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CHAPTER 2

The Disappearing Who: Kierkegaard, Shame, and the Self

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> The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing: every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. is bound to be noticed.
>
> —Søren Kierkegaard (*The Sickness unto Death* 62–63)

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher of the early nineteenth century (he died in 1855), focused extensively on the nature of the self and of the individual, and on the shame (for Kierkegaard, the "sin") that defines the human condition. By so doing, he raised questions of ethical responsibility and of the limitations of logical systems, questions avoided by Hegel and Nietzsche. More fundamentally still, by wrestling with the nature of the self, Kierkegaard influenced the course of subsequent psychological/philosophical investigations, influencing, for example, both Freud and William James.

While Kierkegaard has often been interpreted to have emphasized guilt when speaking of sin, I will propose a different interpretation: namely, that it is the concept of *shame* that lies at the core of Kierkegaard's concept of sin and also of his concept of dread, that terrible "sickness unto death" that threatens the self. For the purposes of this paper we will provisionally define shame as involving discrepancies between the way one wants to be seen and the way one feels or imagines one is being looked at, a failure to conform to an ideal (in psychoanalytic terms, a profound conflict involving the ego ideal). These discrepancies together produce efforts to control the way one appears. And, more importantly still, every effort to control the way one appears is simultaneously an effort to regulate one's feelings. Therefore, shame can give rise to obsessive efforts to control appearances, so as to control

what one feels. However, the effort to control who one is and how one feels through the way one is seen is an effort doomed to failure. Depending on others for a sense of who one is often leads to more shame and greater efforts to conceal the fear of dependence on what others see.

In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1806), Hegel described self-reflection as a process whereby one understands how the thinking self can be conscious; he thereby framed questions of consciousness to be taken up by Kierkegaard and, later, the existentialists and phenomenologists. Neither static nor finite, the Hegelian dialectical process of understanding (and the sense of identity with which it is associated) is *dynamic*, and comes about through the forever incomplete efforts at grasping who we are.[1] If for Descartes the one thing that cannot be doubted is doubting itself, for Hegel, the one thing that cannot be negated is the process of negation itself.[2] And for Kierkegaard, the self is "a relation which relates to itself. . . . The self is not the relation but the relation's relating to itself" (*Sickness* 43). In other words, the self is a *process* of relating, just as self-consciousness for Hegel is a *process* of negation.

While Kierkegaard built upon Hegel, he also departed significantly from the latter's definition of self-consciousness as dependent upon a logic-driven dialectics of negation and alienation. For example, in *The Concept of Dread* Kierkegaard criticizes Hegel for a logical system that pretends to be dynamic, but that, by its very nature, can never produce change or respond to responsibility. Because Kierkegaard's self can never fully *be* itself, and must *become* itself (in part by being what it is not), the self is always subject to despair (*Sickness* 60).

In this paper I will draw upon Kierkegaard's notions of the self, sin, and despair as developed in *The Sickness unto Death* to elucidate contemporary experiences of shame and identity confusion, and also use my work as a clinician to bring contemporary concerns about shame dynamics to bear on a reading of Kierkegaard.

WHAT IS DESPAIR?

A sequel to the work published five years earlier, under the title, *The Concept of Dread* (also translated as *The Concept of Anxiety*),[3] *Sickness Unto Death* set out to describe an anxiety so intense that other forms pale by contrast and can therefore be more easily borne. Generally speaking, before the nineteenth century, works of philosophy dealt primarily with ideas, not feelings. In this respect *The Concept of Dread*,[4] *Fear and Trembling*, and *Sickness unto Death* broke fresh ground by making feeling states the object of philosophical investigation.

Kierkegaard composed *The Sickness unto Death* in the first five months of 1848, but deliberated for more than a year before deciding to publish it under a pseudonym, an interesting fact over which much ink has been spilled. It did not appear until July 13, 1849. Kierkegaard's basic argument in *Sickness unto Death* is that despair (the sickness unto death) is a sickness of the spirit and therefore of the self, a "self disorder."[5] For Kierkegaard despair has three forms: (1) unconscious despair in which one is not conscious of having a self in despair; (2) "not wanting in despair to be oneself"; and (3) "wanting in despair to be oneself" (43).

In explaining what despair is, Kierkegaard compares the first kind to an illness that has not yet manifested itself, like measles before the spots. Next comes the declared despair. When a young girl despairs over losing a love, either to death, misfortune or a rival, what she is really pained about is not being able to lose herself in him, having made herself conscious of how her own self is an embarrassment. "This self, which should have been her richesse—though in another sense just as much in despair—has become, now that 'he' is dead, a loathsome void. . . . To despair over oneself, in despair to want to be rid of oneself is the formula for all despair" (50).

