

Selfhood and Relationality

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Nineteenth century Christian thought about self and relationality was stamped by the reception of Kant's groundbreaking revision to the Cartesian *cogito*. For René Descartes (1596-1650), the self is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*), a simple substance retaining its unity and identity over time. For Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), on the other hand, consciousness is not a substance but an ongoing activity having a double constitution, or two moments: first, the original activity of consciousness, what Kant would call original apperception, and second, the reflected self, the "I think" as object of reflection. Both are essential to the possibility of an awareness of a unified experience. Such an awareness is achieved only insofar as the self is capable of *reflecting* on its activity of thinking. As such, the possibility of self-consciousness, or the capacity to reflect on one's own acts of thought is essential to the constitution of the self. This new model of the mind became the starting point to the thought of central 19th century figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), J. G. Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). This chapter will explore their reception of Kant's model of self-consciousness, the controversies surrounding its development and exposition, and the advantages of this model for theological reflection. The idea of mind as essentially capable of reflection provided an account of how the self can stand in an ontologically immediate relation to God constitutive of the self, while at the same time allowing that the self's consciousness of itself is distinct from this original moment, so that a limited or false consciousness of self is possible. As such the task of the self is to recognize (that is, to realize in and through self-consciousness) who it most truly is, both in relation to God, and in relation to self and other.

1. Kant's radical critique of the Cartesian cogito

Famously, for Descartes, the 'I think' served as the fulcrum of an apodictic certainty that could withstand the radical doubt engendered by the possibility of an evil genie. He reasoned that even if all my thoughts were mere fantasies that did not truly reflect a world distinct from the mind, access to both my activity of thinking and its products is immediate, and consequently my judgments regarding them indubitable. The self to which I have such immediate access is, according to Descartes, a simple substance

retaining its unity and identity over time. Among other things, Kant's first *Critique* offers a radical critique of this picture. At its ground is Kant's claim that "The **I think** must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all. . . ." (B132). Kant notes that it must be possible for me to become self-consciously aware of the **I think** as accompanying my representations in order for me to be aware of them as mine. From this, a great deal follows. For the **I think** that must be able to accompany my representations is the I think as *object* of thought. Kant's arguments in the transcendental deduction depend on his analysis of the nature of *self-consciousness*, that is, of what it is that is involved when the self makes itself its own object. He argues that the possibility of self-awareness, in which the self becomes an object *for* itself, is a transcendental condition of experience. As such, Kant's understanding of the mind involves two moments that stand in interrelation to one another. The first is what he calls **original apperception**. This is the *activity* of thinking itself. This activity, however, cannot be an awareness *of* anything unless it is also possible for the mind to be co-conscious of itself in its awareness of something. Hence the second moment in self-consciousness is the self's awareness of itself, its becoming *for* itself. This understanding of the **I think** as having two moments became the starting point for much of nineteenth century thought about the self, its relation to God, and to others.

2. A Theological Appropriation of Kant's Model of the Mind

Friedrich Schleiermacher, often referred to as the father of modern theology, inaugurated a new method in theology. A large measure of his significance lay not only in his adaption of Kant's views on consciousness to suit theological purposes, but also in his harnessing of Kant's model of the mind to counter Kant's relegation of religion to an afterthought of practical reason. Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy had toppled the old metaphysics, radically limiting its scope to the objects of possible experience. Gone was the legitimacy of speculative enterprises inquiring into the nature of things in themselves, God, the soul, and the world as a whole. Moreover, the fundamental demand of practical reason—autonomy—precluded acceptance of revelation and what it enjoined on heteronomous grounds. Schleiermacher's brilliant synthesis reestablished the foundations of theology on wholly new grounds. Given the success of Kant's devastating critique of metaphysics, how is knowledge of God possible at all?

Schleiermacher's answer was: awareness of God is given in the depths of consciousness. We know God through God's action upon us, both in our awareness of our not being the ground of our own existence, and through the presence of the divine love in us through the redemptive action of Christ. Because the relation to God stands at the ground of the self, we can and must understand religion through that which do have access to: consciousness. Moreover, here the objection that religion leads to heteronomy is overcome, for God is not a being that stands over against the self. Rather, God is known in the depths of consciousness, and the self's true nature and destiny is revealed precisely in its relation to God.

