

25

AGENCY, IDENTITY, AND ALIENATION IN *THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH*

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I am much of what my parents and especially my grandparents were – inherited stature, colouring, brains, bones (that part unfortunate), plus transmitted prejudices, culture, scruples, likings, moralities, and moral errors that I defend as if they were personal and not familial.

(Wallace Stegner, Angle of Repose)

There is another woman in me, I'm afraid of her – she fell in love with that man, and I wanted to hate you and couldn't forget the one who was there before. The one who is not me. Now I'm real, I'm whole.

(Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina)

Introduction

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes selfhood as an achievement, specifically claiming that the self's task 'is to become itself' (SUD, 29/SKS 11, 146). Potentially about this sort of task, Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry from December 3, 1854, 'to become human or to learn what it means to be human does not come that easily' (JP 2, 278/SKS 26, 362).¹ But how can one become who or what one already is, and what sort of achievement is it? Contemporary philosophy of agency commonly assumes that not all desires or movements that occur in us are equally ours.² Fleeting, incomprehensible desires and muscle spasms, for example, seem to happen to us and not be things we do. But what makes some desire or action uniquely an agent's own or, more technically, internal to the agent or one with which the agent is identified? Or, conversely, when can we dismiss desires or actions as not the agent's own, as external or alien? Sometimes our bodies move in ways that are clearly not up to us, as with a muscle spasm. But what about unbidden and potentially unwelcome desires? Or beliefs and dispositions inherited through upbringing? It is not obvious whether beliefs we inherit from parents or culture without consciously endorsing them are internal to us. Nor is it straightforward how to interpret Anna Karenina's attributing her actions to 'another woman in me,' someone who 'is not me' (Tolstoy 2000: 412). The mere fact that someone experiences an action or desire as

external could seem to resolve the issue: if she experiences it as alien, it happens to her and she does not do it. Yet there are reasons to dig deeper.

We are conglomerates of traits, desires, and beliefs – some inherited, some actively acquired, some with hybrid ancestry – and we are tasked with integrating these different aspects into a coherent whole or self. As we adopt, winnow, and shape these components, we can find ourselves doing things that seem foreign to us. But what does it mean when desires or actions are experienced as alien or external? Kierkegaard's accounts of the structure of the self and of selfhood as a task suggest several ways we can be alienated from desires, actions, or, more generally, our selves. As 'the contemporary philosopher who argues most thoroughly for the task-oriented nature of self-constitution' (Lear 2011: 4), Christine Korsgaard and her notion of practical identity make sense for analysing the task of becoming oneself. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's treatment of selfhood – as aspirational and, if undertaken well, appropriately grounded in one's facticity (i.e., the concrete facts of one's situation) – suggests how consciously endorsed identities can guide (or fail to guide) our agency. Having a practical identity involves striving to inhabit adopted roles by aligning our actions with relevant normative demands, but also sometimes embracing and consciously adopting identities already tacitly guiding our engagement with the world.

This chapter has two guiding lines of inquiry. First, what does it mean to achieve selfhood and how can the notion of practical identity illuminate or be illuminated by this question? Second, how can this analysis clarify the experience of not being oneself, whether resulting from self-deception, self-ignorance, or the potentially frustrating gap between who one is and who one wants to be?

Desires (and actions) of one's own and the possibility of alienation

Both Kierkegaard and Harry Frankfurt describe processes through which we become ourselves (Kierkegaard) or make desires our own (Frankfurt). Frankfurt (1988) thinks reflective self-evaluation that leads to the formation of higher-order desires (desires about desires) is unique to persons. By identifying with a desire and wanting it to lead to action, we make it internal and make ourselves morally responsible for resulting actions. By contrast, if we wish we didn't have a desire or wish it didn't lead to action, it becomes external to us. Because we are not fully behind the wheel in such cases – whether passively observing or actively working against the desire – we are not fully responsible for resulting actions. Frankfurt (1988: 63) uses the example of someone overcome with emotion:

In the course of an animated but amiable enough conversation, a man's temper suddenly rushes up in him out of control. Although nothing has happened that makes his behavior readily intelligible, he begins to fling dishes, books, and crudely abusive language at his companion. Then his tantrum subsides and he says, 'I have no idea what triggered that bizarre spasm of emotion. The feelings just came out of me from out of nowhere, and I couldn't help it. I wasn't myself. Please don't hold it against me.'

