as dealing with universals or generalities. It is obvious that a system of knowledge that occupies itself exclusively with universals has no room in it for particular individuals. But sin is of such a nature that it inheres in individual selves and as such cannot be subsumed under a category of universality. In this way the concept of sin does not belong to any science by its very nature as a particularized entity. The second problem pertains to the disposition of the knower in relation to science. The modern conception of science entertains the ideal of detached, dispassionate, value-neutral knowledge. The paradigmatic scientist is a disinterested spectator who does not allow his personal feelings, thoughts and beliefs to play any role in the acquisition of scientific knowledge. This objectifying posture in science conflicts with the essence of sin which incorporates and determines the entire being of the human self. It is impossible to gain objective knowledge of sin independently of one’s self-consciousness. The only viable way to understand sin is to recognize that one is already involved and hence caught up in sin, a condition which makes detachment for the purpose of scientific knowing impossible. On this point Kierkegaard writes as follows:

Science cannot explain such things. Every science has its province either in immanent logic, or in an immanence within a transcendence which it cannot explain. Now sin is precisely that transcendence, that *discrimen rerum*, by which sin enters into the individual as an individual. In no other way does sin enter the world, and never has it entered otherwise. When the individual then is foolish enough to inquire about sin as about something irrelevant to him, he speaks as a fool; for either he does not know in the least what the question is about and cannot possibly learn to know it, or else he knows it

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 14: “Sin does not properly belong in any science”. See also pp. 19, 24, 45-46, 51, 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> The subject of the meaning of the pseudonymous writings and the nature of their relationship with Kierkegaard himself is one of constant debate. Although Kierkegaard did assert that the pseudonymous works must be read from the point of the view of the imaginative authors to whom they are attributed, Kierkegaard was clever and, if one may suggest, paradoxical enough to leave enough room to allow for these works to be traced back to him as author, albeit in highly nuanced ways. For example, as Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong point out in their “Historical Introduction” to their translation of *Either/Or, Part 1*, (xv-xvi) Kierkegaard insisted on the pseudonymity of this work, but also wanted to be recognized as the author by Regine Olsen, his fiancée, who is featured as the subject matter of the book. Needless to say, this is a highly complex matter and the scope of this paper does not allow for exploring this issue in detail. To be clear, I follow scholars, such as Paul Dietrichson (see “Kierkegaard’s Concept of the Self”), who are disinclined to keep separate Kierkegaard’s writings based on the avowed authorship, but instead discern common themes and ideas that flow through all of Kierkegaard’s works, whether their authorship is pseudonymous or acknowledged. It is my considered opinion that the pseudonyms add dimensions of depth to Kierkegaard’s writings and provide additional possible interpretations regarding the meaning of the works, but what they do not do is definitely disassociate them from Søren Kierkegaard as their primary author. Put in another way, for Kierkegaard to write a book pseudonymously is to infer that Kierkegaard wanted to express something to his audience and the way that he chose to do this is by means of the invention of pseudonyms as the authors for his works. However, this contrivance does not in the least mean that Kierkegaard is not the author of the works, and furthermore, that the views espoused in the works cannot be attributed to Kierkegaard, regardless of his overt statements on the matter. For an informative study on this topic see McKinnon, “Kierkegaard and his Pseudonyms: A Preliminary Report”.

<sup>7</sup> See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 3-4: “The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be *actual* knowing – that is what I have set myself to do. The inner necessity that knowing should be Science lies in its nature, and only the systematic exposition of philosophy itself provides it. But the *external* necessity, so far as it is grasped in a general way, setting aside accidental matters of person and motivation, is the same as the inner, or in other words it lies in the shape in which time sets forth the sequential existence of its moments. To show that now is the time for philosophy to be raised to the status of a Science would therefore be the only true justification of any effort that has this aim, for to do so would demonstrate the necessity of the aim, would indeed at the same time be the accomplishing of it”.

and understands it, and knows too that no science can explain it. How sin came into the world every man understands by himself alone; if he would learn it from another, he *eo ipso* misunderstands it.<sup>8</sup>