To be ashamed is, as I noted above, to experience a discrepancy between the self one feels oneself to be and the self that one needs to be either for oneself or for others ("to want to be rid of oneself"). For Kierkegaard, despair over one's identity leads to hiding, not being able to tolerate the embarrassment of oneself, not being able to lose oneself in another. "The self which, in his despair, he wants to be is a self he is not (indeed, to want to be the self he truly is, is the very opposite of despair)" (50).

For Kierkegaard, this essential dread or despair, this existential crisis of identity, is what connects us with the "divinity," by which I take him to mean what makes us conscious and confirms the experience of the "spirit" in us. It is the scale and intensity of this anxiety that distinguishes it from all others, and that, for Kierkegaard, requires an act of the imagination beyond the powers of human understanding. At this point, Kierkegaard, like Descartes, invokes God. However, it is altogether possible to acknowledge a debt to Kierkegaard for having contributed to defining an important psychological dynamic, without necessarily subscribing to any religious belief in the existence of God.

Kierkegaard, like Descartes and Hegel, builds upon the Socratic maxim that the unexamined life is not worth living. "The only life wasted is the life of one who so lived it, deceived by life's pleasures or its sorrows, that he never became decisively, eternally, conscious of himself as spirit, as self" (57). However, such consciousness is acquired at

the price of considerable pain and shame, since the human impulse is to hide our despair, even from ourselves. He speaks of "the horror of this most dreadful of all sickness and misery, namely its hiddenness. Not just that someone suffering from it can wish to hide it and may be able to do so, not just that it can live in a person in such a way that no one, no one at all, discovers it. No, but that it can be so concealed in a person that he himself is not aware of it" (57).

THE SHAME OF DESPAIR

The despair of which Kierkegaard speaks at such length is at once an inability to be oneself and a fear that this inability will be seen and recognized. Thus, there is a shame reaction to feelings of despair. Shame leads to despair and despair to shame, in a vicious circle.

Stepping outside the world of Kierkegaard for a moment, let us consider shame as (1) exhibited in behavior, (2) felt subjectively, (3) thought about while one is behaving, and (4) reacted to by the real or fantasized other, in terms of whose reactions one "knows" or does not know what one is feeling. Since shame is at bottom shame about the self, felt in interaction with an other, I am ashamed as I imagine I appear to you. But there is more. Shame deals not only with appearances (i.e., how I appear to the you), but also with *imagined* appearances (i.e., how I *imagine* I appear to you). We may well ask: How much can I know about my own appearance in your eyes? How *do* I appear to you? To what extent and in what ways is that truly knowledge of me? How can I control my appearance and to what ends? This brings us back to the idea adumbrated at the outset of this paper, that attempts to control one's appearance are attempts to control one's feelings. Shame always entails attempts at the regulation of feelings.

As Sartre (for whom hell was other people) notes, shame allows me to realize that I am that object that another is looking at and judging. What dialectically I can understand of myself depends upon another person.[6] Self-recognition derives from shame and dread, as does recognition of others. As Sartre writes: "I realize [the other] through uneasiness" (251). "It is shame or pride which reveals to me the other's look and myself at the end of that look" (237).

Unlike Kierkegaard, whose focus is the individual and for whom despair reveals the self, Sartre explicitly relates self-knowledge and knowledge of others.[7] Whereas, like Descartes, Kierkegaard invokes God to guarantee the search for the self and to validate the quest for self-consciousness, Sartre has self-consciousness depend upon the existence, not of God, but rather of others.[8] This very Durkheimian idea[9]

(that society is God and others are required for self-consciousness) rather sharply distinguishes Kierkegaard and Sartre, although the dynamics of their systems are similar: both deal with shame states and identity. For Kierkegaard, self-consciousness and despair depend upon the notion that God is looking. For Sartre, they depend upon what one can know, imagine, and feel of others, who are also looking. For Sartre, shame has three correlates: *I* am ashamed of *myself* in front of *others*. In order to be ashamed, I must feel (and be self-conscious about my feelings of) myself, the other, and myself as I view myself through what I imagine (and experience) to be the eyes of the other. In the final analysis, then, it may not make much difference who is looking on, whether God or Society. What matters is that there is a presence looking on in whose eyes one is being judged and before whom one can never fully be oneself.