Schleiermacher's analysis of the sensuous self-consciousness in § 4 of *The Christian Faith* is greatly indebted to Kant's theory of consciousness as it had been developed in the B-edition of the transcendental deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The exposition in § 4 is not only a reflection and commentary on Kant's analysis, but also establishes that it will allow us a proper grasp of the self's relation to God. In §§ 24 and 25 of the deduction Kant had distinguished between a) the synthetic original unity of apperception, namely, the original activity of the I think, and b) the self as it appears to itself. Concerning original apperception Kant notes, ". . . in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only *that I am*" (KrV B157). In original apperception I am immediately aware of my existence since I have immediate access to my own activity of thinking. As Kant notes, however, self-consciousness is only possible insofar I am *also* aware of the "determination of my existence," which "can only occur in correspondence with the form of inner sense" (KrV B158). The immediate awareness *that I am* must always be conjoined with a consciousness of the self as it appears to itself in a determinate state. Schleiermacher echoes this view of the mind at §4.1, where he notes "there are two elements in every self-consciousness, which we may call a self-positing element and a non-self-positing element." This is what he calls the "duplication of consciousness, which contains two elements. The first expresses "the being of the subject for itself," and the second expresses "its being with what is other than itself." (KGA I.13,1: 34-35).

Now the "self-positing" element, that is the spontaneity of the subject, is precisely the *activity* of a free being in its thinking and acting. It must be distinguished from the

determinate states of consciousness that we can become aware of when we make consciousness our object. Awareness of this “self-positing” element is given in the immediate awareness of the “I think,” namely, in the very activity of cognizing. This is consciousness of the self in its “unchanging identity.” This self-identical consciousness, however, is always accompanied by an awareness of the self’s changing determinations, which “do not stem from the self in its unchanging identity alone,” but which arise in virtue of a reciprocal relation of influence and counter-influence between self and world. The immediate consciousness of spontaneity cannot exist by itself; consciousness is always directed to an object other than itself, and in its directedness is determined by it. Were this not the case, such a consciousness “would express only spontaneity; not being directed to any object, it would be only an outward urge, an undetermined agility without form or color” (KGA I.13,1:34).

Key to Schleiermacher’s new foundation to theology is his analysis of the immediate consciousness of our spontaneity, for it is in this moment of consciousness that we become aware of ourselves as absolutely dependent on God. Its significance, however, cannot be fully grasped outside of a careful analysis of the “duplication of consciousness” involved in self-consciousness, which contains two elements. The immediate consciousness is that dimension of consciousness *through* which we are intentionally aware of objects; it is the dimension of our cognitive *activity*. This dimension of conscious self-activity must be strictly distinguished from the objects *to* which consciousness is directed. The self can, of course, make itself its own object, and insofar as it is its own object, it has a mediated awareness of itself. However, the *activity* of the self through which the self makes itself its own object is distinct from the self as *object* of cognition. This dimension of the self as active cognizer can only be accessed through an *immediate* awareness of the self’s self-activity, that is, through the feeling or experience that the self has of itself as it acts. It is distinct from the self as object of reflection. The self *that* reflects upon itself always transcends the self that is the content of its reflection, for it is that *through* which the reflection is cognized, and cannot be contained in it. Moreover, it is important to note that the self can only cognize itself as *distinct from* and *standing in relation to* the world insofar as it has made itself its own *object* of reflection. Schleiermacher will argue that we find ourselves to be absolutely dependent on God in the very moment of our immediate awareness of our self-activity.

Throughout §4 Schleiermacher argues that the immediate self-consciousness cannot exist by itself; self-awareness is possible only when an object *distinct* from consciousness in its self-activity is presented to it. In other words, consciousness can only make itself its own object if it stands in relation to something outside of it. This is because it is only when consciousness is determined to exist in a certain state through the influence of that which is distinct from it that it can reflect upon itself, for such a reflection of the self on itself is only possible if in self-consciousness there is a self-identity in *difference*, that is, if the self as object can be differentiated from the self as cognizer, while at the same time the identity of both is preserved. Such differentiation is possible only insofar as the moments of the self as reflected upon are states of awareness determined through the mutual influence between the self and what is other than the self.