Sin can only be properly comprehended from the point of view of subjectivity, from the position of the self. Sin transcends every finite, demarcated scientific system and as such cannot be contained by one. Moreover, to treat sin as an abstract object which has no bearing on one's own life is to distort its essence and fundamentally to misunderstand it. Therefore, a scientific investigation of sin is impossible because each human self is constituted by and involved in sin, a condition which does not lend itself to the cognitive apprehension of sin.<sup>9</sup>

If Kierkegaard rules out the scientific or rational analysis of sin, we might rightly ask ourselves how then we can become aware of sin. The answer lies in the proposition that the consciousness of sin is acquired in and through the consciousness of the self. According to Kierkegaard, "sin is a specification of the individual".<sup>10</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard echoes a prominent doctrine in the German philosophical tradition, found most notably in J. G. Fichte and F. W. J. Schelling, which maintains that the self came into being with sin, a self-positing act of the will.<sup>11</sup> The correct concept of sin is that "it lies in the will"<sup>12</sup> and that it is basically affirmative, in the sense that it denotes an active, deliberate expression of the will rather than a mere privation of the good or passive state of spirit.<sup>13</sup> The upshot of this view is that to be a self is to be essentially sinful, so intimately do sin and selfhood relate to each other.<sup>14</sup> It is for this reason that Kierkegaard asserts that "the more self, the more intense the sin".<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, what exactly constitutes the nature of sin in a material aspect?

Because sin is a primary constitutive factor of selfhood the only viable method of inquiring into its essence is to examine oneself. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that Kierkegaard follows Socrates, the preeminent psychologist, along this path of acquiring self-knowledge. For Socrates, self-knowledge is obtained in an ethical way of life ordained to the procurement of knowledge (*episteme*). This explains why Socrates understood "sin" (*hamartia*) in terms of ignorance, since virtue is knowledge—an echo of Plato's *Meno*.<sup>16</sup> The problem with this interpretation of sin, however, is that it does not account for the situation in which somebody has knowledge of the good and yet does not act on it.<sup>17</sup> The famous Paulinian dilemma—to know what is right and yet not to do it and even to act contrary to it—cannot be explained according to this Socratic paradigm of virtue which has no room for the reality of willful defiance. Only an ethics which acknowledges the fact of sin and attempts to incorporate it within its parameters does the human condition justice. Hence Kierkegaard contrasts what he calls the "first ethics" of the Greeks, who did not entertain the notion of sin, with the "second ethics" of Christian dogmatics that recognizes the reality of sin, in particular original sin, and the impediment it poses to the realization of the good in human life.<sup>18</sup> This discussion brings to the fore Kierkegaard's conviction that Socrates, despite his genius and exemplary character, failed to understand truly who he was and hence did not achieve genuine self-knowledge because he did not recognize the reality of sin and how it influences one's self-knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 153: "By thinking sin does a person himself perhaps become 'sin' – *cogito ergo sum*? A splendid suggestion! However, there need be no fear of becoming sin in this way – pure sin – precisely because sin cannot be thought. Even speculative philosophy would have to admit that, since sin in effect falls below the level of the concept".

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 71: "But the real 'self' is first posited by the qualitative leap. In the situation preceding this there can be no question of such a thing".

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 125.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-133.

<sup>14</sup> This is a view echoed by Kristen K. Deede in her article "The infinite qualitative difference: Sin, the self, and revelation in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard", 37: "Sin, then, is absolutely central to Kierkegaard's discussion of the self or, more accurately, the failure of the self to become a self".

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 147.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124.

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 21.