DESPAIR AND IDENTITY

Never a static property of the self, self-consciousness can exist only in being acknowledged by others. But others can never know of us what we know. And so the always incomplete and dialectical process of trying to know ourselves necessarily produces shame over discrepancies between views and versions of who we are.[10]

For Kierkegaard the pain of these discrepancies prompts not only self-consciousness, but, what for him is the same thing: a consciousness of one's spirit. But such a consciousness must, for him, include the powers of the imagination, since his definition of a self includes what is not yet (i.e., potentiality). Since the self can never be itself, and that is a source of continuous despair, identity depends upon the imagination. Following Fichte, Kierkegaard notes: "what feelings, understanding and will a person has depends in the last resort upon what imagination he has—how he represents himself to himself, that is, upon imagination. . . . The self is reflection and the imagination is reflection, the self's representation of itself in the form of the self's possibility" (60–61).

Discrepancies between ways of appearing and ways of being, as it were, animate the world, since they are forever making appearances unstable. Kierkegaard takes this Hegelian notion[11] and redefines it as inspiring a feeling of dread and shame over the instability of the world of appearances. "Imagination is the infinitizing reflection" (61). Imagination (imagining how we appear to others) can lead either to greater (spiritual) awareness or to loss of self. "The fantastic is, generally speaking, what carries a person into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thus prevents him from coming back to himself"

(61). Since shame entails embarrassment over the person one is seen to be, because one is helpless to present the self one feels others need to see, shame can be, as it were, a sort of malfunction of the imagination.

For Kierkegaard, since the self contains both what is and what is not yet, shame and despair lead to consciousness, and consciousness leads to spiritual salvation. However, this sequence does not come about by itself, since the self must steer a course between imagining itself and recognizing necessity and limitation. It can be knocked off course if it lacks "the strength to obey, to yield to the necessary in one's self, what might be called one's limits" (66–67), or gives in to "fantastically reflecting itself in possibility" (67). In other words, it must navigate between a blind stab into the infinite (in which case it loses itself in fantasy) or a reliance on others (doing itself out of existence). In the latter case, the person "dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd" (64).

DESPAIR, FUTILITY, AND ILLUSION

For Kierkegaard, there are two ways of losing oneself. One is "the wishful," and the other is "the melancholic." In the first case one runs on hope; in the second on fear or dread (67). The two are equally futile. One either loses oneself in wishful thinking, which is like an infant's efforts to articulate words (68), in which case all is imagination and the self is lost. Or one loses oneself in dread, as though all were consonants and one cannot speak, and one "perishes in the dread, or perishes in what it was he was in dread of perishing in" (67). The determinist, the fatalist, is necessarily in despair, "like the king who starved to death because all his food turned to gold" (70).

Unconsciousness of despair bears great similarities to the unconscious of which Freud spoke. "To arrive at the truth one has to pass through every negativity [layers of negation and repression]; it is just as the old story says about breaking a certain magic spell: it won't be broken unless the piece is played right backwards" (74). Freud's psychoanalytic method, which he sometimes presents as scientific (something Kierkegaard never does), seeks to undo the spell of repression by "playing the piece backwards" to restore to the individual an essential sense of identity. In a further correspondence, not only is the very term *psychoanalysis* related to the soul, as Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out, but the Greek root "psuche" means at once breath and soul. Kierkegaard explicitly equates prayer with breathing, an implicit reference to the meanings of the Greek word.[12]

Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual also allows him to give a central place in his concept of the self to selfishness, something that Hegel and the social determinists (e.g., Durkheim) avoid.[13] For Kierkegaard, as for Freud, a person's "natural qualifications," such as human "drive and inclination" are always and necessarily selfish. Indeed, "naturally there is nothing a man clings to so tight as to his selfishness—which he clings to with his whole self" (qtd. in Elrod 91).[14] Moreover, since the self's quest to become itself is essentially selfish, when Kierkegaard speaks of love he takes a position not so far from that of Freud—and of Sartre, who in *Being and Nothingness* argues that to love is to want to be loved (474–84). In short, for Kierkegaard, the notion of a self implies at once a need for others and selfishness.[15]

