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The Posited Self: The Non-Theistic Foundation in Kierkegaard's Writings

Abstract: We may correctly say that Søren Kierkegaard is one of the most influential Christian-religious thinkers of the modern era, but are we equally justified in categorizing his writings as foundationally religious? This paper challenges a prevailing *exclusive-theological* interpretation that contends that Kierkegaard principally writes from a Christian dogmatic viewpoint. I argue that Kierkegaard's religion is better understood as an outcome of his philosophical analysis of human nature. Conclusively, we should appreciate Kierkegaard first as a philosopher, whose aim is the explication of human subjectivity, and not primarily as an orator of Christian orthodoxy.

Scholars would readily agree that Søren Kierkegaard is one of the most influential religious thinkers of the modern era, ranked alongside prolific figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. While some scholars equally appreciate Kierkegaard for his broader philosophical and psychological enterprise, the Dane nevertheless remains predominantly celebrated as a Christian communicator—indeed, the early circulations of Georg Brandes' non-theistic interpretations have certainly fallen out of favor.¹ While Kierkegaard studies in general welcomes a pluralism of interpretation, the majority of leading scholars, however, tend to interpret Kierkegaard's writings largely through the lenses of Christianity. In the Anglo-American world especially, the trend of attributing to Kierkegaard a foundational Christian framework has for decades (and perhaps since the early English translations of David Swenson and Walter Lowrie) been not only the leading approach, but close to the exclusive trend.²

¹ See Julie K. Allen, "Georg Brandes: Kierkegaard's Most Influential Mis-Representative," in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Literature, Criticism and Art*, Tome II, *Denmark*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2013 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 12), pp. 17–42, here pp. 17ff. See also Lee C. Barrett, "Kierkegaard as a Theologian: A History of Countervailing Interpretations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 528–549, here p. 530.

² In his recent article "Kierkegaard as a Theologian" (pp. 542f.) Barrett groups the contemporary scholars C. Stephan Evans, Hugh Pyper, Bradley Dewey, Andrew Burgess, Robert C. Roberts,

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As noted by John Lippitt, it is evident that Kierkegaard is, with few exceptions, simply *shut out* of Anglophone philosophical circles—which is undeniably obvious given the *minimal* impact Kierkegaard has had on Anglo-American philosophy.³ This tendency stands in noticeable contrast to the European, or *continental*, way of reading Kierkegaard through the philosophy of his Danish and German contemporaries—that is, reading Kierkegaard not necessarily as a fundamental Christian thinker, but separately or equally as a non-theistic philosopher of human nature.⁴

Thus, the problem is not only that Anglo-American supporters of the exclusive-theological reading presuppose the Christian doctrine as their premise for interpretation. A bigger problem seems to be that they often fail to appreciate the scope and gravity of the Germanic philosophical milieu from which Kierkegaard was intellectually cultivated.⁵ Indeed, a thorough understanding of Kierke-

Timothy Polk, David Cain, Abraham Khan, David Gouwens and himself as scholars who read Kierkegaard as an *expositor of Christian concepts*. Barrett further states: “These writers point out that the existentialist portrait of Kierkegaard as the champion of the centered, self-legislating individual is faulty, for it ignores the constitutive role of the language of the Christian community in his writings” (ibid., p. 542). See also Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 48–75, here p. 58. See also George Pattison, “Great Britain: From ‘Prophet of the Now’ to Postmodern Ironist (and after),” in *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, Tome I, *Northern and Western Europe*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2009 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 8), pp. 237–270, here p. 239. See also Lee C. Barrett, “The USA: From Neo-Orthodoxy to Plurality,” in *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, Tome III, *The Near East, Asia, Australia and the Americas*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2009 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 8), pp. 229–268, here pp. 230 ff.

3 John Lippitt, “Kierkegaard and Moral Philosophy: Some Recent Themes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 504–527, here p. 504.

4 See Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard,” pp. 49 ff. For a good collection of nuanced articles on the topic, see *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, Tome I, *Northern and Western Europe*.