This confrontation with Socrates raises once again the issue of the hermeneutical perspective of one's investigation of sin. How precisely, then, should one inquire into sin? Kierkegaard addresses this issue by focusing on one's attitude or disposition to this reality and to oneself. Only by assuming an attitude of seriousness, Kierkegaard tells us, can we become aware of sin.<sup>19</sup> The idea of seriousness pervades Kierkegaard's entire corpus and lies at the heart of his inquiry into sin and selfhood. Kierkegaard emphasizes: "To the concept of sin corresponds the mood of seriousness".<sup>20</sup> For somebody like Kierkegaard who has assumed an ironic, playful, and at times comical tone in his writings, it seems strange at first glance for him to be emphasizing seriousness as the correct manner of approaching the study of sin. Yet as Kierkegaard states, it is imperative to have the right sentiment and the right mood when dwelling on sin.<sup>21</sup>

Although seriousness has no definition, Kierkegaard goes to great lengths to describe its essential features. In a vague sense, seriousness can be depicted as a more intense expression of what the German word *Gemüth* conveys, namely, an overall state of being that incorporates emotion, mind, and self-consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Yet the more precise determination of seriousness is that it is an emanation of inwardness or certitude.<sup>23</sup> As Kierkegaard writes: "inwardness is precisely the fountain which springeth up unto eternal life, and what issues from this fountain is precisely seriousness".<sup>24</sup> By the term "inwardness" Kierkegaard means subjectivity, truth, the process of becoming a self through an act of self-appropriation.<sup>25</sup> To be a self one needs to be decisive to this end and to focus one's energies on becoming a self. This is why Kierkegaard asserts that the true object of seriousness is oneself.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to seriousness we have the person who is not resolutely committed to developing himself in action, but who rather lives a spiritless, lazy, frivolous existence, caught up in the idleness of the crowd and slavishly attached to finite, sensuous reality. It is becoming clear, therefore, that Kierkegaard understands seriousness as the attitude or mood in which a human being is aware of himself and deeply desires to become a true self, as opposed to someone who does not care a whit for his selfhood. As the term itself suggests, the serious person takes his own existence as a self seriously.

Seriousness is the correct mood to investigate sin, therefore, because it is the mood in which a human being is preoccupied centrally with his very self, and as we already know, the self is determined essentially by sin. In short, the more one becomes aware of oneself, the more one becomes aware of sin. However, this conception of self-knowledge suggests that a typical human self is capable solely on his own strength to comprehend what sin is. The error of this supposition lies in the essential characteristic of sin as a refusal to embrace the good. In fact, sin is a theological concept that takes its point of departure from God and the human being's relation to God, or as Kierkegaard puts it, being "before God".<sup>27</sup> What this insight underlines is the "crucial Christian specification"<sup>28</sup> that sin can only be comprehended in reference to God and would lose its intrinsic nature if one did not presuppose the existence of God. But in a paradoxical twist, sin is precisely the human self's rejection of God by

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 56: "The point is to have a right sentiment".

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 134: "Inwardness, certitude is seriousness". Kierkegaard holds that inwardness possesses the quality of certitude, of the state of being certain. The term "certitude" has no doubt Cartesian overtones, but with the Kierkegaardian distinction of being equated with the inner life of human spirit, not merely intellectual life. Thus, faith has the quality of certitude that Kierkegaard is evincing here. Put otherwise, to lack belief is to lack certitude.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 71: "Truth is inwardness; there is no objective truth, but the truth consists in personal appropriation".

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 109: "Sin is: *before God*, or *with the conception of God*, in *despair not wanting to be oneself*, or *wanting in despair to be oneself*. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the heightening of despair. The emphasis is on: *before God*, or on there being the conception of God. What makes sin, dialectically, ethically, religiously, what lawyers would call 'aggravated' despair, is the conception of God".

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 115.

means of the establishment of a solipsistic condition completely separated from God.<sup>29</sup> To be sinful is to affirm in defiance that one's own existence has no relation to God. This demoniacal dread of the good, as Kierkegaard calls it, inscribed into the heart of sin, demonstrates the complexity of the process of becoming a true self. For on the one hand, who one is as a self is a function of one's sinfulness, which manifests itself as an outright rejection of God, and it would appear that one need simply to come to terms with this sinful condition to acquire authentic self-knowledge. But on the other hand, one does not really know what sin is and concomitantly who one truly is without acknowledging and affirming God's existence and one's relation to God, a stance which contradicts the general thrust of sinful selfhood. To affirm God's existence, however, is nothing other than to have faith, which shows itself to be at odds with sin. Bearing this human predicament in mind, then, it is unremarkable to learn Kierkegaard's position that the opposite of sin is not virtue, as Socrates would have it, but faith.<sup>30</sup> Thus it is from the vantage point of faith that we will be able to gain a more complete picture of what sin is and by extension what the self is.