The notion of illusion and its functions that one finds in Kierkegaard shows up in Freud's notions of the functions of dreams and defenses. Kierkegaard speaks of hope and wishes as driving the attempt not to despair (as Freud sees wish fulfillments as the key to dream interpretation). He also speaks of the illusions of the old. "An older woman who has supposedly left all illusion behind is often found to be fantastically illuded, as much as any young girl, in her own recollections of herself as a young girl, of how happy she was then, how beautiful, etc. This *fuimus* [we have been], which we so often hear from older people, is just as great an illusion as the younger person's illusions of the future; they lie or invent, both of them" (*Sickness* 89). This passage is of particular interest not only for the history of Freud's seduction theory, but also for the history, within psychoanalysis and clinical work, of the nature of memory and distortion, leading straight to the current controversies over the false memory syndrome and Freud's abandonment of the seduction hypothesis. There is thus an emphasis both in Kierkegaard and in Freud on the imagination. Shame dynamics depend upon the imagination, and give rise to fantasies of false personae, an insight that provides an interesting perspective on the pseudonyms Kierkegaard used in writing his books.[16]

For Kierkegaard, "through the eternal the self has the courage to lose itself in order to win itself" (98), a notion analogous to that of psychoanalysis, which aims to give the self courage to engage in the regression (fear of losing itself) as a result of which it will in the end "win itself." But the quest for the self always runs up against impossibility, for "at a whim," as he writes in *The Concept of Dread*, "it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing."[17] Like the self, thought "becomes another thing, and attains a dubious perfectibility by being able to become anything at all" (*Concept* 9). The reason for such evanescence Kierkegaard attributes to "something the Christian would call a cross, a basic fault, whatever that may be" (*Sickness* 101). Interestingly, the psychoanalyst Michael Balint would write a book entitled *The Basic Fault*.

> this world-historical viewpoint of the Hegelians. It severs the individual from his empirical relations, robs him of personal freedom and responsibility and saps the initiative from human planning under genuinely contingent circumstances. This is the consequence of converting the Christian theory of history into a philosophical doctrine. (135–36)

Hegelian philosophy strikes at the heart of what Kierkegaard regards as the freedom of the personal individual-God bond. It "suffers from the perspectival illusion of viewing history as the freedom of necessity" (Collins 136), simply because it is already and cannot be changed. "From our previous study of becoming, however, it is clear that the historical process, like every other instance of becoming, remains contingent, and offers further opportunity for the growth of human freedom and the working of divine providence. These are considerations which lie beyond the System" (136). In Kierkegaard's eyes, Hegel was wrong when, in reaction to Kant, he essentially equated thought and being, and Kant was right in "stressing the cleft between thought and being, phenomenal object and noumenon" (124).

Collins summarizes Kierkegaard's three criticisms of Hegel found in the introduction to *The Concept of Dread*:[22] the meaning of history cannot ever be contained in any philosophical science ("a logical system is possible; an existential system is impossible" [121]), existence can never be described by an idealistic dialectic (174), and ethical responsibility (i.e., change) can never be accounted for within the Hegelian (or any logical) system.[23]

SIN, SHAME, AND BEING SEEN

Being seen by one whom one cannot see (or not being seen by one who can see) is threatening—and shameful. This, of course, is the situation in the Garden of Eden, which has often been "overlooked." Not only are Adam and Eve ashamed of being found out to have been disobedient, they are ashamed of being seen to know what they know.

When Kierkegaard equates "belief" (in God) with self-consciousness (i.e., the presence of self), he relates sin to the absence of self. Belief in God for Kierkegaard creates an ideal, a standard (i.e., God) against which one is nothing, and, equally important, a "being" in whose eyes one can imagine oneself. Sin is "before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not wanting to be oneself, or wanting in despair to be oneself." The key here is "before God." "What made sin so terrible was its being before God" (*Sickness* 112). For Kierkegaard, God is not external at all. Rather the idea (and ideal) of God functions as that part of the self that generates feelings of shame, wanting to hide (as in the case of Adam and Eve) because its standards are so much loftier than anything one can manage. "What really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty person was conscious of being before God" (112).

Despair depends upon consciousness of the self. But the self depends upon the standard by which the self measures itself, and infinitely so when God is the standard. The more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more conception of God (*Sickness* 112). Again, compare this to Freud: "Where id was there let ego be." The more consciousness of the Unconscious, the more self, and the more self, the more consciousness of the Unconscious. Also, Freud and psychoanalysts speak of the ego ideal, an ideal of the self that can generate shame. Listen to what Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, has to say about the psychological functions of ideals: "This self which the individual knows is at once the actual self and the ideal self which the individual has outside himself as a picture in likeness to which he has to form himself, and which, on the other hand, he nevertheless has in him since it is the self" (*Either/Or* 2: 263, qtd. in Connell 142).

