

# Kierkegaard's Construction of the Human Self

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this article is to analyze Kierkegaard's philosophical views concerning the problem of the nature of the human self. With the help of a close examination of Kierkegaard's texts *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*, we argue that Kierkegaard "constructs" the human self in a specific way. This way reveals, through the examination by Kierkegaard of "anxiety" and "despair," three main characteristics of the human self: a) the self is a dynamic process, always "becoming" in time through free will and freedom of choice, b) the human self is always a historical self, so that history is then a direct product of "becoming a self," and c) the human self, in order to be "whole," must freely ground itself in a transcendental being (God).

**KEYWORDS** anxiety; despair; faith; free will; freedom of choice; history; Kierkegaard, Søren; self

## INTRODUCTION

One possible Kierkegaardian position in philosophy that has been neglected up to now is to be found in his views concerning the historical character of the human self. History and its nature were not at the center of Kierkegaard's thinking. What the current analysis will try to show, however, is that Kierkegaard describes the nature of the human self in such a way that he furnishes us with a unique approach to both history and the human self.

The purpose of this article is to analyze and explain the way in which Kierkegaard "constructs" the human self. It will be argued that in *The Con-*

*cept of Anxiety*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter *CA*) and *The Sickness unto Death*<sup>2</sup> (hereafter *SD*) he describes the main characteristics of the human self in a specific way: one that construes human existence as a being that is absolutely intertwined with historical existence, but also itself grounded in a transcendental being. The principal conclusion of our analysis will be to point out three main characteristics of the human self, namely: a) the existential freedom to will and to choose, b) the historical essence of the human self, and c) the transcendental ground of the human self.

In the first part we will examine how, in *CA*, Kierkegaard analyses anxiety as a source of existential proof of both human freedom of the will and freedom of choice. In the second part we will analyze how, in *SD*, Kierkegaard argues on the one hand for a historical core to the human self, and on the other for an account of the transcendental grounding of the human self. In the third and last part, conclusions will be drawn regarding the overall Kierkegaardian approach to the problem of the nature of the human self.

## PART I

The philosophical project of seeking to extract a unified theory concerning Kierkegaard's construction of the human self from *CA* and *SD* runs contrary to the so-called issue of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship. That is, Kierkegaard wrote *CA* under the pseudonym of Vigilius Haufniensis, and *SD* under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. It can thus be argued that what Haufniensis states belongs to a different context from what Anti-Climacus states, and both of them have nothing to do with Kierkegaard's own thinking. If this is true, then we cannot hope to extrapolate a Kierkegaardian theory from his texts, because every text would have a different context and a different philosophical point of reference. Kierkegaard as a thinker would vanish amidst the multitude of his personae. The thesis of the current analysis is that no matter how many literary disguises Kierkegaard uses, the voice that animates them is one and only one: Kierkegaard's own authentic voice. The ultimate philosophical consequence of the thesis stated above is that we are in a position to search through Kierkegaard's different texts and focus attention on the ideas and arguments we find there, instead of simply nullifying Kierkegaard's own

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, transl. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

philosophical authorship out of deference to his many pseudonymous authorial identities.

In this part of our analysis we consider what, for Kierkegaard, are the most important aspects of "anxiety." This means examining the relation of anxiety to: a) human freedom, b) sin, c) personal responsibility, d) spirit, e) individuality, f) self-consciousness and g) the "moment."

In *CA* "anxiety" and its nature plays the central role. Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is the only "proof" of freedom humans can ever have.<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning of this text, Kierkegaard relates anxiety to sin. The connection is quite obvious, but at the same time indicative of the possible nature of the freedom that anxiety discloses: we can sin only because we have the freedom of will and choice to do so. We are free to commit sinful acts, so we can freely sin. Without the actual individual capacity for free will and free choice, there could be no such thing as sin. At the same time, such a capacity to sin presupposes the existence of personal responsibility: we must be held responsible for our will and our choices, if we are to sin.