Kierkegaard's discussion of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* has similar concerns. In despair, one fails to become oneself either by failing to see (or hiding from the fact) that one is responsible for one's self or by failing to (1) adequately acknowledge and engage with one's facticity or (2) live in light of the fact that one is not reducible or limited to one's facticity.

Engaging with both Frankfurt and Kierkegaard, Mark Wrathall (2015) argues that Kierkegaard's conception of subjectivity as an achievement is more successful than Frankfurt's hierarchical

model at explaining how acts and, by extension, a life can be an agent's own. Frankfurt's initial account, as Gary Watson (2004) indicates, fails to explain why some higher-order desire uniquely speaks for the agent. Wrathall (2015: 429) thinks that what is missing is 'some prior vision of who I am or ought to be which guides me in my identifications, some prior sense of self with which my choices can resound.' This vision serves as the basis for reflective self-evaluation as I sift through desires in order to forge a coherent identity (Wrathall 2015: 429, 438, 441). For Kierkegaard, the thought of immortality focuses 'my attention on the style of personality that *is* (or that *I want to be*) essential to being me' (Wrathall 2015: 438; emphasis added). As Wrathall describes it, my sense of self involves a vision of who I am or ought to be. My claim is that, for Kierkegaard, proper selfhood involves a vision of who I am *and* (not 'or') who I ought (or want) to be. Agents failing to properly attend to either aspect fall short of ideal selfhood/agency.

When my body moves or I experience a desire, those are both mine in some sense – they are not anyone else's (see Frankfurt 1988: 60). But it seems justifiably intuitive to distinguish robust actions from muscle spasms and, more controversially, out-of-character actions from those that align with one's core values. Similarly, unbidden and unwelcome desires seem differently, presumably less, mine than desires I have cultivated and happily entertain. However, pinning down what differentiates these can be difficult. Typically, examples of externality are those in which one falls short of one's ideals – one experiences alienation when acting in uncharacteristically bad ways. The tendency to distance the agent *qua agent* from bad actions seems problematic, however, because agents also act in uncharacteristically virtuous ways. Yet even though people deflect praise in various ways – 'I just did what anyone would have done,' for example – I suspect we are less likely to consider uncharacteristically virtuous actions as external. Admittedly, this could just make us suspicious of the tendency (both in the literature and in everyday experience) to see uncharacteristically vicious actions as external. However, the structure of the self, as Kierkegaard understands it, offers another explanation for this asymmetry. Because we are existentially grounded but also drawn to be different than we are, practical identities rightly appeal to descriptions that may not (yet) fit our behaviour. When seeking to change, we may find ourselves alienated from actions that are still consistent with our current character.³

The significance of claims to not have been oneself depends on the way in which one does not consciously identify with (or see oneself as inhabiting) some identity, whether those are roles such as parent or teacher, or traits such as being patient or ambitious. This sort of claim could arise out of genuine self-ignorance, motivated self-deception, or out of a conscious effort to try to change oneself. First, I could be self-ignorant, unaware of the sort of person I am. If I inaccurately think of myself as a patient person, I could see impatient actions as instances when I am not myself (even if they occur regularly). Over time, however, it may be hard to describe this as mere self-ignorance. When I try to hide certain truths or facts about myself from myself, I enter the territory of self-deception and/or active repression. Rather than face unpleasant truths about myself, I could in some way convince myself that that is not who I really am. Finally, I could purposefully reject an identity I am trying to leave behind. I could be aware of my tendency to lose my temper and consciously identify as a patient individual, striving to make it the case. These different possibilities suggest that even if we are imperfect judges of ourselves, mere scepticism about the accuracy of self-judgments is a simplistic general approach to claims to not have been oneself.

For Kierkegaard, integral selfhood involves proper grounding in one's facticity and aspiring within or beyond it. Falling short in either way is problematic. A Kierkegaardian analysis of practical identity – including the complex relationship between who we aspire to be and who we find ourselves being – yields different types of alienation.⁴ In the despairs of infinitude and

possibility, one is inadequately grounded in one's finitude/necessity; in the despair of finitude and necessity, one fails to appreciate one's infinitude/possibility – the capacity to aspire and to want to be different. This analysis also shows why repression and wishful thinking can lead to troubles in one's agency. Of Freud's Rat Man, J. David Velleman (2006: 346) says, '[He] chose to regard his hatred as foreign because he was afraid of letting it into his emotional life, even though doing so was his only chance of domesticating it. All of us are like the Rat Man at least to this extent, that we feel threatened by various emotions that would introduce conflict into our lives.' By isolating his hatred as foreign, the Rat Man makes it less likely that he can control it (see Lippitt 2015: 132–3). For Kierkegaard, because the self is necessity *and* finitude, but also possibility *and* infinitude, good agency takes account of one's necessity and finitude (including unruly desires), but as possibility and infinitude, it also incorporates, develops, and builds on its facticity.⁵