### 3 The offense of faith

As Kierkegaard presents it, sin is marked intrinsically by an ignorance of what sin is since sin rejects what is divine and eternal in the human being. Fortunately, though, the attitude of seriousness provides an opening in the self to be positively receptive to revelation for the sake of self-development. The serious individual desires to become a true self and will be responsive to anything that presents itself as being integral to this goal. Kierkegaard is indeed giving voice to a standard medieval understanding of the human being's journey to God which begins in egoism and self-interest and then gradually turns into a selfless devotion to the divine Other. By stressing the pivotal importance of the mood of seriousness Kierkegaard is demonstrating the modern subjective framework of his meditations, that is, the fact that he begins his reflection from the human, and not divine, point of view. There is a need to transcend the condition of "shut-upness", the self-enclosed prison of subjectivity, and to reach out to the wellspring of otherness in God.<sup>31</sup> It is precisely here that we can notice Kierkegaard's great contribution to the philosophy of religion and his attempt to direct the "natural man" (*anthropos psychichos*), the modern-day secularist, who has no faith and no knowledge of the spiritual realm, to a possible recognition and acceptance of God. However, Kierkegaard does not want merely to vindicate God's existence, in accordance with mere theism, but desires to go one step further and to grapple with a distinctively Christian view of the divine. Christianity is the central issue of Kierkegaard's writings, not an empty, abstract concept of God, something which any rational human being can conceive, whether it be construed in terms of a Supreme Being, a Demiurge, or a Prime Mover.

The uniqueness of Christian revelation is located in the Incarnation, the claim that God became man. An infinite, eternal, and omnipotent being decided to be born a finite, temporal, and mortal human being. As an historical case in point, the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), combating the heresy of Arianism, affirmed as an article of faith that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man. The person of Christ, therefore, manifests a reality that is inscrutable to human reason, namely, the unity of God and man, the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the historical, and the omnipotent and the weak. Reason cannot comprehend the person of Jesus Christ because he is a *paradox*, a reality which contradicts human thought and defies logical explanation. Kierkegaard was well aware of the qualitative difference between mere theism, that is, the concept of God as such, and Christianity, which is rooted in the doctrine of the Atonement. Therefore,

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 115: "This notion of the single human being before God never occurs to speculative thought; it only universalizes particular humans phantastically into the human race. It was exactly for this reason that a disbelieving Christianity came up with the idea that sin is sin, that it is neither here nor there whether it is before God. In other words, it wanted to get rid of the specification 'before God', and to that end invented a new wisdom, which nevertheless, curiously enough, was neither more nor less than what the higher wisdom generally is – the old paganism".

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>31</sup> On the idea of "shut-upness" see Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 110-114.

whenever Kierkegaard speaks about the Paradox as the essence of faith what he has in mind is the doctrine of the Incarnation or Atonement, and not simply a belief in God as such.<sup>32</sup>

The chief problem in human civilization, as Kierkegaard sees it, is a deep-seated unwillingness among human beings, expressed in diverse ways, to take the claims of Christianity *seriously*. If someone confronted the fact of the Incarnation in a serious manner, honestly searching for answers to the profound questions of existence, this act would result in a life-transforming experience for the individual. But as it stands most human beings are not like this. The hope in having human beings open themselves up to God in faith lies in the possibility of offense. The concept of offense is an extremely important one in Kierkegaard’s philosophy and sheds much light on his understanding of religious faith.<sup>33</sup> The possibility of offense can be described as the beginning of faith. In this sense, to be offended means that one is taken aback, shocked, perplexed, or disturbed, emotions which Christianity is supposed to evoke by virtue of its supernatural message of love. Kierkegaard is explicitly relying on the New Testament notion of the *skandalon*, the stumbling block or scandal represented by Jesus Christ to the pagans and Jews.<sup>34</sup> What happens in the offense is that reason, which is incapable of conceiving anything unlike itself, collides with a brute reality of which it cannot make sense. This “autopathic collision”<sup>35</sup> is not something that reason produces, but comes about in and through the Paradox.<sup>36</sup> Reason is offended precisely because it cannot understand the Paradox, that is, the reality of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man. Reason is taken aback and feels insulted by the existence of a reality which it cannot conceptualize and incorporate within its parameters.