Freedom of the will and freedom of choice are thus necessary preconditions for sin. We must have both of them, otherwise we cannot sin. If we are able only to will, and not also to choose, then our will is nullified; moreover, the same occurs if we are able only to choose, and not also to will. Kierkegaard does not bother to distinguish between these two kinds of freedom. He labels both kinds "freedom." This is because Kierkegaard wants beyond all else to establish an existential proof of our individual responsibility as this pertains to our actual choices. What, then, is of critical importance for Kierkegaard's approach to freedom is that he should succeed in establishing a direct connection between human historical freedom to act and human responsibility.

In such a context anxiety serves as an actual indicator of both freedom of the will and freedom to choose. We must stress the word "actual" here, because in *CA* Kierkegaard does not wish to offer us a theory, but instead to point out the reality of this "anxiety" that everybody feels would count as an existential proof of freedom. "Anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (*CA*, 42). To be anxious is to actually have in front of us all our possible future options, rather than just in theory.

Having pointed out the necessary connection of anxiety to freedom of will and choice, we must move on to the next characteristic of anxiety,

3. Poul Lubcke examines the possible meanings of freedom in Kierkegaard's *CA* and *SD*. Poul Lubcke, "Freedom and Morality," in *Kierkegaard and Freedom*, ed. James Giles (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 93–105.

namely, that anxiety is the first and most authentic sign of “spirit”: “How does spirit relate itself with itself and to its conditionality? It relates itself as anxiety” (CA, 44). In advance of explaining the exact nature of “spirit,” we may safely suggest that anxiety is connected both to sin and to spirit. However, Kierkegaard also adds that “How sin came into the world, each man understands solely by himself” (CA, 51). Here we have an indication of the possible relation of anxiety, sin and spirit, which is as follows: anxiety as an ability to be free is also an ability to sin, and this is something that must be understood on a personal level by each human being. Individuality and self-consciousness are the most significant factors pertaining to the actual appearance of anxiety in humans. Kierkegaard will further state that “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom. . . . In anxiety there is the selfish infinity” (CA, 61).

Later in our analysis we will offer a further explanation of what exactly “spirit” is. For the purposes of our analysis, it is enough to point out here that an individual comprehension of our ability to be free in actuality is a necessary aspect of the phenomenon of anxiety. “Selfishness,” Kierkegaard argues, is the “particular,” and what exactly selfishness is only each human being individually can understand (CA, 77–78). Only we can understand our selves, and this can occur only through the actual occurrence within us of anxiety.

By repeating the words “actual,” “actually,” and “actuality,” we aim to draw attention to the fact that, for Kierkegaard, anxiety is not a theoretical construction. Anxiety, on the contrary, can be used philosophically only because it can disclose, through our experiences, our ability to be free. To put it as simply as we can: the fact that we do feel anxiety strongly indicates our actual ability to freely will and choose. This actual feeling cannot be approached via theory. Anxiety, then, as selfish infinite possibility, can only be experienced, and cannot be viewed under universal categories (CA, 78).

The last and most important aspect of anxiety is the “moment.” This is because the “moment,” for Kierkegaard, brings together in actuality two seemingly opposite elements of “spirit,” namely the “temporal” and the “eternal.” We can synoptically describe the way Kierkegaard argues about the “moment” as follows: the “moment” is the necessary condition for time’s having three aspects (i.e. past, present and future). The “moment” occurs every time we make a decision about our life. Finally, it serves as historical proof of the union within history (i.e. within time) of the psyche and the body (CA, 85–88).

We encounter here the crux of Kierkegaard's argumentation in *CA*. Spirit is related to the moment. Spirit posits itself, and by this positing the moment is made present. Temporality (and thus history) cannot begin, then, without the positing of spirit and the presence of the moment. In other words, whenever we make a decision, spirit is posited, the moment is present and history is made. Kierkegaard's philosophical argument in favor of his supposition is as follows:

If (a) time is defined as an infinite succession, and (b) the moment is another conceptual abstraction, then (1) the eternal and the temporal cannot exist together, and (2) the present has no existence at all,

which indicates that the only means of grasping history is as the passage of time (which Kierkegaard considers *de facto* absurd).

If, on the contrary

( $\alpha$ ) time can be "pervaded" by the eternal, and ( $\beta$ ) this is so even in the moment, then (I) time comprises present, past and future time.