When anyone feels he or she has fallen miserably short of the ideal, there is a great sensitivity to being shamed by others. At this point in *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard imagines the tale of the mightiest emperor who summoned the poor farmhand, who was so astonished that his existence could be noticed that he was ashamed and fearful of being mocked, being made a fool of in the eyes of everyone, even though the emperor wanted to make the farmhand his son-in-law.

But there is one thing worse than being made a fool of in the eyes of everyone: being made a fool in the eyes of no one, so there is nobody who can see the shame of feeling foolish. Because Kierkegaard can imagine that God sees the shame of Adam and Eve, they are protected from the chaos, fragmentation, disorientation, and annihilation of self that would result if there were no God to recognize the shame. So while much attention has been focused on how painful it is for Adam and Eve to have been caught and thrown out of the Garden of Eden, not enough attention has been paid to not having a Garden of Eden to be thrown out of, not having a God (or any imaginary being) who can see the shame. Strangely, then, belief in God, such as Kierkegaard proposes, actually saves us from endless shame, by bringing into existence a being in whose eyes shame can be imagined to be recognized.[24]

The opposite of sin is not virtue but rather faith. This point is driven home in the following passage from *The Concept of Dread*, in which Kierkegaard links sin and anxiety with repentance gone wild:

> Sin advances in its consequence; repentance follows it step by step, but always a moment too late. It forces itself to look at the dreadful, but

The conundrum of feeling ashamed of a basic fault while needing to communicate it reappears, for example, in the work of Pirandello. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello himself, the imaginary author, cannot get his characters to communicate what he wants them to. The characters rebel against him; but, since they depend upon actors to express themselves, and these actors have their own preoccupations, the characters cannot represent themselves adequately. The entire situation recalls the following passage in which Kierkegaard speaks of the dilemma of the despairer. It is "as if a writer were to make a slip of the pen, and the error became conscious of itself as such—perhaps it wasn't a mistake but from a much higher point of view an essential ingredient in the whole presentation—and as if this error now wanted to rebel against the author, out of hatred for him forbid him to correct it, and in manic defiance say to him: 'No, I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against you, a witness to the fact that you are a second-rate author'" (*Sickness* 105).

In speaking of envy, Kierkegaard hits upon the feelings of contempt that have come to be recognized as the hallmark of shame defenses. "Envy is concealed admiration. A man who admires something but feels he cannot be happy surrendering himself to it, that man chooses to be envious of what he admires. He then speaks another language. In this language of his the thing he admires is said to be nothing, something stupid and humiliating and peculiar and exaggerated. Admiration is happy self-surrender; envy is unhappy self-assertion" (*Sickness* 118).

All the above forms of "not-seeing" or illusion hide the pain and conflict inherent in the self-consciousness of being ashamed,[18] and thereby fundamentally deny something essential about the self. Such denial leads to deep feelings of imposture, of not knowing who one is.[19]

DESPAIR, LOOKING, AND AFFECT REGULATION

Looking as wanting to be seen (and fearing to disappear if I am not) becomes a source of shame if it leads to loss of control over appearance and my feeling of self. If I look at you, then you become for me "that object in the world which determines an internal flow of the universe, an internal hemorrhage" (Sartre 233). The "drain hole" look of the Other sucks out who I am for myself, reconstituting it through the perception of one who is not myself.[20]

One may respond to shame (or sin) by either looking or not looking. Looking behaviors express feelings of shame as well as the efforts to conceal them. And fantasies of being seen often give rise to behaviors of not looking, as a magical protection against being seen (if one does not look, one cannot be seen). Feelings of vulnerability, of being caught

off guard, appear to be essential to the shame experience. But intensifying the shame experience even more is the experience of being seen to feel ashamed, and being seen by one who cannot be seen (so that there is no way of shaming him back). Sartre writes that shame is driven by the perception "that I cannot in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that I am seen" (235). While for Kierkegaard, implicitly if not explicitly, such an experience can be associated with religious awe, for Sartre it is purely individualistic, and therefore unavoidably humiliating.[21] One of the unforgettable features of Oedipus is the force of his shame at realizing that he did not see his own fate, and was ignorant of the process of his own undoing. Indeed, so blind was he that he unwittingly engineered his own demise. It is worth underlining the intractability of the dilemma of shame, dialectical self-consciousness, and negation and dependency on others; the more ashamed one is, the more *ipso facto* one depends on the idea one has of the ways one is being seen—and on those who are doing the seeing.