5 Although the following comment by Jon Stewart dates back to 2003, I still believe the situation is somewhat the same today: “Although the research community in the English-speaking world has witnessed a new wave of interest in Kierkegaard’s work over the last several years, the secondary literature has remained somewhat uneven, often treating him as a figure isolated from the intellectual tradition and context out of which his thought was born. Few of the major commentators do much to situate his thought vis-à-vis the tradition of German idealism which preceded him or the Danish philosophical milieu in which he was educated, and it is here that many issues and connections remain to be explored.” Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, p. 1.

gaard's affiliation with the works of Immanuel Kant, Johann G. Fichte, Friedrich J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel (and the Romantics, i.e., Friedrich von Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Karl Solger, etc.) has proved itself to be of crucial exegetical importance.⁶ As recent commentators have rightly pointed out, by presupposing a Christian foundation to Kierkegaard's inquiries (instead of a philosophical foundation), one may risk overlooking the far more interesting viewpoint—namely, that Kierkegaard's religion is a solution to the existential problem he uncovers *qua* his genuine philosophical analysis of human nature.⁷ Furthermore, an even larger problem with the exclusive-theological reading seems to be, as Poul Lübcke correctly notices, that it suggests that there cannot be a non-theistic understanding of Kierkegaard's depiction of human existence.⁸ Surely, a drastic viewpoint; if we follow its premise, it seems to suggest that we would be justified in simply removing Kierkegaard from philosophical studies at all. One can hardly imagine Kierkegaard agreeing with such a guileless approach to his purported *authorship* (*forfatter virksomhed*).

This brings us to the aim of the present paper. In the following, I will attempt to challenge the so-called exclusive-theological (or exclusive Christian) reading of Kierkegaard, which I believe is currently stalling the development and impact of Anglo-American Kierkegaard-studies. The goal is to reveal a non-theistic foundation in Kierkegaard's thinking, which I will argue we discover if we elucidate and unfold his philosophy of human selfhood. It is this systematic philosophy that I believe precedes and grounds all of Kierkegaard's valuable insights.

I find it necessary to underline that this is not an attempt to weaken or obliterate the Christian outlook we find in Kierkegaard. That would, first of all, be naïve, but more importantly a foolish exegetical effort. Although it is an intricate

⁶ For a thorough overall philosophical contextualization cf. Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006. See also David J. Kangas, "J.G. Fichte: From Transcendental Ego to Existence," in *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Tome I, *Philosophy*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2007 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 6), pp. 67–96. See also Tonny A. Olesen, "Schelling: A Historical Introduction to Kierkegaard's Schelling," in *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Tome I, *Philosophy*, pp. 229–276. See also Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*; K. Brian Söderquist, *The Isolated Self. Irony as Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007.

⁷ See Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 7 and p. 140. An interesting comparison could be John Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1975.

⁸ Poul Lübcke, "At 'have sat sig selv, eller være sat ved et andet,'" *Filosofiske Studier*, vol. 8, 2007, pp. 1–12, here p. 5. A similar point is raised by Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 139f.

topic, it is undeniable that Kierkegaard was a passionate believer throughout the later part of his adult life—something that clearly shines through in his overall agenda. Quite the opposite, then, the paper should be read as an attempt to illustrate why Kierkegaard had good reasons to emphasize religion as an existential topic. In fact, it is my conviction that Kierkegaard reiterates the validity of a religious lifestyle as a whole, although from a new and non-orthodox standpoint. Of course, as Kierkegaard was well aware, such validity cannot come from within canonical theology itself (e.g., Christendom). A validation of the religious life must instead grow out of a richer philosophical soil—and this, I believe, is exactly what Kierkegaard was early to realize. In fact, as noted by Arne Grøn, one of the most remarkable and fundamental viewpoints Kierkegaard promotes, which also serves as an opening to the religious question, is his rejection of the Cartesian idea that human subjectivity is existentially non-problematic and self-reliant—arguing that human life (i.e., selfhood as the task of becoming a self) fundamentally is an innate existential problem of human nature.⁹ Kierkegaard’s answer or antidote to this problem, as we all know, is a thoroughly religious one. However, we as readers of Kierkegaard are made aware of the existential problem of *becoming a self* from his non-theistic definition of human nature, which shows that religion is not part of Kierkegaard’s foundational analysis. This, as I will show in detail, is the deeper notion we should appreciate in Kierkegaard, rather than presupposing question-begging and overshadowing religious doctrines as our pathway into his work.