What remains to be mentioned here is that Kierkegaard defines the future as the most important dimension of temporality: "The possible corresponds exactly to the future. . . . An accurate and correct linguistic usage therefore associates anxiety and the future" (*CA*, 91). To make a choice signifies the moment. History is made only through these choices: "The history of the individual life proceeds in a movement from state to state. Every state is posited by a leap" (*CA*, 113). For Kierkegaard however, when we understand ourselves in terms of our future decisions, we also really grasp ourselves as subjects that are free (in time, and thus in history, too).

That is the most definite philosophical conclusion in *CA*: we feel anxiety every time we feel our actual freedom to will and choose. This freedom is an actual and thus a historical freedom, which can only be individually experienced:

In turning inward, he discovers freedom. He does not fear fate, for he lays hold of no outward task, and freedom is for him his bliss, not freedom to do this or that in the world, to become king and emperor or an abusive street corner orator, but freedom to know of himself that he is freedom. (*CA*, 108)

Anxiety thus actively points to the individual responsibility to act, will, and choose. Contemplation is of no use. Action is what anxiety brings

about through the self-realization of personal freedom. This is why Kierkegaard insists that:

The most concrete content that consciousness can have is consciousness of itself, of the individual himself—not the pure self-consciousness, but the self-consciousness that is so concrete that no author, not even the one with the greatest power of description, has ever been able to describe such self-consciousness, although every single human being is such a one. This self-consciousness is not contemplation, for he who believes this has not understood himself, because he sees that meanwhile he himself is in the process of becoming and consequently cannot be something completed for contemplation. This self-consciousness, therefore, is action. (*CA*, 143)

“Concreteness” and “becoming” are the main and most crucial characteristics of self-consciousness. What is in play here is Kierkegaard’s determination to stress the actuality of the dynamic process involved in acquiring a self, rather than any theoretically pre-given “nature” pertaining to the human self.

## PART II

In this part of our analysis we examine how Kierkegaard “uses” despair to arrive at his conclusion regarding the specific way that human selves are. We will therefore analyze the Kierkegaardian approach to despair as a universal aspect of the human self, before examining Kierkegaard’s arguments regarding the relations between despair and a) freedom and necessity, b) temporality and eternity, and c) self-awareness and faith.

In *SD* Kierkegaard argues in favor of despair as a general characteristic of being human: “There is not one single living human being who does not despair a little” (*SD*, 22). He further argues that despair is also a fundamental feature of the human self: “despairing lies in man himself . . . is the self, upon it rests the responsibility for all despair at every moment of its existence” (*SD*, 16).

If despair cannot be separated from the existent human self, then Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair in *SD* also becomes an analysis of the latter. Despair, moreover, is proof that we are spirits and are related in some way to the eternal: “to despair is a qualification of spirit and relates to the eternal in man” (*SD*, 17). Just as anxiety is proof of the existence of our personal freedom of will and choice, so despair is proof that we are (partly) spirits participating in the eternal.

A synoptic overview of our subsequent analysis runs as follows: for Kierkegaard, the despair to which participation in eternity gives rise engenders a historical task—to create ourselves in history and, at the same time, to create our history, as free human subjects (selves) who ground our selfhood in God.<sup>4</sup> Putting it as plainly and directly as possible, Kierkegaard believes that every human being despairs. This despair, Kierkegaard argues, is a strong actual indication that something “goes wrong” with the way human beings operate as selves. His analysis will point out that what is “wrong” is that while we have to freely create ourselves in history, we also have to freely submit ourselves to God. Despair then becomes an existent sign of the lack of balance which exists in the very core of the human self: we must be responsible for our lives, but cannot be the ultimate ground of our existence. This ground lies outside of our historical existence.

In *SD* Kierkegaard employs the same argumentative tactic as in *CA*: instead of giving us a theory, he points out the philosophical reasons that can serve to explain the actual existence of despair in every human being. If, then, we choose to believe Kierkegaard's statement that despair is a universal human phenomenon, then his philosophical arguments acquire a significant philosophical weight: that is, Kierkegaard is referring to an actual existent situation rather than just putting together “theories.”