Selfhood and varieties of despair

Practical identities involve both what Kierkegaard calls externalities (including contingent roles) and the infinite, or the naked self (see SUD, 53–5/SKS 11, 168–71 for a discussion of the relationship between 'externalities' and the 'naked abstract self'). Externalities are crucial to but not exhaustive of who we are. We can strive or aspire to become different. Aspiration could sound like the problematic despair in which one wants to be someone else, but aspirational agency is not only compatible with but necessary to the task of becoming oneself. Different kinds of despair result when agents fail to integrate either aspect of practical identity. On a conceptual level, we can either (1) fail to account for the normative or aspirational dimension of human agency or (2) underappreciate the extent to which the contours of identities and, by extension, agency are not entirely under the agent's active, self-conscious control. The self as simultaneously something one already is and an achievement to which one aspires illuminates the grounded and dynamic nature of practical identity.

Becoming oneself and various ways of falling short are central to Kierkegaard's treatments of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* and anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*. He begins *The Sickness unto Death* with an infamously complex description of the structure of the self:

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.

(SUD, 13/SKS 11, 129)

The human being, as spirit or self, is a relation to and thus responsible for the synthesis of apparently contradictory factors. These factors, which Kierkegaard calls 'moments,' include the pairs of infinitude/finitude and possibility/necessity.⁶ The pairs 'are meant to point (respectively) to a constraint and that in virtue of which the constraint is not total or determining' (Kosch 2006: 200). The synthesis 'is the activity of integrating the givenness of oneself with the set of goals or view of life one has taken up – forming one's concrete embodiment into some ideal shape . . . but also tailoring the ideal to the unchangeables of personal history, social situation, physical and psychological nature, and so on' (Kosch 2006: 201).

It could seem that to become oneself, one should simply accept one's station – including one's characteristics, dispositions, preferences, and social roles. But *becoming* oneself is not passively accepting one's facticity. One becomes who one is by taking up the accidents of one's existential situation with the understanding that those accidents do not exhaust one's self.

Kierkegaard's initially puzzling task thus highlights how human agency is grounded in but not reducible to one's facticity.

As Wrathall (2015: 426) describes the synthesis, 'the fundamental human condition is one in which, within our overall mental economy, there are contradictory or incompatible moments – that is, we all possess attitudes, affects, and aims which impel us to move in a way that, in certain key moments of our lives, will frustrate or cancel out the way other attitudes, affects or aims incline us to be moved.' The goal of selfhood is to forge 'a consistent and coherent identity that can encompass the whole of my particular attitudes and affects' (Wrathall 2015: 429). To do this, 'I need a clear sense of the subject I want to be so that this can serve as a background against which to perform the reevaluation' (Wrathall 2015: 429). A clear sense of who I want to be is crucial. But for the aspirational element of selfhood to function well, I also need a sense of who I am. Put differently, effective aspirational agency depends on one's existential situation. Wrathall (2015: 429) picks up on this when he claims, 'There must be some prior vision of who I am or who I want to be which guides me in my identifications, some prior sense of self with which my choices can resound.' For Kierkegaard, my vision of myself (and my self) involves who I am *and* who I want to be. Both aspects are necessary. And even if they are entwined, we must not reduce 'who I am' to 'who I want to be.' Wrathall highlights the aspirational dimension of practical identity – the subject I want to be determines the criteria according to which I evaluate the elements of my self – but if that aspirational self-conception is inadequately connected to my facticity, I am in despair.