A move away from the static Christian interpretation is also a move toward a different sort of foundation, which I believe is less transparent, but instead more dynamic, fertile and pluralistic. Actually, it welcomes further studies and cross-disciplinary interpretations. As mentioned, I believe that such foundation can be found in Kierkegaard’s study of human subjectivity (selfhood). In fact, a careful analysis of Kierkegaard’s *corpus* of work is first of all an inquiry into his concept of selfhood.¹⁰ It is noticeable that in everything Kierkegaard writes, whether it is his pseudonymous writings or his edifying discourses, he operates with an underlying, solid philosophical idea about selfhood as the essential qualitative aspect of human nature. It is from this framework that Kierkegaard manages

⁹ For a thorough elaboration see Arne Grøn, “Subjektivitet og Selvforhold,” *Psyke & Logos*, vol. 23, 2002, pp. 186–199, especially pp. 187 f.

¹⁰ See Peter P. Rohde, *Søren Kierkegaard. Et Geni i en Købstad*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1962, p. 51. See also John J. Davenport, “Selfhood and ‘Spirit,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 230–251, here p. 231. See also Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet: Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1997, p. 9.

to structure and systematize his (at first glance) seemingly inconclusive, ironic and scattered effort as an author. I agree with many other scholars that it is overly apparent that Kierkegaard maneuvers with a rather sophisticated idea of human selfhood already from the beginning of his career—namely, with his *magister* thesis from the University of Copenhagen *On the Concept of Irony* from 1841.¹¹ This view is thoroughly elaborated by K. Brian Söderquist, who argues that we should appreciate Kierkegaard's *magister* thesis as a *first draft* of the recurring problematic existential task; a question that occupies Kierkegaard throughout his life—that is, “the difficulty of taking ownership of the relationships which make up one's world and thus the difficulty of becoming one-self.”¹² It is along these lines that I set the challenge of the present paper. Namely, to reveal Kierkegaard's systematic philosophical outline on human selfhood, without presupposing a Christian-theistic foundation—a challenge, which I believe, Kierkegaard always saw himself pursuing, via both the personal and the pseudonymous works, that is, seeking a philosophical justification and definition of the essence of an authentic lifestyle.¹³

11 A viewpoint condensed with great precision in K. Brian Söderquist, “Authoring a Self,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2009, pp. 153–166, especially p. 154. See also K. Brian Söderquist, “A Short Story: The English Language Reception of *On the Concept of Irony*,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2009, pp. 493–506.

12 Söderquist, *The Isolated Self*, p. 23. Furthermore, Söderquist has also argued that *On the Concept of Irony* is an *anticipatory work* that can be used “as a prism through which to illuminate Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole” (Söderquist, *The Isolated Self*, p. 1). See also Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Existence*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 2003, p. 11: “Kierkegaard very early realized that human existence consists essentially of three elements: the subject (the self), freedom, and the ethical.”

13 Throughout the paper I will primarily refer to Kierkegaard himself, and by and large avoid references to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous viewpoints. This is not because I find the pseudonyms unimportant for the interpretation of Kierkegaard's work. Rather, it is because I find the pseudonyms inconsequential to the interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy of selfhood. I appreciate Michelle Kosch's brief comment, which sums up a non-problematic and sober viewpoint concerning these matters (*Freedom and Reason*, pp. 10–12). Further, what has often been argued is that *irony* plays a crucial role in understanding the scope of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous project. This, however, I still find inconsequential for Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood. Cf. K. Brian Söderquist, “Irony,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 344–364, especially pp. 348 ff.