A fundamental danger in living, despite all the accoutrements of success and substance, is to forget, not to notice that one lacks a self. "Such things cause little stir in the world; for in the world a self is what one least asks after, and the thing it is most dangerous of all to show signs of having" (*Sickness* 62). From this we can infer that one cannot be too ashamed of one's self without losing it, and that, conversely, an ability to tolerate having one's self seen is a necessary part of having a self to hold on to. In other words, too much shame leads to a loss of the self.

Kierkegaard continues: "The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing: every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. is bound to be noticed" (62–63). The unconscious shame over being blind to so basic a loss makes us so dependent upon what others see of us (and/or what we imagine others see of us) that we can easily lose our "selves." Interpolating, we have to be willing to reveal our selves and have the faith both that we are able to do so, and that doing so is worth while. As Kierkegaard notes, whether or not the individual driven by "sickness unto death" goes under depends upon whether he or she has faith (a notion upon which William James and others will expand later). Faith to Kierkegaard contains an element of some belief in possibility.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel. Kierkegaard held that the Hegelians would in fact like to assume a role with respect to human history given only to God. James Collins notes, with reference to Kierkegaard's critique:

> What John Dewey has so often castigated as the Aristotelian spectator-theory of knowledge and the Christian view of contemplation, is in fact

> like the mad King Lear . . . it has lost the reins of government, and it has retained only the power to grieve. At this point, anxiety is potentiated into repentance. The consequence of sin moves on; drags the individual along like a woman whom the executioner drags by the hair while she screams in despair. . . . Sin conquers. Anxiety throws itself despairingly into the arms of repentance. . . . In other words, repentance has gone crazy. (Qtd. in Connell 174)

In other words, "[d]read is the possibility of freedom" (*Concept* 139), "the dizziness of freedom which occurs when the spirit . . . gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at finiteness to sustain itself. In this dizziness freedom succumbs. . . . Psychologically speaking, the fall into sin always occurs in impotence" (*Concept* 55). This fall into sin is a fall away from faith.

Why should Kierkegaard think it useful to consider Adam's fall and original sin as part of a philosophical treatise? In part because it represents to him a kind of malfunction of the imagination about which we spoke earlier. "The history of the human race acquires a fantastic beginning, Adam was fantastically put outside, pious sentiment and fantasy got what it desired, a godly prelude, but thought got nothing" (*Sickness* 23). In other words, the entire Genesis myth has been misunderstood. Any adequate explanation must account for Adam as an individual.[25] For Kierkegaard one cannot arrive at original sin through the negation of innocence, an observation that strikes at Hegelian dialectics. Kierkegaard redefines original sin as ignorance (not knowledge), thus reestablishing the Socratic maxim "know thyself" as a goal. In so doing Kierkegaard redefines the meaning of innocence, which he believes can never be anything but illusion. "Innocence is not a perfection one ought to wish to recover; for as soon as one wishes for it, it is lost, and it is a new guilt to waste time on wishes."[26]

The human being is a synthesis of soul and body. "But a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third factor . . . the spirit. In the state of innocence man is not merely an animal, for if at any time of his life he was merely an animal, he never would become a man. So then the spirit is present, but is in a state of dreaming" (*Concept* 39). This means that a state of innocence depends upon potentiality only.

"The sexual itself is not the sinful," Kierkegaard observes, demonstrating how sophisticated his notion of innocence is. "Real ignorance of the sexual, when nonetheless it is present, is reserved for the beast, which therefore is enthralled in the blindness of instinct and acts blindly. . . . Innocence is a knowledge which means ignorance" (*Concept* 61). In clinical work, not seeing, attempting to present oneself as innocent as a way of "not knowing" what one in fact knows, crops up frequently—and, as I mentioned, lies at the heart of the tragedy of Oedipus.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on sexuality, selfishness, and the self places him within the orbit of what today might be defined as psychology. During his own lifetime Kierkegaard's idea of the individual drew much attention ("bitter notoriety" [Collins 175]), and provided a model for Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*. What is perceived as excessive individualism grows in part out of Kierkegaard's notion of the individual's relation to God. His dialectic of "Thou and I" was later to be taken up by Buber, Berdyaev, and other personalists. In treating the other as "thou" one responds to him or her with all that is most intimate and personal (Collins 199), a position, particularly in the light of Kierkegaard's emphasis on the human being as a creature of passions, reminiscent of Freud's notions of transference.[27]

Despair over sin feels empty, since in sin the self is conscious "of its having nothing whatever to live on, not even a self-image" (*Sickness* 143). Kierkegaard quotes, from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the lines pronounced by Macbeth when he has murdered the king:

> . . . for from this instant
> There's nothing serious in mortality.
> All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead.
> (Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 94–96)

Such a lack of seriousness—"all is but toys"—translates a profound sense of disorientation at the core of the sense of self. "I can't take myself, anything I want or anyone I know seriously," commented one patient when speaking of shameful feelings. This patient was ashamed of feeling so much like a toy, ashamed that others seemed "real" but not she.