Kierkegaard describes two types of despair, that is, different ways to fall short of selfhood: (1) 'despair considered without regard to its being conscious or not, consequently only with regard to the constituents of the synthesis' (for convenience, Despair₁) and (2) 'despair as defined by consciousness' (Despair₂) (SUD, 29, 42/SKS 11, 146, 157). In Despair₁, one element of the synthesis is over- or underemphasized (see Davenport 2013: 236). In Despair₂, the individual fails to take responsibility for the synthesis, whether by failing to see or hiding from the responsibility. Alastair Hannay (1997: 332) describes despair for Anti-Climacus as 'wanting to be rid of the self' (see SUD, 19–21/SKS 11, 134–7). One can want to be rid of one of the two elements of the synthesis – not making the self a synthesis of *both* elements (Despair₁) – or want to be rid of the responsibility for the synthesis (Despair₂). In this section, I focus on the Despair₁ arising in the syntheses of (1) finitude/infinitude and (2) necessity/possibility.

Despairs of finitude/infinitude

Kierkegaard writes, 'The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God' (SUD, 29–30/SKS 11, 146).⁷ In the synthesis, 'the finite is the limiting and the infinite the extending constituent' (SUD, 30/SKS 11, 146). Becoming a self is an ongoing process of moving away from and coming back to oneself (SUD, 30/SKS 11, 146). One finds oneself with moments of finitude – a body, dispositions, social expectations, language, and so forth – and with moments of infinitude – wishing, aspiring, imagining, and seeking to stretch or go beyond that finitude. Wrathall (2015: 425) thus divides the moments into those that volatilize the self – taking one beyond one's concrete patterns of existence – and those that bring one back to the facts of that concrete existence.

The despair of infinitude is closely related to imagination, 'the rendition of the self as the self's possibility' (SUD, 31/SKS 11, 147). Imagination includes distinct possibilities but also the capacity for possibility, that the self can be different than it has been. Possibility is crucial to human agency, but in the despair of infinitude, the individual goes too far and loses touch with

the moments of finitude that characterize one's existence. Infinitude's despair is 'the fantastic, the unlimited. . . . The fantastic is generally that which leads a person out into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thereby prevents him from coming back to himself' (SUD, 30–1/SKS 11, 146–7). By aspiring to things that are not (yet) adequately connected to his existential situation, and willing things quixotically beyond the possibilities afforded him, the self – seen as pure, untethered possibility – 'is . . . infinitized, but not in such a manner that he becomes more and more himself, for he loses himself more and more' (SUD, 31/SKS 11, 147).

By contrast, Kierkegaard describes despair of finitude as reductionism or narrowness because the individual is reduced (or reduces oneself) to qualities, characteristics, or roles (SUD, 33/SKS 11, 149). Limited to moments of finitude, one fails to see and act beyond a narrow interpretation of who one is, becoming 'a number instead of a self, just one more [person], just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei* [one and the same]' (SUD, 33/SKS 11, 149). Content to play out the script for one's roles – without thinking about how to make them one's own – life becomes cozy and comfortable: 'it is far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man' (SUD, 34/SKS 11, 149). Observers may not regard it as despair, but because selfhood involves synthesizing the finite *and* the infinite, if one does not venture beyond this narrowness, one risks losing oneself (SUD, 34–5/SKS 11, 149–51). But if despair is to want to be rid of the self, despair of finitude seems especially well-suited for avoiding self-responsibility.

Despairs of necessity/possibility

For Kierkegaard, both possibility and necessity are essential to the task of becoming oneself: 'Insofar as [the self] is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility' (SUD, 35/SKS 11, 151). In the despairs of possibility/necessity, however, necessity or possibility is overemphasized to the detriment of the other. Hubert Dreyfus (2008: 15) describes despair as 'The feeling that your life isn't working and, given the kind of person you are, it is impossible for things to work out for you.' It is impossible for things to work out because the self involves necessity *and* possibility, and the person in despair fails to properly attend to both.

In the despair of possibility, one has lost touch with one's own necessity. The self 'runs away from itself in possibility, it has no necessity to which it is to return. . . . Eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self' and the individual becomes a mirage (SUD, 35–6/SKS 11, 151). The self lost in possibility lacks 'the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitations' (SUD, 36/SKS 11, 152). In such cases, 'the tragedy is not that such a self did not amount to something in the world,' but 'that he did not become aware of himself, aware that the self he is is a very definite something and thus the necessary. Instead, he lost himself, because this self fantastically reflected itself in possibility' (SUD, 36–7/SKS 11, 152). Because the self is both its possibility and its necessity, selfhood and effective willing requires awareness of one's necessity. By refusing to acknowledge his limitations, he appears free, and Kierkegaard admits that he has some sort of self-mastery – 'the self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called' (SUD, 69/SKS 11, 183). But the mastery is 'so-called' because 'on closer examination . . . it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing' (SUD, 69/SKS 11, 183).

