

Kierkegaard's Faces: Pseudonymous Writings on Despair and the Self

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard wrote a great number of works under various pseudonyms. In many cases, pseudonymous authors allowed him to write from various perspectives in order to add narrative layers to his works, but also to create the possibility of dialogue with various facets of himself. Being a devout Christian, yet unorthodox in his faith for the time (he often denounced the Danish Church), issues relating to existence, selfhood, and relation to God were on the forefront of his mind. This paper serves to describe Kierkegaard's own understanding of aesthetic existence, ethical existence, religious consciousness without faith, and faith itself. The concept of despair and its escape via moments of faith will also be explored. Kierkegaard's thoughts will be surveyed from his works, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Either/Or Volumes I and II*, and *Fear and Trembling*.

It becomes exceedingly clear through Kierkegaard's works that aesthetic, ethical, and religious experiences are all important, but none of these things alone can relinquish a self from despair. It is through faith alone, necessitated by special revelation through God, that one can exist without despair. This phenomena is best understood through the case of Abraham's unwavering obedience and (near) sacrifice of Isaac, his son.

The Self & Despair- Anti-Climacus

The first pseudonymous author that will be examined is Anti-Climacus, a persona whom Kierkegaard himself wished to aspire to in regards to religiosity and faith. Anti-Climacus wants

to awaken people to the actuality of despair and the importance of bringing oneself in relation to oneself and to God. To do this, it is necessary to define what *self* and *despair* are. To these matters he states:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis [S.U.D., 13].

In the above passage, Anti-Climacus has handily explained what the self is: a synthesis of three dialectical pairs whose sum is greater than its parts. These pairs are finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, and free and necessary. This being said, a self is not merely the relationship of self to itself. Now that the self has been explained, one can begin to understand despair. Despair itself occurs in two distinct manners, the first being “the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself” [S.U.D., 15], and the second being when one is in misrelation with the power that posits the relationship that makes the synthesis of the relation of the self possible. The power that posits the relationship, according to Anti-Climacus, is the Christian God. To recapitulate, despair may be defined as the misrelation of self to oneself and/or self to God. It is important to note that the self occurs in moments. Therefore, one has to consciously choose to be a self, and despair can occur at any moment; it is not a permanent state of being, but it is possible for it to be so. To live in despair is to be at odds with the purpose sewn into one's own existence.

Again, the six traits, or three dialectic pairs don't constitute a self, but are *a priori* factors sewn into a self by God. To avoid despair is not a mere balancing act; the dialectic pairs are

inseparably woven together, and to neglect one is to reject the tapestry that is the self. God is the power of life, immediate in the life of the self. Anti-Climacus emphasizes upbuilding and wants to develop knowledge that has the purpose of turning people toward inwardness and away from the abstract. Now that self and despair have been adequately defined, we will navigate Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms with these two concepts as touchstones.

Aesthetic Existence- Johannes Climacus

Johannes Climacus, author of the essays in *Either/Or Volume I*, is an individual who embodies an imbalance of the free and necessary as well as the infinite and the finite. By diving headfirst into the infinite, he attempts to escape via the aesthetic. Johannes is a passionate man, though plagued by despair and depression due to his inability to make choices. His fear of repetition and boredom are his ultimate downfall. Despite crafting an infinity of imaginary options for him to take, Johannes feels trapped. In one passage he feels, "as a chessman must feel when the opponent says of it: That piece cannot be moved" [E/O 1, 22]. The analogy of chess directly corresponds with Johannes's existence. His inability to make a significant choice leaves him paralyzed. It is almost akin to a person living in solitary confinement; one can imagine an infinity within their mind, constructing worlds and creatures and adventures, but none of it is grounded in the concrete, and at the end of the day the individual is confined to a cell which they cannot escape not for a lack of want but for fear of what is on the outside.

Possession is an anathema to him as well, and he avoids decisions and cultivates the accidental at all costs. The sheer act of grasping resembles a form of repetition, which according to his rationale, limits the individual. Johannes cannot hope, for hope predetermines the future.

For him, detachment is key, especially in the erotic. He cites Don Juan as the archetype in this manner, and in his own life he explains his tantalization with experiences when he says, “The most beautiful time is the first period of falling in love, when, from every encounter, every glance, one fetches something new to rejoice over” [E/O 1, 24].