I. Philosophy of Human Nature as Kierkegaard's Foundation

Traditionally, interpreters have been particularly divided on one central aspect in Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood—namely, his emphasis that the human self stands in some regulatory or compelling (*tvingende*) relationship to the exteriority of its existence. As Kierkegaard prefers to frame it, something or some other *establishes* or *posits* the human self (*sat ved et Andet*).¹⁴ That is, for Kierkegaard the human self is always in relation to a compelling criterion that is higher or external to itself, which somehow hinders the infinite free human comportment.¹⁵ We could say that Kierkegaard understands selfhood as bound by, or entangled with, an exterior inescapable affection.¹⁶

This peculiar depiction of human nature (or human freedom) has given rise to two remarkably different viewpoints. The exclusive-theological readers wish to understand Kierkegaard (and his pseudonyms) literally and attribute to this *affective exteriority* the innate epistemic epiphany of being the effect of God's creation, always already in ontological connection to the Christian concept of the divine creator. That is, the exterior affection is God's way of reaching out to us. Naturally, a defiant denial of one's contextual freedom is conclusively a denial of God's will, and therefore considered a sinful way of life.¹⁷ Philosophical readers, on the other hand, bracket the question about the divine *affection* in order to place emphasis on how Kierkegaard depicts human existence (selfhood) merely as contextualized or relational awareness. They hold that the compelling exterior affection can at least potentially be grounded in other relations than a divine Christian God, for example, the affective impact of other human beings or

¹⁴ SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13. See also an early articulation of this viewpoint in SKS 1, 330 ff. / CI, 297 f.

¹⁵ SKS 11, 193 / SUD, 79. See also Merold Westphal, *Lévinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2008, p. 75.

¹⁶ See for example the elaboration by the pseudonym *Vigilius Haufniensis* on how *entangled freedom* is experienced as *anxiety*, in SKS 4, 355 / CA, 49.

¹⁷ I will refrain from quoting any particular advocate of this view, since the view has many variations, but instead point to Barrett, "Kierkegaard as a Theologian," p. 542. See also Lübcke, "At 'have sat sig selv,'" pp. 1–5. In addition, one may compare Gouwen's well-constructed attempt to show how Kierkegaard is fundamentally a (Christian) religious thinker, cf. David Jay Gouwen, *Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996.

sociological-historical contexts.¹⁸ Emphasis, however, is still placed on Kierkegaard's notion that human selfhood stands in a qualitative relation to an exterior criterion—that in front of which, life becomes ethically evaluated. This means that *the ethical* is compelling us from an exterior (qualitatively higher) position.¹⁹

The latter philosophical approach is an essential element to an interpretation of Kierkegaard, since it first of all informs us of how Kierkegaard deviates philosophically (and anthropologically) from the Cartesian tradition Kierkegaard saw refined in Kant and Fichte.²⁰ In a late journal entry from 1850 Kierkegaard wrote:

Kant held that the human being was his own law (autonomy), i.e., bound himself under the law he gives himself. In the deeper sense, what this really postulates is lawlessness or experimentation....It is impossible for me actually to be stricter in A than I am or wish to be in B. There must be constraint if it is going to be in earnest. If I am to bind myself and there is no binding force higher than myself, then where, as the A, who binds, can I find the rigor I do not possess as B, the one who is to be bound, when, after all, A and B are the same self [?]²¹

This quotation echoes Kierkegaard's early criticism of both Kant and Fichte from *On the Concept of Irony*, revealing that Kierkegaard was early to philosophically sever himself from the Cartesian anthropological view on human selfhood as mere self-legislative rationality.²² In the same journal note from 1850, Kierkegaard continues arguing that selfhood is relationally posited in a constraining and compelling relationship to something different than itself.

If we pair this observation with Kierkegaard's outspoken criticism of Hegel, we may want to say that one of Kierkegaard's central concerns was exactly to clarify whether the human self was actively self-positing as pure rational spontaneity (Fichte and Kant), or whether the human self was heteronomously or deterministically grounded (Hegel). For Kierkegaard, the answer was somewhere to be found in between these two viewpoints; Kierkegaard understood human freedom as always already entangled in a concept of heteronomy or *positing compelling exteriority*. Thus, according to Kierkegaard, freedom is simply never *free* as such, but better understood as *entangled*. It is therefore a somewhat new

18 See Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 200–204. See also Arne Grøn, "The Embodied Self. Reformulating the Existential Difference in Kierkegaard," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 11, 2004, pp. 26–43, especially p. 36.