In despair of necessity, by contrast, the individual lacks or does not see possibility. When this happens, everything becomes necessary (the determinist/fatalist) or everything becomes trivial (the philistine-bourgeois). The determinist, the fatalist, has lost his self 'because for him, everything has become necessity' (SUD, 40/SKS 11, 155). Regardless of role – 'whether alehouse

keeper or prime minister' – this individual lacks imagination and thus 'lives within a certain compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens' (SUD, 41/SKS 11, 156). In this way, Kierkegaard thinks such an individual has lost God and one's self. These losses are connected because 'God' means that everything is possible and if one lacks (fails to see or runs from) possibility, one falls short of selfhood (SUD, 40/SKS 11, 155–6). Hannay describes this with the image of the thorn in the flesh, some limiting aspect of oneself (necessity in Kierkegaard's sense). One could accept the thorn as part of the 'definite thing' that one is and then 'humble oneself under this weakness' before God, for whom everything is possible (see Hannay 1997: 345). In despair of necessity, however, by identifying oneself completely with the thorn, one fails to incorporate the truth that 'with God everything is possible,' that there are various ways to take up the thorn in the flesh.

Instead, in this type of despair, I hold the thorn apart from myself. I want to be myself before God, but I do not want the thorn to be part of myself. Rather than own up to the weakness and humble myself under it, I try to keep it apart from myself. But in so doing, I end up holding on to the thorn (SUD, 77–8/SKS 11, 191–2). If I were to better own up to my necessity, I could better arrange my life to integrate the moments of my self. But instead of acknowledging the thorn as part of my self, I reject it and thereby ensure that it will continue to affect my existence, likely in ways not under my control.

In addition to despair in relation to the synthesis (Despair₁), Kierkegaard discusses despair in relation to consciousness (Despair₂). Despair₂ can take various shapes depending on one's awareness of being a self – of being responsible for the synthesis – and one's response to that awareness (see SUD, 47–74/SKS 11, 162–87). Selfhood is more than the synthesis of elements. It involves one's relationship to the synthesis and the capacity to shape it. However, not everyone is aware that they are spirit, having the freedom and responsibility to shape the synthesis, or, more colloquially, to shape their lives (SUD, 26–7/SKS 11, 142–3). But if one is unaware of being responsible for the synthesis, one is less likely to see one's hand in the shaping of one's life or to see one's actions as expressing oneself. And if one becomes aware that one is spirit, one may still ignore or run from that responsibility.

Despair, then, depends on a problematic self-synthesis or on one's awareness of being responsible for oneself and the response to that awareness. It can go unnoticed by the external observer and even the agent herself. Just as the knowledgeable physician 'does not have complete confidence in what a person says about his condition,' the physician of the soul knows that self-assessments about despair are unreliable: 'He knows what despair is; he recognizes it and therefore is satisfied neither with a person's declaration that he is not in despair nor with his declaration that he is' (SUD, 23–4/SKS 11, 140).

Practical identities and alienation

Instead of mere scepticism, however, Kierkegaard provides resources to analyze the significance of claims to not have been oneself. For Korsgaard (1996: 101), a practical identity is a 'description under which you value yourself, under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.' These identities 'give rise to reasons and obligations. Your reasons express your identity, your nature' (Korsgaard 1996: 101). She notes that 'practical identity is a complex matter and for the average person there will be a jumble of such conceptions' (Korsgaard 1996: 101). But more than just different conceptions, I would add, the structure of practical identities involves two dimensions – one more a matter of facticity and another more a matter of our aspirational capacities. And alienation from (or despair related to) either of these dimensions leads to different ways of being alienated from our practical identities.

Korsgaard (1996: 101) often describes practical identities as roles or characteristics: 'You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone's lover or friend, and so on.' Of the despairing individual, Kierkegaard writes, 'He is a university graduate, husband, father, even an exceptionally competent public officeholder, a respectable father, pleasant company, very gentle to his wife, solicitude personified to his children' (SUD, 63–4/SKS 11, 178). Although describing roles as 'externalities' could make them seem to be obstacles to selfhood, good selfhood involves the agent taking up 'his concrete self or his concretion' along with its 'necessity and limitations' (SUD, 68/SKS 11, 182). When Kierkegaard emphasizes that the self is distinct from externalities, his point is that externalities do not exhaust the self (SUD, 53/SKS 11, 168–9).