In the above quote, Johannes Climacus poetically captures the experience known as “first love.” There comes with it a sense of euphoria, tantalization, and elusiveness. Johannes ultimately fears that this feeling is fleeting, and upon making any sort of decision or commitment that this sense of first love will dissipate. One may imagine a powerful and beautiful lion in the savannah, always out of reach, yet seen with the eyes. The manner in which one is captured by its awe can seemingly never be replicated, and if this lion were to be tamed, extracted from its natural domain, then something mystic is lost and can never be retrieved. This is exactly the feeling Johannes has about first love. It feels as if aesthetic experiences only come in pockets, and the only way to chase them is to reject repetition and expand infinitely into a poetic and detached existence. This may also be called an aesthetic existence, one in which the what little bit of the self is present is a slave to phenomena real and imaginary, and reality becomes blended with a quasi-euphoria with dread creeping around every corner. In a way, Johannes tries to renew the firstness of the aesthetic by drifting from one experience to another, desperate for a moment of amusement that he can escape at any time he pleases.

Johannes himself had an engagement with a woman named Cordelia that he dissolved quickly. Their correspondence was in *Either/Or Volume I*, and an excerpt written by Cordelia in the Seducer’s Diary profoundly captures Johannes’s lack of self: “At times I was like a stranger to him; at times he surrendered completely. Then when I threw my arms around him, everything

changed, and I embraced a cloud” [E/O 1, 309]. Cordelia throwing her arms around him is a sign of love, commitment, and repetition, and upon doing so Johannes dissolves into nothing because he is incapable of commitment, and hardly a self to be embraced at all. The poetic, the imaginative, the possible cannot exist alone, and upon an encounter with even a semblance of the ethical, a decision, a way of becoming, it cannot endure. Johannes states that, “Real enjoyment consists not in what one enjoys but in the idea” [E/O 1, 31]. The idea of Cordelia is certainly different from a concrete relationship with her; this would require a concrete decision, which is not aesthetic but ethical.

The only trace of actuality (or the self) is in his deep depression and seduction of his ex-fiance, Cordelia. Anti-Climacus was also aware of this. According to him, the fantastic only leads people into an imaginative infinity and away from themselves. In his case, what little self he had became a volatilized, abstract sentimentality.

Ethical Existence- Judge William

Judge William, the essayist in *Either/Or Volume II*, makes an attempt to enlighten Johannes Climacus about the fault in his ways by introducing the possibility of an ethical existence. Ultimately, Judge William wants to provide a window, an opportunity for Johannes to become a self and escape the phantasmagoria of a foundationless poetic, aesthetic existence. In order to escape this, it is necessary that Johannes make a choice.

He is not alone in his conviction; Anti-Climacus, writer of S.U.D., believes that intensity increases perceptivity of the self. The intensity of which one makes decisions not only increases this, but also sheds light on the ethical and guides the individual toward a more ethical existence

through that experience. The infinite leads infinitely away from the self, but eternity leads infinitely toward the self.

An ethical existence occurs in the process of becoming (via passionate decisions) that is fulfilling in and of itself, but can also cultivate aesthetic experiences, greater than one having aesthetic existence. One example of living an ethical existence is through the rejuvenating power of first love. In the firstness of love along with other commitments, one can further relate oneself to oneself by relating oneself to oneself through the other. The point being that one may have aesthetic experiences without leading a sheerly aesthetic existence.

Judge William's marriage is his prime example of how one can harvest ethical and aesthetic experiences while engaging in an ethical existence. Being decisive and committed to Judge William's wife provides richness in soul, spirit, and self (note that these are the same). Marriage itself is a continuous string of choices. In this regard, it is a constant decision in every moment to commit oneself to another. This constant decision will lead a self toward a concreteness, and the passion and energy with which one makes this commitment helps bring about the rejuvenation of the firstness of love. This firstness of love is not only a product of this, but also of a constant relating of the relation of oneself to oneself through another. The ethical relates oneself to oneself through a commitment that is outside of oneself. He reiterates this when saying, "...it still gives me joy to rejuvenate continually our first love, and in such a way, furthermore, that it has just as much religious as esthetic meaning" [E/O II, 10]. This is the sign of the most significant departure from an aesthetic to an ethical existence. It is also important to note that in relationships of this nature, God is present in the relation of one to the other and also in the immediacy of both people involved.

One may achieve an ethical existence and enjoy the fruits of a relationship that points to and is encompassed by the power that posits the relationship (God); this is not what is contended here. What I posit is that the ethical existence is not necessarily synonymous with religious consciousness. Judge William may be religious, but the ethical can exist in general revelation and the divine without tipping its hat to it. The religious, however, necessarily contains the ethical. Devotion, rejuvenation of firstness, aesthetic experiences, and cultivation of self are present in both. Despite the virtues of the ethical existence, it is not enough to avoid despair.