Two things are important in this regard. First, in the first element of self-consciousness, namely, the self-positing element or what corresponds to original apperception, the self grasps itself immediately *in its activity*. Second, in the second element of self-consciousness, moments of the *self as object of reflection* are co-determined by *both* the spontaneity (self-activity) of the subject *and* the subject's receptivity insofar as it has been affected in a certain way. Since the first element in self-consciousness is simply the subject in its sheer activity, it is not dependent on the world, and since the second element of self-consciousness is a product of both spontaneity and receptivity, it too cannot be understood as *fully* dependent on the world. At the end of §4.3 Schleiermacher argues that the feeling of absolute dependence *cannot* arise from the objects to which consciousness is directed (the world as object of consciousness), for on those consciousness always directs a determining counter-influence. Consciousness is, as such, only partially determined by what lies outside it; it not only contains a self-positing element, namely the activity of the I think, it also partially determines what is given to it through both its spontaneity and its receptive powers. Only in and through the consciousness of one's self activity in relation to the world is a feeling of absolute dependence towards God possible. If we are to speak of *absolute* dependence, then it must be the self *in its very activity of cognizing* the world that is understood as dependent on a source that transcends both self and world, and is the source of both. Schleiermacher cannot be clearer: absolute dependence is "the consciousness that the

entirety of our spontaneity, in relation to which we should have had a feeling of freedom, springs from elsewhere, even as it must have sprung from ourselves. Without the feeling of freedom, however, a feeling of absolute dependence would not be possible” (KGA I.13, 1:38). Given that the world with which Schleiermacher concerns himself is the world *as it is given to consciousness*, the absolute dependence of our conscious activity on a source outside ourselves also encompasses the world as object of conscious reflection, for the self becomes aware of itself through its world. *Both* the self and its world are absolutely dependent, and as such the “Whence” from which both our spontaneity and receptivity springs “is not the world, in the sense of the totality of temporal existence, and even less is it any single part of the world” KGA I.13,1: 39).

Through his appropriation of Kant’s theory of the mind Schleiermacher constructed a powerful systematic theology bypassing the outmoded metaphysics, and lay the foundations for a fertile existential spirituality developed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries grounded in the claim that the place to inquire of the presence of God was at the very ground of the soul.

3. The Double Constitution of Consciousness and Absolute Idealism

While Schleiermacher remained within the Kantian paradigm in holding that the self is receptive to influences from outside it (so that the self stands in a real relation to that which is distinct from it), both Fichte and Hegel concluded that consistency in thinking through Kant’s model of consciousness forces us to conclude that we must eliminate “things in themselves” as grounding affections of the mind. The Kantian model of self-consciousness was the starting point for the philosophy of both, and reflection on its implications led both to the shore of absolute idealism.

J. G. Fichte was one of Kant’s most able followers. He later developed his own system of transcendental philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In his little book *The Vocation of Man* published in 1800, Fichte provides an argument purporting to show that first, we are conscious *only* of our own consciousness of things, and second, that we cannot validly use the category of causation to infer that there is something outside of the mind causing changes in its modifications. As such, the idea of an unknown and unknowable thing in itself grounding these modifications is utterly useless. Everything, then, is mind and the activity of mind, and our consciousness of objects is merely the

result of the necessary activity of mind in coming to know itself. This argument is used to stave off the specter of materialistic determinism, whose character and dire implications he had developed in the first part of the book. If everything, however, is mind and the activity of mind, there is nothing outside the mind that determines it to be one way or another. Consciousness, then, is essentially free.

The starting point of Fichte's argument, developed in the second section of the book, is his rendition of Kant's claim in §16 of the first *Critique* that it must be possible for the I think to accompany all my representations. He notes that "strictly speaking you have no *consciousness of things*, but only *a consciousness...of a consciousness of things*." The initial discussion concerns the question of *problematic* idealism: if all we have is a consciousness of our consciousness of things, how do we move from our consciousness to that which lies outside it and determines its modifications? The transcendental realist will answer: we make an inference from the modifications of our mind to that which lies outside the mind through the principle of causality: we posit things outside the mind that affect it and determine changes in its modifications. But how do we know of this causal principle? The realist assumes that we arrive at the principle of causality through a universal generalization of relations between empirically given things. Fichte notes that this argument turns in a circle, for we would then only arrive at the very principle needed to establish that there are outer things through the assumption that there are outer things and that we can generalize in regard to their interrelations, thereby arriving at the principle of causality (43). Rejecting an empirical origin to our knowledge of the principle of causality, Fichte follows Kant in arguing that causation is a law of the mind through which our representations are synthesized in order for objective knowledge to be possible. Application of the principle of causation must be *internal* to our representations, that is, it relates our representations to one another and allows us to posit phenomenal objects. This principle cannot, however, relate our representations to something that is wholly outside of the mind altogether. To have knowledge of such a mind-independent representation would be to "jump over myself" (59). As such, Kant's thing in itself, posited as the ground of affection, is to be done away with altogether.