And so one layer of shame covers another. Not taking oneself seriously can be seen as the result of sin, producing dread and anxiety, in which case reliance upon God can provide something to grasp so as not to be hurled into the abyss of seemingly endless shame.

> He who goes astray inwardly . . . soon discovers that he is going about in a circle from which he cannot escape. . . . I can imagine nothing more excruciating than an intriguing mind, which has lost the thread of its continuity and now turns its whole acumen against itself, where conscience awakens and compels the schemer to extricate himself from this confusion. It is in vain that he has many exits from his foxhole; at the moment his anxious soul believes that it already sees daylight breaking through, it turns out to be a new entrance, and like a startled deer, pursued by despair, he constantly seeks a way out, and finds only a way in, through which he goes back into himself. (*Either/Or* 1: 304)

In other words, shameful feelings of being "toylike" can result in still more shame over being so stigmatized, so different from others, who are

"real," in which case there may be no orienting oneself, since there is no self to orient and no selves from which to get one's bearings. In this case, out of shame, the loss goes unrecognized. The self has been, as it were, murdered without a struggle and without a trace of there ever having been anything to miss.

This brings us, in closing, to the fundamental notion that "a self is what it has as a standard of measurement" (*Sickness* 147). Without a standard of measurement, a self cannot recognize itself.[28] For Kierkegaard, God functions as the internalized standard of measurement with respect to which one can recognize one's self—and by so doing avoid the state of dehumanizing and irreversible dread and shame which the unrecognized loss of self brings on.[29]

NOTES

1. As Wurmser, in *The Mask of Shame*, has pointed out, shame has everything to do with dialectical processes.

2. "And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the inexperienced . . . becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation" (Hegel 21).

3. *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. R. Thomte (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1980).

4. Walter Lowrie, the translator and editor of the edition of the *Concept of Dread* on which I have relied, has several interesting things to say about the book. First, its style is unlike the other pseudonymous works, showing the greatest unevenness of style of all his works. Kierkegaard was aware of this book's difficulty, and accompanied it with a frivolous companion piece called *Prefaces*, a book that focused on trivial details in the little world of Copenhagen. Interestingly, the pseudonym he chose for this work was Virgilius Haufniensis, or the watchman of Copenhagen. This is pertinent inasmuch as looking and being seen play so crucial a role in his concepts both of dread and of despair.

5. Since Kohut and the self psychologists, this notion of a self disorder has come into the psychoanalytic/psychotherapeutic vocabulary. But there are no footnotes to Kierkegaard in Kohut or the self psychologists, although there are clearly religious overtones to their positions.

6. "Beyond any knowledge which I can have, I am this self which another knows" (237), writes Sartre.

7. When I feel myself to be the object of your gaze, I may well be uncomfortable not knowing myself as you know me. I cannot understand my object status all alone. As Sartre writes, "the Other does not constitute me as an object for myself but for him" (251).

8. Shame, writes Sartre, "supposes a me-as-Object but also a selfness which is ashamed" (252).

9. See Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* for a brilliant and altogether indispensable analysis of Society as God.

10. In a sense, the phenomenologists in general attempt an analysis of self-experience that by definition defies Cartesian (and Hegelian) logic. Hegel and Sartre attempt to define self-consciousness as a feeling, not simply as "objective" knowledge, but both aim at describing phenomena beneath rationalization. Both believe that truth belongs to what is known of the self not in isolation (e.g., Kant) but rather in relationship to others.

11. This is why, notes Hegel, the Greeks thought of the void as the principle of motion, although they did not go so far as to identify the negative as the self. Hegel writes: "The disparity which exists in consciousness between the 'I' and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the *negative* in general. This can be regarded as the *defect* of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the 'I' and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject" (21).

12. Compare these lines from Kierkegaard: "To pray is also to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing" (*Sickness* 70).

13. Elsewhere (Kilborne, "The Vicissitudes of Positivism") I have examined the religious origins of the social sciences, and the extent to which faith influenced the concept of a "social science" (like a "Christian science"). An emphasis on the unity (and health) of the self, so clear in the writings of Kierkegaard, can be seen in part as a reaction to the French Revolution and as part of the movement of religious revival and Romanticism.