19 SKS 11, 193 / SUD, 79.

20 Grøn, "Subjektivitet og Selvforhold," pp. 187 ff.

21 SKS 23, 34, NB15:66 / KJN 7, 42.

22 See SKS 1, 309 / CI, 273.

and sophisticated attempt to depict human nature as a non-idealistic entity, and paying respect to the reality of human experience, that is, the difficulties of becoming a self.

It is from Kierkegaard's later (religious psychological) work from 1849, *The Sickness unto Death*, that we find the most explicit and formal analysis of human selfhood as entangled freedom. The precise and rigid language Kierkegaard uses in this work, which was credited to his (so-called) *extraordinary Christian* pseudonym *Anti-Climacus*,²³ makes the writings particularly suitable for an analysis of his concept of selfhood. The work opens with the well-known quarrelling definition of selfhood: "The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."²⁴ In the following I will elaborate on this particular quotation in order to give a considerate and fair explication of the meaning that Kierkegaard lays into this expression.

First, I will allow myself to make an initial distinction. The quotation above is a composition of three separate aspects of the human self. Therefore, I will carve up the definition into the following three sections:²⁵ (1) *The human self is a derived established relation*, (2) *a relation that relates itself to itself*, and (3) *in relating itself to itself it relates itself to another*. Thus, I will discuss the three segments in isolation, making them the subtitle of each of three subsections: (A) *Synthesis*, (B) *Self-Relation*, and (C) *Exteriority*. The reader should constantly have in mind, however, that Kierkegaard sees the above definition as a non-reducible compounded totality. The human self cannot be divided into these three sub-relations, and neither can we understand selfhood in virtue of one of these single and separate segments. Instead, selfhood consists of all three sub-relations as a complete unity. In order to properly address this totality of selfhood, the paper will conclude with a conjoining discussion of Kierkegaard's notion of *selfhood* in relation to *theism* and *morality*.

²³ SKS 22, 136, NB11:22 / KJN 6, 133.

²⁴ SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 13–14. Note the Danish original wording: "Et saadant deriveret, sat Forholder Menneskets Selv, et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, og i at forholde sig til sig selv forholder sig til et andet" (SKS 11, 130).

²⁵ For the sake of simplicity the following is slightly altered compared to the original quotation.

A. Synthesis: (1) “The human self is a derived established relation”

By stating that (1) *the human self is a derived established relation*, Kierkegaard is communicating a central view he holds about the basic facticity of human nature. It is also, in its crude outline, most likely to be a view he partly inherited from his contemporaries, in particular from the philosophy of both Schelling and Hegel.²⁶ The overall idea is that the fundamental structure of human nature is indicated as relational, or better, the particular human being is a relation (*et Forhold*). The more explicit outline Kierkegaard gives is that the human being is a synthesized posited relation between the physical (body) and the psychical (mind).²⁷ It should be noted, that the view that the human being is a synthesized relation carries recognizable Hegelian terminology. That is, in a Hegelian logical notion the coupling of two opposing entities, for example, body and mind, will result in a third entity, which is the posited relation.²⁸ Kierkegaard here follows Hegel to a certain point, arguing that human nature cannot be reduced to any of its single natural kinds, but must necessarily be thought of as a totality (i.e., unity); human nature is both rational and embodied.

Now, despite the apparent Hegelian heritage, both terminologically and philosophically, Kierkegaard's articulation will later convey an intelligent opposition to Hegel's understanding of the synthesized (i.e., mediated) relation. For Hegel, the synthesis is the particular third element in the relation, which also is seen as

²⁶ See Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 551. See also Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 122. See also David James, “The ‘Self-Positing’ Self in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*,” *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, vol. 16, 2011, pp. 587–598, especially p. 590. See also Alastair Hannay, “Spirit and the Idea of the Self as a Reflexive Relation,” in *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. by Robert Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1987 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 19), pp. 24–38, especially p. 24. See also Alastair Hannay, “Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 329–348, especially p. 332.