Fichte arrives at idealism not only through his analysis of causation, but especially through his analysis of consciousness itself. He asks, 'What does that mean

when you say “I,”...? His answer is an in-depth reflection on the implications of Kant’s model of consciousness. Recall that Kant argues that it must be possible for the self to become conscious of itself *as* having a representation if that representation is to be integrated into the single objective experience of the subject. This means that consciousness of phenomenal objects requires that I be able to reflect on my representations *as mine*, and this implies self-consciousness. In other words, it must be possible that the I can become an intentional object of awareness alongside the objects of experience. But a condition of the self becoming its own object in reflection is the original *activity* of the I think, that is, original apperception. Since this original moment is not yet reflected upon, in it there are no distinctions between subject and object; this moment is the ground of both. One grasps this moment of self consciousness “immediately simply by existing.” The identity of subject and object constitutes the self’s “essence as intelligence.” However, one cannot “become conscious of this identity, of that which is neither subject nor object but which is the foundation of both and out of which these first two come to be.” (48). This identity cannot be an intentional object of awareness since it grounds the possibility of reflection and is the very act through which reflection takes place. This ground must split up in reflection into subject and object if consciousness is to be possible at all:

I am always conscious only on condition that *that which is conscious* and *that of which there is consciousness* appear distinct from each other.... In finding myself I find myself as subject and object, which two however are immediately connected. This separation.... [is] what you necessarily find in yourself as you become conscious of yourself (48).

The concept of the self as subject only arises in the moment of reflection on the self. But reflection on the self as subject requires that the subject reflect upon itself as standing in relation to that which is other than itself. Both subject and object, their distinctness and interrelations, are thus necessary for the original activity of thought to achieve self awareness and develop its own identity. Consciousness, then, necessarily has two moments. The first is the original activity of thought (Kant’s original apperception). It grounds the second moment of consciousness, in which the mind reflects upon its own activity, thereby becoming for itself in this reflection. However, in

reflecting it recognizes its identity as subject only in and through its distinction from, and interrelations with, the world. The subject-object split is fully the product of original consciousness as it strives to know itself, and all perception is in fact perception of the self. As Fichte notes, “you only perceive yourself:”

You are placed before yourself and projected out of yourself by the inmost ground of your being, your finitude; and everything you see outside of you is always you yourself. In all consciousness I intuit myself; for I am I.... I am a living seeing. I see (consciousness), and see my seeing (that of which I'm conscious) (50).

When Fichte, famously, noted that “the I posits itself as an I,” what he meant was that this positing occurs only through a reflection in which the original activity of thought makes its activity its own object and in doing so projects both the self as subject and the world as object as the objects of its reflection.

Because Fichte's system commits him to subjects that do not stand directly in relation to one another, he stands in agreement with Leibniz, for whom the monads had no windows. Free spirits know of each other only in and through their “common spiritual source” (109). Original consciousness has its origin in God, and the self relates to other finite spirits only in this moment of original consciousness as it stands in relation to God. Hence what is reflected upon—the subject as it stands in relation to the world distinct from it—is only the after-effect or mirroring of what has occurred logically before, at the ground of consciousness.

4. Hegel on Absolute and Finite Mind

The systematic philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel towers over the long nineteenth century. He was both influenced by, and critical of, Kant's philosophy. While Hegel significantly revised Fichte's ideas, his own system is only intelligible in light of Fichte's analysis of mind. In Hegel, the idea of a duplication of consciousness as necessary to the being and identity of mind is taken as the fundamental principle of all reality. Absolute Mind, or God, achieves existence or becomes only through its activity of reflecting on itself: “God is self-consciousness; he knows himself in a consciousness distinct from him...” (392). God is a “differentiating of himself within himself” (393). In

reflecting on itself Absolute Mind goes out of itself and becomes *other* than its original activity, that is, Absolute Mind must become a system of finite minds (subjects) that relate to one another in and through nature. Infinite Mind achieves knowledge of itself through the perfecting of finite minds, and their perfection is achieved when they come to know themselves as expressions of Absolute Mind. Hence, the consciousness that is distinct from God, namely, the consciousness of finite spirits, “is implicitly the consciousness of God.... We define God when we say that he distinguishes himself from himself and is an object for himself but that in this distinction he is purely identical with himself—that he is *spirit*.” (392). Hegel moves beyond Fichte in that the other in which Absolute Mind reflects itself to itself is itself a *system* of finite minds, and these finite minds in turn achieve their identity through the process of self-reflection through which they become aware of their true identity. As such, both Absolute Mind and finite minds have their being in their becoming: all mind is spirit precisely because it only achieves its being and identity through the never-ending process of self-reflection. God knows himself when finite minds achieve knowledge of their true identity. God, therefore, must go out into his other in order to be; God *must* create. As such, Hegel’s system is essentially heterodox.