In *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard, in the guise of Anti-Climacus, another one of his pseudonyms, outlines three different kinds of offense.<sup>37</sup> The lowest form of offense happens when an individual encounters the Paradox and is basically indifferent towards it. Such an individual has no opinion on the matter and could not really be bothered to engage himself with this reality and as a result carries on with his life as if the Paradox did not exist. According to Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus), indifference and apathy on this fundamental level are clear signs of offense. The second kind of offense can be discerned in the person who is interested in the Paradox and does take notice of it, but who is not willing to believe it. There are countless examples of this kind of individual in our world, such as the philosopher or theologian, a typical university intellectual, who devotes his entire life to studying Christianity in an academic manner and with good intentions and yet who cannot bring himself to embrace the truths revealed therein. Thus Christianity is viewed as a curiosity, as something worth investigating intellectually, but is at the end of the day deemed not to be believable. The final and most egregious example of offense is exhibited by the person who actively condemns Christianity as a falsehood and a lie. One can do this in one of two ways: either by denying Christ’s humanity (Docetism) or by denying Christ’s divinity (rationalism). What we should notice

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<sup>32</sup> See Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 132: “For the paradox results from the doctrine of the atonement”. The exceptions to this rule appear to be Kierkegaard’s discussions of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and Job in *Four Upbuilding Discourses*, both published in 1843. [For the Job discourse see Kierkegaard, “The Lord Gave, and the Lord Hath Taken Away, Blessed be the Name of the Lord”, in *Edifying Discourses: A Selection*, 67-86.] These paragons of faith from the Old Testament certainly did not know Jesus Christ and hence could not have entertained a faith in God understood in terms of the Incarnation. Yet Kierkegaard is clear in describing their faith in the language of the Paradox. The way to reconcile this anomaly with the assertion that Kierkegaard is principally concerned with Christian faith is to situate these two works under the rubric of yet another text which was also published in 1843, namely, *Repetition*. As Edward F. Mooney argues in “*Repetition: Getting the world back*” (in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 282-307), we need to read *Fear and Trembling* and the “Job Discourse” under the aspect of the theory of repetition, that is, as the forward, future-oriented movement in which a seemingly lost situation is restored. This doctrine of repetition is appropriate in the case of Abraham and Job since they, as Old Testament figures, presage the coming of Christ in the New Testament. This orientation towards the future in repetition and the foreshadowing of Christian revelation in the Old Testament come out starkly in Kierkegaard’s avowal that “repetition will come to mean atonement” (297-298).

<sup>33</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 79-144; *Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy*, 39-43; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 518-519; *The Sickness unto Death*, 146-165.

<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 40, n. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Scientific Postscript*, 518.

<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 41: “offense comes into being with Paradox; it *comes into being*”.

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 163-165.

in this third kind of offense is the attempt on the part of the offended consciousness to deny the Paradox as such, that is, the unity of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup>

When reason suffers the offense in the encounter with the Paradox, a feeling of tension and malaise is established in reason. In essence, the offended consciousness does not understand why it is offended because at bottom it is unable to arrive at a coherent grasp of the Paradox. It is only from the point of view of the Paradox that the offense can be understood.<sup>39</sup> This realization of the offense is also the individual's first consciousness of sin.<sup>40</sup> In fact, it is the Paradox that lays down the necessary condition for an individual in order to become aware of one's own sin and to acquire authentic self-knowledge.<sup>41</sup> In the absence of the Paradox the individual could not possibly gain such an insight into his own self. The reconciliation between reason and the Paradox cannot take place by means of reason, but by a third passion adopted by the individual in the form of faith. For Kierkegaard, faith is a function neither of knowledge nor of the will, but is the *condition* or *passion* that unifies or reconciles reason and the Paradox.<sup>42</sup> The miracle of faith opens the individual to what is eternal and to true self-knowledge, something that the individual on his own strength and abilities could never have accomplished.<sup>43</sup> It is through faith, the radical leap outside a purely rational perspective on life, that an individual gives assent to God's having come into being in the world and pays homage to the Paradox.<sup>44</sup> But the question that we need to ask ourselves at this point is the following: what could possibly motivate someone to decide to make the transition from offense to faith? The answer to this question lies squarely with Kierkegaard's concept of the self.