14. Kierkegaard closely follows Aristotle on this point. The natural man is one who "loves himself selfishly" (Elrod 91).

15. "The existence of what Kierkegaard called the natural man requires the existence of the other. So closely aligned are the natural man and social existence that one cannot exist without the other" (Elrod 119).

16. "The pseudonyms sought to rescue the individual from the objectifying mentality of the Hegelian metaphysic by employing a variety of devices to enable the reader to discover that the subjective life could not be expressed, understood or fulfilled in any abstract system of thought" (Elrod xii).

17. "What it [the self] understands itself to be is in the final instance a riddle; just when it seems on the point of having the building finished, at a whim it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing" (*Concept* 46).

18. Compare Sartre, who suggests that shame is in what one fantasizes to be the recognition (or nonrecognition) of others. I can deny that you are seeing the object that I fear you are making me into, believing in effect that the object I fear you make me into is not "me" (the person you are making ashamed is not me). Or I can deny that I am an object at all, and try instead to look at you and make *you* ashamed.

19. Shame, observes Sartre, is "the consciousness of being irremediably what I always was: 'in suspense'—that is, in the mode of the 'not-yet' or of the 'already-no-longer'" (Sartre 277).

20. "What sort of relations can I enter into with this being which I am and which shame reveals to me?" (Sartre 237)

21. Sartre defines shame as "the original feeling of having my being outside, engaged in another being and as such without any defense, illuminated by the absolute light which emanates from a pure subject. . . . Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being an object, that is, of recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault, but simply that I have 'fallen' into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. I am ashamed not only of the discrepancy between what you know me to be as your object and what I feel myself as subject to be, but I am also ashamed of feeling ashamed of such feelings" (254).

22. Kierkegaard levels criticism at Hegel's concept of being. He focuses on modes of being, that of God and that of existing individuals, and criticizes Hegel's notion of abstract necessity as the force driving being. God's being is not abstract and dialectical, and neither is that of the individual. Characterizing Kierkegaard's critiques of Hegel, Collins notes: (*a*) that Hegel does not understand that existence "can never be subsumed within a system of finite thought, no matter how broad and inclusive its principles and method"; (*b*) that Hegel is inept in dealing metaphysically with the basic notions of being and becoming because of "his failure to distinguish between these concepts in their logical status and as representative of objects, which are themselves nonconceptual"; (*c*) and, finally, that Hegel's theory of world history is "inimical to man's ethical life as a responsible individual" (Collins 119–20).

23. *Either/Or*, as Stendahl understands it, presents three different approaches to the possibility of change: (1) aesthetics (which manipulates but does not believe in change), (2) ethics (which sees change in commitment), and (3) religion (which sees change in conversion) (114).

24. "Because the self is not a static essence but a relation that relates (or misrelates) itself to itself and that also relates (or misrelates) itself to God, sin is not an individual action or series of individual actions or 'sins' but an ongoing misrelationship" (Kirmmse 361).

25. "To explain Adam's sin is therefore to explain original sin, and no explanation is of any avail which explains original sin and does not explain Adam" (*Sickness* 26).

26. "Innocence is not an imperfection with which one cannot be content to stop but must go further; for innocence is always sufficient unto itself, and he who has lost it (lost it, that is to say, in the only way it can be lost, i.e., by guilt, and not in the way it perhaps pleases him to have lost it)—to that man it will not occur to boast of his perfection at the cost of innocence" (*Concept* 34).

27. In his emphasis on the individual, Kierkegaard draws upon the tradition of Augustine and Luther. Kierkegaard takes up the Thomistic notion that man is a finite, body-soul complex, but he revises his definition to include man as a creature of passions (for Kierkegaard the will is a major natural passion).

28. Compare Sartre: I cannot "make myself be for myself as an object; for in no case can I ever alienate myself from myself" (250–51).

29. Compare William James in the following passage: "There are innumerable consciousnesses of emptiness, no one of which taken in itself has a name, but all different from each other. The ordinary way is to assume that they are all emptinesses of consciousness, and so the same state. But the feeling of an absence is *toto coelo* other than the absence of a feeling. It is an intense feeling. The rhythm of a lost word may be there without a sound to clothe it; or the evanescent sense of something which is the initial vowel or consonant may mock us fitfully, without growing more distinct. Every one must know the tantalizing effect of the blank rhythm of some forgotten verse, restlessly dancing in one's mind, striving to be filled out with words" (43).

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