In God, according to Hegel, there are three moments. The first is the eternal idea of God. Here we have “God in his eternity before the creation of the world and outside the world.” Strictly speaking, this moment cannot, by itself, achieve being, for God becomes only through moving into his other. However, this moment contains implicitly the logic of God’s becoming. The second is God’s becoming other than God-self in actuality, God’s movement into God’s other, the arising of nature. In nature finite minds come into being, and in and through nature finite minds work out the process of estrangement and reconciliation. Through this process selves come to a true knowledge of themselves. This knowledge is no mere *gnosis*, but a practical working out of the self’s true identity through action and its relation to others. It culminates in the love in which each being achieves true knowledge of itself through its reflection of itself in the other. This is the third moment, that of spirit.

Because finite mind is that through which the Absolute becomes other than itself in order to know itself, finite minds are *implicitly* divine. This means that the principle,

or the inner law of the process that culminates in the love of the Holy Spirit, wherein the divine in them becomes manifest and known, is already contained within them. However, insofar human beings are merely implicitly good, they “are good only in an inner way, or according to the concept...” (439). While the principle of their self-development is already contained in them, insofar as it remains merely implicit, this principle has not yet been worked through and the self is not self-consciously aware of who it really is: “what is needful is that it must become *for* itself what it is *in* itself, it must arrive at its concept” (407). This working through involves an arduous narrative and historical process through which the individual arrives at a true self-understanding of itself through its working out of its identity in terms of its relation to God, the world, and to others. A condition of its ability to achieve this is its capacity for self-reflection.

That the human being is only *implicitly* good is the presupposition for the intelligibility of Hegel’s claim that “humanity is by nature evil” (440). This is because in order to be fully realized, human beings must complete the process through which what is merely implicit becomes fully explicit; this becoming explicit requires that the individual arrive at a correct self-reflection, one that truly expresses the real nature of its inner being. Insofar as the individual merely expresses the power of nature, it values and seeks to realize only “the inclinations and desires, instinct and passions; and this first fulfillment is the fulfillment of its natural state” (407). To the degree that she remains submerged in the powers of nature, the person is not free, for she does not express her real essence. Instead, she finds herself valuing and acting in accordance with the desires of an alien power, namely, those that spring from her particularity as a merely natural being. The passions are selfish drives; they are expressions of the individual insofar as she is ensconced in nature, that is, insofar as she is a particular whose desires are causally determined and therefore lie outside of the will as practical reason itself: “... as a natural subject it [the human being] is *this* single individual; the will involved is this singular will, and it is fulfilled with the content of its singularity” (441). This is the Kantian moment in Hegel’s philosophy: for Kant, the inclinations and passions belong to the lower faculty of desire. Action determined by the lower faculty of desire *alone* is evil, for here the individual has neglected to determine whether such action might agree with the demands of the universal moral law. For Hegel, too, action

stemming from the passions alone is also evil: “When humanity exists only according to nature, it is evil” (440). Yet evil is only possible because the demand for the good is already present within the human being. If human beings were only capable of instinct, they would be neither good nor evil. But because the reason within them functions as a drive to universal values, there is a cleavage between the individual’s purely natural determinations and the demand for goodness. This brings about a contradiction in the individual, one that brings about extreme anguish, or the unhappy consciousness.