## 4 The synthesis and the possibility to be a self

The direct object of faith is the Paradox, the God-Man.<sup>45</sup> Faith can be construed as the human individual's relation to an objective reality that transcends the confines of subjectivity and yet which simultaneously makes a mark on this same subjectivity. This idea is strongly evinced in Kierkegaard's repeated assertions that faith is neither a doctrine nor an article of knowledge, that is, a condition of immanence, but should be correctly viewed as the human being's connection with eternity and transcendence.<sup>46</sup> However, the human self does not abandon entirely his initial status as a finite, historical self prior to the adoption of faith in his embrace of the Paradox. Therefore what faith produces is a relation between the human self and God, a relation epitomized in the God-Man. It is with this image in mind that Kierkegaard will describe the self as a relation between two poles in *The Sickness unto Death*: the finite and the infinite; the temporal and the eternal, and necessity and freedom.<sup>47</sup> In very suggestive language Kierkegaard will define the self as "a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself".<sup>48</sup> Another possible way of putting it is that the self is a relation between two realities which is conscious of itself as being this relation. However, as Paul Dietrichson argues, this idea of the relation relating to itself should not be interpreted

<sup>38</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 28: "That an individual man is God, declares himself to be God, is indeed the 'offence' *κατ' ἐξοχήν*".

<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 40: "The offended consciousness does not understand itself but is understood by the Paradox".

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-53.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52: "How does the learner then become a believer or disciple? When the Reason is set aside and he receives the condition. When does he receive the condition? In the Moment. What does this condition condition? The understanding of the eternal. But such a condition must be an eternal condition. – He receives accordingly the eternal condition in the Moment, and is aware that he has so received it; for otherwise he merely comes to himself in the consciousness that he had it from eternity. It is in the Moment that he receives it, and from the Teacher himself".

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

<sup>45</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 140-141: "Faith in a pregnant sense has to do with the God-Man. But the God-Man, the sign of contradiction, refuses to employ direct communication – and demands faith". See also *Philosophical Fragments*, 47.

<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



as an activity of self-consciousness, as if it were occasioned by means of a mental posture, but rather is rooted in freedom itself.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the self is nothing but freedom, or as we could put it, the movement of becoming free.<sup>50</sup> Sin, what Kierkegaard will also call despair, distorts this relation and sets up an imbalance so that only one pole of the relation is emphasized at the expense of the other pole and thereby depriving one of freedom. The sinful individual, therefore, is absorbed in his finite, temporal, and necessary self and will ignore and even attempt to eliminate his infinite, eternal and free self. The overcoming of sin in faith will re-establish the genuine relation in its wholeness and redress the imbalance. But it is imperative to recognize that Kierkegaard maintains that faith can only be achieved if one truly desires to be a complete and genuine self as opposed to a deficient and impoverished self, that is, that one really wants to be free.

The definition of faith that Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) offers us in *The Sickness unto Death* is: “in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it”.<sup>51</sup> What is striking about this mature conception of faith, proposed towards the end of his career, is the single-minded, concentrated focus on the nature of the self. Although faith never ceases to be preoccupied principally with the Paradox, Kierkegaard now shifts his emphasis and views faith as a determination of the self. It is faith that empowers a self to be one’s true self which is to be a proper synthesis between the finite and infinite, the temporal and the eternal, and the necessary and the free. But this self-development can only occur if the self wills or wants to become this self. Such a rendition of the problematic at hand underlines the view that what it means to be a true self is tantamount to willing or wanting to be this true self. Indeed, the self is not a substance or object, but is a dynamic movement of becoming, a spiritual synthesis of contradictory realities into a whole. Yet Kierkegaard also includes in this notion of selfhood an explicit reference to God: that the self be grounded transparently in the power that established it. Kierkegaard is affirming that God is the author of the essence of one’s selfhood as a synthesis, a fact which enlightens us with regard to the sources of authenticity in this endeavour to become a true self. For if God is the creator of one’s very selfhood, understood in terms of the synthesis or relation, then it is a matter of course that the recuperation of a lost or missing wholeness in one’s selfhood can only be received from God, the source of truth.