If in anxiety we discover freedom, in despair we find freedom in necessity and necessity in freedom. This necessity refers to the fact that, for Kierkegaard, our selfhood can only take one form: “A person cannot rid himself of the relation to himself any more than he can rid himself of his self, which, after all, is one and the same thing, since the self is the relation to oneself” (*SD*, 17). This self is not a one-dimensional entity; on the contrary, it is a relation. Despair discloses this composite self.

4. For C. S. Evans there is a direct connection between the becoming of the self and history: “There is no question that the emphasis of Kierkegaard's writings is on selfhood as an achievement, something I must strive to become. . . . Through choice the ethical individual can acquire an identity, can become someone who is capable of enduring and having a history.” Stephen C. Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006). What separates my approach from that of Evans is that I believe that the stress should be on the historical nature of the self and not on its ethical aspect. Although I do recognize the ethical orientation of Kierkegaard's writings on selfhood, I would argue that the creation of our selves points primarily to history, and only then to an ethically significant creation of an identity of one sort or another. In other words, I argue that the self as an ethical identity is itself grounded in the historical self. Even when we make choices based on our aesthetic evaluation, for example, we still create our historical self, without needing to create a specific ethical identity.

Temporality within the human self signifies our individual historical task to freely create ourselves and our history.<sup>5</sup> Eternity within the human self signifies our ontological need to ground our selves in God. Both in temporality and in eternity, freedom and necessity refer absolutely to each other. It is true that we are free to create ourselves through our choices, but it is also an existential necessity for us to do so. Even if we choose not to make choices, even if we will not to will, once again, we will not be able to avoid creating our history through our inability to choose and will. The same goes for our need to ground our existence in God. If we do not do so, then we will find ourselves living continuously with despair. This is our necessity: our freedom consists in that, but even so, we remain free to live in despair.

In *CA* Kierkegaard invoked the “moment” to explain how and why time can fully acquire its three aspects. In *SD* Kierkegaard uses the composite structure of the human self to explain how and why human existence is something more than a temporal being. It is thanks to the actual existence of despair that we can arrive at this composite union of the temporal and the eternal within human existence. Despair is the ultimate product of this composition, in the same way as anxiety is the ultimate product of our capacity to be free. In the end, argues Kierkegaard, we cannot be temporal beings without being at the same time eternal beings.

History then becomes the active unification of freedom and necessity, the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite. It is the concrete product of the individual’s self-creation. Kierkegaard comes up with the following (quite famous but also very enigmatic) formula for a self without 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. (*SD*, 14)

The following key conclusions can be reconstructed from the above statement:

5. E. F. Mooney also points out how Kierkegaard understands the “transformation” of an individual into a human self: “If persons are selves, then perhaps self is something that develops through stages—a common thread, winding through, and thereby linking transformations.” Edward F. Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve* (New York; London: Routledge, 1996), 91. While I agree with Mooney that every individual is not *de facto* a self, I argue also that what Mooney defines as “psychological” stages are in fact entirely “historical” rather than exclusively “psychological” ones. That is because Kierkegaard stresses his view that anxiety and despair are not simply psychological aspects of selfhood.



- (i) The self is not something that stands still; on the contrary, the self is completed through transition and continuous change.
- (ii) Despair is something that can be "rooted out." Despair, then, signifies "wrong" functioning of the self.
- (iii) We can only live without despair in one way. This way is therefore necessary, to the extent that we wish to escape despair.
- (iv) The necessary way to escape despair requires self-activation: i.e. an intention to "rest transparently in the power that established" us (as human beings).
- (v) This necessity, then, "demands" our freedom of will and of choice. Hence, in this context, freedom and necessity are not absolute. Necessity refers to something pre-given to us, which must nevertheless be freely actualised. Freedom refers to our freedom to will and choose, which nevertheless must also achieve some sort of flourishing in the form of the necessity of our grounding ourselves in God.

So becoming a self that continuously makes self-conscious decisions, combined with having enough faith to ground ourselves in God, is the only way we human beings have to acquire a "whole" self in temporality, and thus in history. What is more important, by creating ourselves we create our history. This is the direction in which Kierkegaard guides us: to have a self means to create a self in time, and by creating this self in time we simultaneously create our history. Self and history together constitute an indivisible unit.