Practical identities are often ongoing pursuits, with finite, grounded components and infinite, aspirational components. 'Trying to be a parent' can refer to efforts (a) to have a child or (b) to care for one's child. Thus, although being a parent involves having a child, one can still fall short at being a parent by not meeting the relevant constitutive standards.⁸ So understood, practical identities capture the aspirational and grounded dimensions of human agency.

This two-pronged approach to practical identity (exemplified by Kierkegaard's account of selfhood) explains different ways desires and actions can appear as foreign. A spasm is clearly external to the agent, even if the forces causing the movement are internal to the agent's body. But other cases require more nuance. Desires and actions can appear as foreign when they go against a consciously endorsed practical identity. How Frankfurt's temper-afflicted individual sees himself likely affects whether the rise of passion appears as an intrusion, even if the passion is deeply rooted in his self. But actions departing from one's typical engagement with the world can also lead to disorientation. When working to align actions with a consciously endorsed but not yet effectively grounded practical identity, one could act in ways inconsistent with one's character or psychology.

If the self is a synthesis between the selves we want to be (infinite/possibility) and the selves already shaping our engagement with the world (finitude/necessity), alienation can take various forms. We can be unaware of inherited social expectations or of the extent to which certain dispositions, cares, and values guide us until others point them out or we experience conflict between competing obligations. Sometimes it takes subsequent regret for us to realize how we value features of our lives. In such experiences, we could realize we are different than we assumed (cf. Hannay 1997: 333).

When discussing despair as defiance, Kierkegaard describes someone who, becoming conscious of an infinite self, desires complete control over his concrete self: 'he does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task – he himself wants to compose his self by means of being the infinite form' (SUD, 68/SKS 11, 182). He has achieved some self-consciousness, but by seeing himself purely as an infinite self (detached from its facticity), that self 'is so far from successfully becoming more and more itself that the fact merely becomes increasingly obvious that it is a hypothetical self' (SUD, 69/SKS 11, 183). He fails to acknowledge or incorporate his finitude/necessity (facticity) into his self-conception, holding it apart from himself (SUD, 77–8/SKS 11, 191–2). However, he could feel alienated from his facticity when his desires or actions flow from his 'given self.' He rightly grasps that he is not limited to his characteristics and roles, but he goes amiss by divorcing his possibilities from his facticity. In terms of practical identities, he understands that he has some control over the roles that guide his life, but his ability to act effectively is impeded by his ignorance of or refusal to see how some practical identities guide his actions even if he does not consciously endorse them.

In despair of finitude, when one sees oneself purely in terms of inherited norms and pre-established roles, one is alienated from the aspirational element of practical identity. One sees the identity primarily as acting in certain pre-established ways, instead of as an ongoing and dynamic pursuit. There are different ways to be a (good) teacher, for example. But the way one is absorbed in the role and one's alienation from possibility impede the ability to take up the identity in other than predefined ways. One could do this consciously – saying 'I want to be a good teacher and these are things good teachers do' – or somewhat unconsciously – absorbing rules and practices by observation or through pedagogical training but without sifting through them to determine the sort of teacher one wants to be or how to best use one's unique capabilities as a teacher.

To think through the different problematic self-syntheses in these types of alienation, let's return to Frankfurt's (1988: 63) example of the temper-afflicted individual who 'fling[s] dishes, books, and crudely abusive language at his companion.' The individual sees the emotion and actions as 'a bizarre spasm' and not as his own. But different ways of fleshing out the scenario show distinct ways the individual could experience the emotion as foreign and thus different senses of the claim to 'not have been himself.'

In the first version, imagine he sees himself as cool tempered, even-keeled, and immune to emotional excess. When he senses tides of emotion rising, he works to calm them or at least divert their course. Having aspired to become this way after studying Stoic philosophy, this self-conception is central to his conscious identity. There is only one problem with his self-conception. It's inaccurate. While it is true that he tries to stem perceived tides of rising emotion, he lacks self-awareness. Even though his actions are (often) clearly guided by (in this case unfounded) emotions, because of his self-ignorance, he does not see his actions as being guided by emotions (well-grounded or otherwise). Because his reaction contradicts his carefully cultivated self-conception, he experiences it as foreign.