Strikingly, this leads Hegel to conclude that evil originates with consciousness: “cognition is the source of evil. For cognition or consciousness means in general a judging or dividing, a self-distinguishing within oneself.... The cleavage, however, is what is evil: it is the contradiction. It contains two sides: good and evil.” (443). Once the individual becomes self-consciously aware of itself in reflection, it grasps itself *as* a subject that stands over against the world. Its drives are natural drives that pit it against the rest of nature, and henceforward it recognizes its life as one of struggle. More importantly, the individual comes to an understanding of itself through its dealings with other self-conscious beings who are necessary to its self-development, but who will also check the realization of its desires. Furthermore, insofar as it grasps itself as a singular individual and recognizes itself as finite, it also understands itself as standing over against the Absolute, namely God. This recognition of itself as a subject in relation to what is other than it is the fundamental presupposition of the contradiction that leads to anguish. On the one hand the individual is finite, filled with natural drives, and struggles for self-assertion. On the other hand, there is a strong desire to be one with the universal, that is, for reconciliation with all that is other than the self and with God. These are fundamentally conflicting demands stemming from both the antithesis between self and world, and self and God. Anguish before God is an infinite anguish, one striking the individual at its very core, for the individual recognizes itself as evil, as not at one with God, and as lacking in fundamental value: “It is not that one has transgressed this or that commandment, but rather that one is intrinsically evil—universally evil, purely and simply evil in one’s innermost being” (447). This evil grounds all particular instances of evil; it lies at the root of the individual’s fundamental stance vis à vis God and world, and describes the split or cleavage that, if left

unchecked, leads to a complete deterioration of the self. As Hegel notes, “nothing remains outside this antithesis. . . .This is the deepest depth” (447).

This infinite anguish can only be healed through the work of God himself, who appears in the form of the God-man and reveals to consciousness that finitude does not lie outside of the divine, but is rather, a necessary moment in the divine life. Hegel explains, “...the human, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves moments of the divine, that they are within God himself” (468). And the death of the God-man represents the death of death, that is, the end of limitation and finitude, and therefore of anguish and the return of consciousness into the divine life. This return constitutes the movement of spirit; it is accomplished, according to Hegel, principally through the reflection that consciousness achieves in the ethical domain, that is, spirit knows itself as spirit through its relation to other finite minds. God achieves, or becomes God-self, through the expression of the divine love. This is the work of finite consciousness, which must become what it truly is, must become *for* itself, what it is in itself. This self-becoming has two poles: first, the self’s relation to the Absolute. This is what the self is *in-itself*: its essence is to be a mirror of the divine, so that the principle of its self-development is already contained within it, albeit only implicitly. Second, it becomes *for* itself when this mirroring process (the principle of self-development) becomes explicit and achieves its goal. This is the goal of eternal love in which finite spirits express the divine love to one another in the spiritual community:

When we say ‘God is love,’ we are saying something very great and true.... For love is a distinguishing of two, who nevertheless are absolutely not distinguished for each other. The consciousness or feeling of the identity of the two—to be outside myself and in the other—this is love. I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other.... This other, because it likewise exists outside itself, has its self-consciousness only in me, and both the other and I are only this consciousness of being-outside-ourselves and of our identity; we are only this intuition, feeling, and knowledge of our unity.

Love is only possible on the condition that selves are individual subjects, that is, discrete individuals. The process of individuation—the whole history whereby the self becomes

an individual—is thus an essential one if love is to be possible at all. Yet this process is not one that the individual can achieve alone: the self achieves consciousness of its identity when it knows itself in the other, and when the other knows itself in it. I find my value in the other's valuing of me, and vice-versa: we reflect our value to one another. The divine love of the Holy Spirit is expressed when the mutual reflection of value is maximal and harmonious. In this love there are no more questions to be asked or answered: in it I just am, and through it my whole existence gains an absolute value. Absolute Mind thereby achieves being in and through this process whereby it externalizes itself into finite minds, and finite minds come to know their true identity as manifestations of the Absolute in and through their relations to one another.

5. Kierkegaard on Faith and Reflection

Central to the work of Søren Kierkegaard, a prolific writer known as “the father of existentialism,” is his understanding of the self as a becoming, namely as *spirit*, which achieves its existence in reflecting upon itself. At the beginning of *Sickness unto Death* he notes that “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” (13). Proper analysis of this definition reveals that Kierkegaard's understanding of self-consciousness contains many relations. First, there is the simple relation of the original *activity* of self-consciousness (original apperception) to the power that establishes it. This is an ontological relation. The self is simply absolutely or “completely dependent” on God, and it is this relation of dependence that establishes its reality. Second, there are two relations of reflection through which the self becomes a self by becoming *for* itself and reflecting on its situation and possibilities, and thereby interpreting and understanding itself. As Kierkegaard notes, “The self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self's possibility” (31). In both these relations of reflection we have a relation within a relation, that is, the self becomes a self through reflecting on itself as a subject and how it stands in relation to that which is other than it. In the first case, the self in its original activity reflects on itself (and thereby relates to itself) by grasping itself as a subject in relation to the world. The second case of reflection is yet more complicated, for here we have, in a sense, a reflection on a reflection: here the self reflects on its reflection regarding its relation to the world, and in this reflection

thereby relates itself, in one way or another, to the power that establishes it. Kierkegaard's understanding of the self's becoming a self, and its relation to God and to others cannot be understood without this complex model of the nature of self-consciousness and the role that reflection plays in it. Reflection is an infinite possibility, for the self can always turn around and reflect on its reflection.