Self-awareness and faith are the key activities, both in the making of our self and of our history. And, according to Kierkegaard, they are the most difficult things to have and to preserve:

As a rule, men are conscious only momentarily, conscious in the midst of big decisions, but they do not take the daily everyday into account at all; they are spirit of sorts for an hour one day a week—which, of course, is a rather crude way to be spirit. But eternity is the essential continuity and demands this of a person or that he be conscious as spirit and have faith. (*SD*, 105)

According to our construal here, despair discloses the special way in which we human beings can be whole and real selves. There are three things we need for this to happen: a) freedom of the will and of choice, b) to be fully aware of our responsibility in using our freedom in time, because our decisions will shape both ourselves and our history, and c) enough faith to willfully "abandon" ourselves to God.

## PART III

In this, the final part of our analysis, we shall point to what we consider philosophically most important in respect of Kierkegaard's views concerning the nature of the human self. Kierkegaard manages on the one hand to preserve human responsibility, and on the other to "locate" the ground of human existence in God. For Kierkegaard, then, the human self needs the ultimate form of will—the will to be both free and dependent at the same time. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard admits the conditions necessary for humans to acquire and preserve their existential, and thus their historical, dignity, and he can do this thanks to the fact that he places human beings at the very center of history.

Becoming a self, in Kierkegaard's approach, is the central form taken by our struggle to freely create history. His construction of the human self, then, gives us a composite self: a self who is at one and the same historical, in that our freedom must only be actualized within time, and transcendental, in that if we wish to acquire a "whole" self without despair, then our existence must be grounded in God.

Anxiety and despair refer to actual and existent situations, and not either to mere matters of psychology or to theoretical attributes. Thus Kierkegaard's "construction" of the human self does not refer to any theory or theoretical scheme. The use of the word "construction" refers firstly to the composite nature of the human self, and secondly to the fact of one's "becoming" a self.

Kierkegaard's overall view regarding the problem of the nature of the human self is that it has no "pre-established" nature or essence. The self is more akin to a continuous activity than it is to an eternal ideal structure in need of actualization, and this is why what we really have to deal with here is "becoming a self." Indeed, this "becoming" is surely the critical element in Kierkegaard's approach, as it is "becoming" that enables Kierkegaard to offer us not a fixed theory of the human self, but the actual procedure capable of leading us to the point where we have a self—where this same activity also leads us to have a history.

To have a self, then, means to have a history, and to have a history means to become a self. "Selfhood" and history are intertwined. Our self-awareness of our freedom and our responsibility, and our self-consciousness pertaining to our struggle to become a self, point to both "selfhood" and history. In these terms, however, history is only human history: human beings, human selves, are the only historical agents. This is so because according to Kierkegaard, history can be made only by those beings

who possess the requisite consciousness to realize their past and decide about their future in their present.

For Kierkegaard, the self *becomes*—doing so in time, through willing and self-conscious action. This capacity can only be found among human beings. Even if one could assert, for example, that the weather plays an active role in the making of history, we still cannot, by Kierkegaard's lights, attribute agency to the weather, because it lacks the requisite consciousness. For the same reason neither animals nor "destiny" nor "chance" can count as historical agents.

In this way Kierkegaard acknowledges a dynamic process that produces human selves and history, while placing the very ground of human historical existence outside of temporality. His arguments stem from what he takes to be existent in every human being: anxiety and despair.

A very important philosophical consequence of his approach is that he puts at the center of history human dignity and free human effort. Human individuals—persons—agents are the only historical (free) beings. They must be individuals because, for Kierkegaard, only individuals really exist, everything else being nothing but a convenient abstraction. And they must be persons, because only through personal choices do we acquire a self. And finally, they must be agents, because we must actively create ourselves and our history.

Kierkegaard's analysis of anxiety and despair can therefore be viewed as something other than symptomatic of human imperfection—as a vital indicator, instead, of our capacity to be free and whole. History becomes the domain of human responsibility, and therefore of human dignity, too. This can be more than a philosophical theory: it can be our power to fight for our lives and for our history.

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