In the second version, imagine he is aware of his tendency to emotional outbursts. The behaviour has led to trouble before. Despite this self-awareness, however, he does not subjectively identify with the tendency or the associated actions. He sees it consistently occurring in him but not as expressing who he is. Because he sees it as a spasm over which he lacks control, rather than seeking to change, he (perhaps bitterly) resigns himself to it as part of his life.

Although the agents in both versions experience the emotions as alien and their agency seems compromised, the experiences are different. In the first, self-ignorance leads him to overlook emotions and actions that run against his (inaccurate) self-conception. In the second, his fatalistic view of his lack of control leads him to see the actions as his, but not in a way that allows him to change. He relates to his self-synthesis as a sort of bystander (SUD, 55/SKS 11, 170–1). Patrick Stokes (2015: 185) describes the naked self as 'teleologically enjoined to take responsibility for the human being that it is, becoming a fully conscious and responsible ethical agent, but which is nonetheless on some level distinguishable from the *human being* it identifies with.' Identification is complex and becoming oneself is difficult because *who we are* involves *how we see ourselves* and *who we want to be* but also *how we are*, and these various elements do not always happily coincide.

Achieving selfhood and dynamic human agency

By understanding practical identity as both aspirational and grounded in one's facticity, the process of becoming oneself (or effective human agency generally) is illuminated. Effective aspirational agency must be grounded in one's facticity, which requires some self-awareness, but (at least in most cases) effectively taking up one's facticity also involves aspiration. One could aspire

to be a better parent. But being a better parent is aspirational as it involves continually seeking to respond well in new situations. Effective human agency, then, involves taking up one's facticity in a way that recognizes both freedom and responsibility for one's self.

Achieving selfhood is a delicate balance 'between the need to recognise and accept our natures as having their own stubborn realities; and the need to take active responsibility for their shaping' (Rudd 2012: 244). Or as John Davenport (2013: 238) says approvingly of John Elrod's (1975) interpretation of Kierkegaard: 'existential freedom operates within the limits of an individual's facticity.' One becomes oneself within inherited parameters. If, as Stegner (1971) suggests, much of who we are comes from our parents (and family, friends, teachers, communities, and so on), our task is to take up and respond to the possibilities afforded us by the complex inheritance of genetics, culture, education, society, and the like.

The world of action is shaped by self-conscious, aspirational identities – I want to be a good parent, teacher, or scholar, and identify with those roles – but also by identities that can escape my conscious awareness – being ambitious, arrogant, or insecure. I could be guided by considerations of what a good son would do even if that identity does not appear in my conscious deliberations. I more effectively direct my actions when these components align. If self-conception and aspirations are insufficiently grounded in facticity, aspirational agency loses traction. Perhaps counter-intuitively, my agency improves as I acknowledge and embrace the ways in which my self and my life are not (entirely) up to me. In the other direction, I also miss an important aspect of robust human agency by living my identities in pre-packaged ways.

Good human agency requires awareness of one's necessity but without limiting oneself to the necessity. Although some passages of *The Sickness unto Death* place 'freedom' opposite 'necessity' in the self, more often 'possibility' rather than 'freedom' is opposed to 'necessity' (Davenport 2013: 238). Moreover, in the work as a whole, selfhood involves both possibility and necessity. Unmoored from necessity, freedom is fantastic willing. Self-ignorance creates problems because a poor grasp of one's self or one's being in the world makes it hard to change or reinforce aspects of oneself to allow for a coherent way of being in the world. Someone like Frankfurt's individual who experiences his outbursts as external will regularly succumb to aspects of himself that he does not recognize or identify as his own rather than guide them in self-directing ways. We see this in Kierkegaard's discussions of fantastic willing in *The Sickness unto Death* and anxiety experienced as fate in *The Concept of Anxiety*. In anxiety as fate, even when actions flow from the agent in some significant way, one does not see oneself as the source of the actions and so still experiences them passively, as external to oneself. Similarly, in the despair of possibility, one detached from one's facticity is less able to effectively engage with the possibilities before one.