Religious Consciousness without Faith, and Faith itself- Johannes de silentio

At this point, one might intuit that aesthetic is surpassed by the ethical, which is surpassed by the religious, which is surpassed by faith, but this is not the case. Faith exists entirely outside of these states. The author of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio, is someone who is trying to understand faith from outside of it; to him, it is incomprehensible, paradoxical. To him, human authenticity through ethical existence or even a religious existence is not enough to save your soul.

Johannes de silentio's notion of faith demands faith in the power of the redemptive love of Jesus of Nazareth. Faith will come from nowhere else but the Christian God who breathes life into all things and permeates all of existence. It is also made clear that, "Faith is this paradox, and the single individual simply cannot make himself understandable to anyone" [F&T, 71]. Here, Johannes de silentio explains the incommunicable, unmediated, absurdity of faith. The study of what faith is is not about doctrine, but existential transformation and transcending despair. One cannot be further from despair and closer to God than through an absurd faith.

To demonstrate what faith looks like, it is necessary to display its absence. Johannes de silentio proposes three persons: the knight of infinite resignation, the tragic hero, and the knight of faith. The knight of infinite resignation may be seen as one who can live with religious consciousness but without faith. The knight of infinite resignation may sacrifice themselves for a noble cause such as the universal ethical, but not for God. Another example of one who could potentially have religious consciousness, even if not explicitly stated, is the tragic hero. The tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation are similar, if not the same. Johannes de silentio cites King Agamemnon, who lost his daughter for the sake of the universal ethical. This is evidenced when he says “The tragic hero is still within the ethical. He allows an expression of the ethical to have its τέλος in a higher expression of the ethical” [F&T, 59]. In subscribing to the ethical in this case, something is lost. What makes a knight of faith is a leap of faith by trusting in God even to the point of absurdity.

To best explain the quagmire of faith, de silentio presents Abraham of Ur. God commissioned Abraham with the task of sacrificing his son, Isaac, atop Mount Moriah after waiting seventy years to have him with his wife, Sarah. In this instance, Abraham entered into a private relationship with the divine. Abraham trusted God past the point that made sense; sacrificing a child seems the most obvious violation of the ethical. Not only does it seem that Abraham would lose something, but his rationale would have been incommunicable. In this case, “Abraham is at no time a tragic hero but is something entirely different, either a murderer or a man of faith” [F&T, 57]. However, Abraham, through faith, by risking everything in the absurd, gained everything from faith, and conquered despair. Not only did Abraham’s son not die, but Abraham satisfied the τέλος of God, being in perfect relation with Him and himself, thus being

incapable of experiencing despair in that moment. Even though Abraham experienced fear and trembling during this because the universal ethical imperative was dethroned, he was the furthest from despair in that moment than anyone could be by following the special revelation of God: something so strong that it can accomplish anything to satiate the teleological. Normally, the ethical universal (which Judge William, among others, lives by) is higher than the single individual, such as Abraham. But things change when a leap of faith enters the equation. That is the one and only time when the singular individual is higher than the ethical universal, and it is through God.

It is important to note that in the teleological suspension of the ethical that the ethical is not violated or broken, but that the teleological simply suspends *the authority* of the ethical. Just like special revelation isn't communicable, Christ's love can not be mediated or communicated through doctrine, structure, or prescription. In this same vein, Christ's love may also be considered absurd. Abraham trusted God to be in harmony with the ethical imperative He created. Since God created the ethical imperative as an *a priori* structure, it seems absurd to violate it. However, Abraham did not know that Isaac would necessarily be spared, but he did know that God would never lead him astray. This is why it is crucial to understand that the teleological via faith does not violate the ethical but suspends the authority of it.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, Søren Kierkegaard utilizes pseudonyms to explore concepts relating to the self and the nature of existence in an intense, intimate manner. Different possibilities of existence are explored, from the imaginative yet empty aesthetics of Johannes Climacus, to the

wise ethics of Judge William, to the dumbfounded and awe inspired Johannes de silentio, who writes of the ultimate and absurd existence in a moment of faith. Through these pseudonyms, the concepts of self and despair are breathed into life and made relatable in various narratives and ideas. Kierkegaard's radical Christian spirituality bleeds through his work, and his drive to overcome despair manifests itself in a passionate and ontological exposition with the intention of helping others find liberation through the power of the redemptive love of Jesus of Nazareth.

References

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