The ontological dependence of the self on God is not one in which God determines the self to be one way or another. God establishes the reality of the self, but lets go of its activity of reflection, so that it is up to the self to determine how it will understand itself, and therefore who it will be. The capacity for free reflection is thereby the origin of despair: "Where, then, does the despair come from? From the relation in which the synthesis relates itself to itself, inasmuch as God, who constituted man as a relation, releases it from his hand, as it were—that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself. And because the relation is spirit, is the self, upon it rests the responsibility for all despair at every moment of its existence..." (16). The capacity for reflection, and thereby the possibility of despair, is also that which elevates the human being to the level of spirit. Despair has its origin in the self's ability to reflect on the self's understanding of itself in relation to the world, and in thus reflecting on its reflection, to relate itself to the power that establishes it. Now the self always stands in an ontological state of dependence to the power that establishes it. And not only is the self capable of understanding this ontological dependence, of accepting it, and of resting in it, this acceptance is the only way that it can avoid despair: "The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (14). All other attitudes that the self can take towards its true character, whether of ignorance, indifference, or defiance, are forms of despair, for there is only a single formula for the equilibrium of the self, and that is its acceptance of itself as absolutely dependent upon the power that established it. Hence all preoccupations with the things of this world, and all expressions of the self outward into the world can become occasions for the loss of the self, that is, for the forgetting or ignoring of the true self, the self that is what it is in virtue of the power that established it. They are diversions through which the self forgets the fundamental problem of the self, the authority problem in relation to God. Yet resting transparently in the power that

established the self is not something that happens all at once, but is something that must be worked through, moment by moment, as the self develops its understanding of itself in relation to the world and reflects on it. And since the reflection through which the self achieves itself is something that must be carried on perpetually, both despair and faith must be reestablished in every single moment of the self's being in the world and its reflection upon it.

Kierkegaard points out two fundamental forms of despair: one is a "weak" form of despair based upon self-deception. Here the self loses itself in the world, ignores itself and its fundamental condition, namely its relation to the Absolute. Whether it is happy or unhappy, it attributes its condition to how it is faring in the world. It is always directed outwards, it believes that earthly goods will fill it up. Here the self remains in a kind of naïve immediacy. This does not protect it from despair, however, for the self cannot be fully itself until it knows itself in the power that established it. Hence, even in the most happy moments of such immediacy there is an internal restlessness, a nagging doubt that cannot be fully quieted. Here the self must work continuously to deceive itself, to forget its origin and true self. In the second kind of despair the individual is much more self-conscious. She is quite aware of her freedom, that is, of that moment of original consciousness, where she is quite free to choose how she will imagine and reflect upon herself. This original moment of thought is the "infinite form;" infinite because it is the source of all reflection and can infinitely reflect on itself: "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 that he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self" (68). Instead of accepting itself as resting in the power that established it, here the self denies its dependence and fancies that it can make itself into who and what it wants to be. In reflection, it turns away from its dependence, strives to ignore it, and pays attention only to its own activity: "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" (68-69).

In Kierkegaard we have all the elements of self-consciousness developed earlier: in agreement with Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard will argue that the self is absolutely dependent on a power that establishes it. And in agreement with Fichte and Hegel, Kierkegaard understands that the self must continually *become* itself through reflection, that is, it becomes itself as it understands and interprets itself. Faith is born in reflection, in how the self chooses to understand itself as it carries out its daily self-development in relation to the world. In faith, the self is fully present to itself “in the small part of the task that can be carried out at once” (32).