It was asserted previously that selfhood is born with an act of sin and hence is intrinsically constituted by sin. However, in this present discussion we are witnessing a radically different interpretation of selfhood which defines it no longer in terms of sin, but with the category of faith. Is this an inconsistency in Kierkegaard’s conception of the self? Or is there a deeper or higher level upon which these two seemingly disparate interpretations of selfhood can be reconciled with each other? I would like to contend that these two views of selfhood—the one stressing the sinful nature of the self and the other singling out faith as the primary constituent of selfhood—operate in a dialectical fashion to produce the uniqueness of the human self. We have already observed how this is done in our treatment of sin and faith. The reason why this interaction is called “dialectical” is due to Kierkegaard’s claim that the self is spirit, a movement of becoming, and thus wavers back and forth between these two poles of sin and faith. The human self is at one and the same time constituted by sin and by faith, that is, by inauthenticity and authenticity. The Paradox is a reality in our world which provokes and prods human beings to discover their true, inner self which has been occluded by means of sin. This dimension of the Paradox and its relation to the human self points out the important idea that for Kierkegaard the truth of selfhood is already present within each and every self, but that because of the reality of sin in the world the self requires a Teacher who will establish the right conditions according to which this truth may be realized by the self.

The crux of this discussion then is situated in this pivotal idea of being able to be a self or the possibility of being oneself. This is such a central issue for Kierkegaard’s philosophy because it penetrates to the very heart of the problem that has consumed his entire life’s work: how to become a Christian. The challenge here, naturally, is to defend a view of the authenticity of selfhood which is achieved in and through Christian

<sup>49</sup> Dietrichson, “Kierkegaard’s Concept of the Self”, 10: “That the total synthesis relates to itself and thereby attains selfhood is synonymous, then, not with its becoming conscious of itself, but with its becoming free”.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 44, 79, 114, 165.

faith, a tenet which an increasingly secularized and pluralistic world, such as our present one, would find difficult, if not impossible, to accept. This difficulty stems primarily from a misunderstanding of the nature of faith. Many in our world view faith as a proposition or a formulated dogma or espoused doctrine. Kierkegaard rejects such interpretations of faith, seeing it more as a way of existing for the human individual in his or her relation with God. It was, in fact, part of Kierkegaard's mission as a Christian philosopher to elucidate a deeper and more authentic dimension of faith that is all too often ignored and overlooked. Moreover, this secular way of framing the issue, however, would be unacceptable to Kierkegaard who would regard the influence and power of the world over the individual to be yet another instance of despair and the devaluation of selfhood. The struggle of faith is precisely the attempt to pursue possibility in a state of necessity, that is, to overcome the fatalism of the world with the freedom of the true self.<sup>52</sup> According to Kierkegaard, there are two ways to lose possibility: either to succumb to the belief in determinism or fatalism, that everything has become necessary, or to immerse oneself in a trivial and spiritless existence.<sup>53</sup> To lose all hope, to disbelieve, to resign oneself to the sign of the times, would be nothing short of abandoning the possibility deep within to become a complete self and ultimately to recognize the truth of the Paradox. The protreptic style of Kierkegaard's writings shines forth in his insistence that human beings learn from possibility and always listen to its wisdom. "Possibility is so absolutely educative",<sup>54</sup> writes Kierkegaard, because it teaches us that the human self is also eternal and infinite and that with God anything is possible. Being able to be a self, therefore, means to transcend the finite, temporal dimension of human existence and to welcome the Unknown.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 141.