What emerges is a more modest sense of agency. Much of the necessity that shapes our lives came (or comes) to us in ways that were (or are) not up to us. But we can develop that necessity in different ways. Anthony Rudd (2015) describes Kierkegaard's position as a paradox involving the self-shaping of Sartre and the self-acceptance of Schopenhauer. If holding these elements together is a paradox, that's appropriate because Kierkegaard thinks that the self is a synthesis of contradictory elements. Both contradictory elements are essential to selfhood but neither exhausts human agency, so it is a problem to reduce the self to either element alone. He describes an individual with 'no consciousness of a self that is won by infinite abstraction from every externality, this naked abstract self, which, compared with immediacy's fully dressed self, is the first form of the infinite self and the advancing impetus in the whole process by which a self infinitely becomes responsible for its actual self with all its difficulties and advantages' (SUD, 55/SKS 11, 170). The selfhood dynamic between the naked self and the fully dressed self requires awareness of the self's externalities and of the ways in which we must submit to our necessity.

But understanding that we are more than those externalities and necessity allows us to better pursue our possibilities, including becoming and sometimes changing ourselves. As grounded beings, genuine possibilities must be grounded in our facticity; as aspirational beings, our practical identities stretch beyond our current dispositions and situations. Even if much of who we are is inherited, then, given the sort of selves we are, working through that inheritance is complex and we can find ourselves alienated from our facticity and our aspirations in the process. But, given the creatures (or selves) we are, we distort our natures in both theory and practice if we try to do otherwise.

Related topics

‘The ethical life of aesthetes,’ Ulrika Carlsson; ‘Conscience, self-deception, and the question of authenticity in Kierkegaard,’ Claudia Welz.

Notes

- 1 Jonathan Lear (2011: 3) begins *A Case for Irony* with this passage. In the entry, Kierkegaard attributes the view to Socrates, but he seems to endorse it.
- 2 See Harry Frankfurt’s (1988) ‘Identification and Externality,’ for example.
- 3 This possibility does not mean that the asymmetry is always justified. Kierkegaard is keenly aware of our self-serving natures, which can also explain some claims to ‘not have been oneself.’ In short, although this is not the focus of this chapter, there is a Kierkegaardian case for suspicion about judgments that uncharacteristically vicious actions are external. (Thanks to Patrick Stokes for help articulating this point.)
- 4 This is, in part, because who we are depends on how we think of ourselves and who we want to be.
- 5 Kierkegaard’s use of ‘necessity’ does not align with typical use of necessity as a contrast to contingency. There are contingent facts that figure into my necessity in the Kierkegaardian sense. My height or the proportion of fast- and slow-twitch muscle fibres in my legs would typically be thought to be contingent features of my existence. But they are part of my necessity in the way they set limitations on my athletic ability, for example.
- 6 See Wrathall (2015: 425) for a helpful discussion of Kierkegaard’s moral psychology in terms of the relationships between the moments.
- 7 Hubert Dreyfus (2008) thinks that Jesus shows that both sets of factors (infinite and finite) are essential and embodiments of the equilibrium between them. By committing to an identity-defining project, that equilibrium becomes possible. Responding to Dreyfus, Alastair Hannay (2008: 54) argues that Jesus functions as an example of an actual way of life presented as a pattern to be imitated.
- 8 Lear (2011) describes this dynamic with the concept of irony.

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- Wrathall, M. A. (2015) 'Trivial tasks that consume a lifetime: Kierkegaard on immortality and becoming subjective,' *Journal of Ethics*, 19: 419–41.

Further reading

- Callard, A. (2018) *Aspiration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Callard examines aspiration, the process by which we acquire values and through which we become a certain kind of person, as a distinctive form of agency. Without an adequate understanding of aspiration, problems emerge in theories of practical rationality, moral psychology, and moral responsibility, respectively.
- Lippitt, J. (2013) 'Kierkegaard and moral philosophy: Some recent themes,' in J. Lippitt and G. Pattison (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- This chapter explores the connections between Kierkegaard and recent moral philosophers, focusing on the relationship between Kierkegaard and narrative-based views of personal, specifically practical, identity. It then uses the example of self-forgiveness and the notions of wholeheartedness and ambivalence to refine our understanding of narrative unity.
- Van Stee, A. (2015) 'Selves, existentially speaking,' in A. Rudd and J. Davenport (eds), *Love, Reason, and Will: Kierkegaard after Frankfurt*, London: Bloomsbury.
- This paper uses Kierkegaard and Frankfurt to think through the structure of existential selves. It explores the apparent resemblances between their views – including the way they both emphasize our relations to what we love as we constitute ourselves – but also the way in which their different aims lead them to different characterizations of the structure of the self.