While Kierkegaard worked with an understanding of self-consciousness indebted to Kant, Schleiermacher, Fichte, and Hegel, he had significant differences with Hegel, and understood himself as working through and revising Schleiermacher’s idea of faith as absolute dependence. His disagreement with Hegel is rooted in the question of the relations between God, self and world, and their ontological constitutions. While Hegel adopts a heterodox conception of God (Absolute Mind becomes through expressing itself out into the world), Kierkegaard adheres to a more orthodox understanding: God exists independently of the world. For Hegel God must express God-self into the world in order to become. As such, the ethical or universal, in which finite minds achieve the life of spirit, is the highest expression of human life. Kierkegaard notes that for Hegel “The whole of human existence is in that case entirely self-enclosed, as a sphere, and the ethical is at once the limit and completion. God becomes an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought, and his power is to be found only in the ethical, which fills all existence” (*Fear and Trembling*, 98). One cannot relate to God outside the ethical sphere in Hegel, for God becomes only insofar as the divine love achieves its expression in the world. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, the individual that has chosen and developed herself by committing herself to genuine relations with others still has not made the final, necessary movement whereby she relates herself to God. Kierkegaard will agree with Hegel that real commitment to others and participation in the public sphere may very well be a necessary moment in the development of self-consciousness. The ethical sphere as described by Judge William in *Either/Or* corresponds to Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. Yet because God exists independently of the world, the self must make yet another movement whereby it consciously (in reflection) accepts its ontological

dependence on God. This cannot be done publicly or arrived at through one's relation to others:

In the ethical view of life, it is the individual's task to divest himself of the determinant of interiority and give it an expression in the exterior.... The paradox of faith is this, that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with the exterior, an interiority which, it should be stressed is not identical with the first [that of the child] but is a new interiority.... Recent philosophy has allowed itself without further ado to substitute the immediate for faith. If one does that it is ridiculous to deny that faith has existed through all ages. Faith in such a case keeps ordinary company, it belongs with feeling, mood, idiosyncrasy, hysteria and the rest. (97).

It is in its inmost depth that the self is dependent on God, and it is only through going inward into these depths and resting in them that the self achieves equilibrium. Genuine faith requires reflection on, and acceptance of, this dependence, and all the self's doings in the world and relations to others must be referred to this dependence. In his discussion of the moment of a 'second interiority' Kierkegaard takes issues with both Schleiermacher and Hegel. For Hegel, the moment of evil in consciousness arises when the self chooses to remain within its abstract freedom. Here it makes no choices or real commitments to others, for these would compromise its possibilities. Instead it relates to others by always withholding itself or through sheer self-assertion. This is the first interiority, the interiority of the child, which Kierkegaard depicts in the life of the aesthete in *Either/Or*. Along with Hegel, Kierkegaard agrees that this first interiority must be overcome. Yet contra Hegel, he affirms that the self cannot rest there. Once the self has developed itself through a passionate commitment to an individual or enterprise in the world, it must move inward yet again. It must, in reflection, refer this self-understanding—how it stands in relation to the world—to its absolute dependence on God. And here we find Kierkegaard's critique of Schleiermacher. For Schleiermacher, piety is "a modification of feeling, or of immediate self-consciousness" (*CF* § 3). Kierkegaard charges that Schleiermacher substitutes "the immediate for faith," that is, for Schleiermacher, faith remains within the moment of immediacy. Certainly Schleiermacher is correct that the self is directly dependent on God. But this is an ontological matter, and everyone stands in this relation of direct dependence. Faith

concerns how the self understands and interprets itself given this ontological relation. Hence all faith, according to Kierkegaard involves a reflection taking the self back into its own depths, where it must be content to rest in the power of God.

The upshot of these developments paved the way for a much more dynamic understanding of the self in twentieth century philosophical disciplines such as phenomenology, existentialism and hermeneutics. The self is not a static substance; it is, instead a process, a process of reflection. It becomes itself as it engages in the project of self-understanding and interpretation. It can, of course, misunderstand itself in all sorts of important ways. Yet its fundamental project in becoming itself is to understand itself aright, that is, paradoxically, to become what it most genuinely is. This paradox can only be properly understood once several relations are posited: both the ontological relation between original consciousness and the Absolute, which establishes its real possibility, and the self's relation to itself in reflection. This reflection is carried through as the self comes to understand itself both in relation to the world and others, and in relation to the Absolute. The richness of this understanding of the self for the theological enterprise cannot be overestimated: it leads theology directly into the problem of self-understanding and hermeneutics in the development of all its major elements. At one and the same time it avoids mere subjectivism, since the self's possibility is established ontologically, and it does justice to the interpretive work of the appropriation of salvation which must take place as the self comes to understand itself in the task of daily living.

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