²⁷ Kierkegaard communicates his *synthesis-outline* about human nature in many formats—both explicitly, as in *The Sickness unto Death*, but also implicitly through the fictional characters from, for example, *Either/Or*. Regardless of the format the idea remains that human facticity is *relational*. Thus, as I see it, the idea of a systematic format dwells foundationally in his way of thinking about the issue of human nature. Especially, in *The Concept of Anxiety* from 1844 we see the familiar explicit terminology: “Man, then, is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a *synthesis of the temporal and the eternal*” (SKS 4, 388 / CA, 85).

²⁸ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. by Arnold V. Miller, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1969, pp. 82f. Cf. Stewart's detailed analysis of the Hegel-Kierkegaard relation(s) (*Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 577 ff.)

a *resolution* of the opposite constituents into a higher third.²⁹ For Kierkegaard, the established relation, the synthesis, is a sustainment of the actual collision between opposites—holding sway of the actual contradiction: “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two.”³⁰ It follows that Kierkegaard’s deviation from the Hegelian logic is first of all grounded on existential premises.³¹ Kierkegaard simply disagreed that human existence is able to mediate itself as mere balanced synthesized self-understanding.³² This opposition plays a key role in understanding why Kierkegaard sees human existence as a problematic task.

Briefly, we could understand this relational essence of the/a human being as Kierkegaard’s way of articulating seemingly ordinary aspects of human nature. The paradoxical constituents of human nature make up the fundamental facts and limitations about human everyday comportment. He simply underlines the paradoxes of having to simultaneously position or relate oneself as both a conscious (*infinite/free*) and an embodied being (*finite/necessity*). For example, we could say that human beings are capable of *infinetizing* themselves in the sense that one can fantasize or be visionary (i.e., cognitive capabilities). On the other hand, human nature is just as much limited because of the *finiteness* of one’s physical, biological nature (i.e., embodiment). In other words, human nature can be seen as completely *free*, but at the same time must abide by the natural *necessities* that human nature implies.³³ These two opposites become relativized and sustained in what Kierkegaard calls *spirit* (*Aand* (*ånd*)), or better,

²⁹ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Arnold V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, pp. 49f. Note that Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* talks about the relation between *consciousness* and *world*—or better, the move from *rationality* (*Vernunft*) to *world spirit* (*Geist*)—and not explicitly about the mediation between body and mind. The logical movement, however, is in principle the same—which Kierkegaard is here both responding to, and taking advantage of.

³⁰ SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

³¹ See, Hannay, “Spirit and the Idea of the Self,” p. 34. Furthermore, Kierkegaard is especially concerned with the difference between abstraction (e.g., pure rationality) and the aforementioned existential paradox of being a relation between opposites. This can be inferred from a rather long passage in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which is summed up by the pseudonym *Johannes Climacus*’ mocking denial of the Hegelian approach to the existential reality: “Hegel is just as much in the wrong when he, forgetting the abstraction, plunges from it [sc. the eternity of abstraction] down in existence in order by hook or by crook to cancel the double *aut* [sc. the non-contradictory abstraction]. It is impossible to do this in existence, because then he cancels existence also” (SKS 7, 278 / CUP1, 305).

³² See Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*, pp. 140f.

³³ See Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 200f.

what he refers to as human selfhood—that is, the self sustains this established paradoxical relation *as* concrete selfhood. This approach is a clear negation of the Hegelian logic, which (opposite to Kierkegaard) would have claimed that the paradox of the opposing constituents would be resolved in the third—namely, selfhood itself is in Hegelian terms understood as a resolving of the paradoxical composition, into self-determined *self-consciousness as truth*.³⁴

In summary, and as we will see, selfhood is for Kierkegaard necessarily associated, or intimately connected, with an inner conflict between the infinite mind and the finite body. But it is also Kierkegaard's way of illustrating the potentiality of selfhood, since the third entity in the synthesis is never merely given as a positive unity. In this sense, *human nature* is by default seen as a qualitative negative entity. The *human self*, on the other hand, is the qualitative positive entity human nature is capable of becoming.³⁵ The emergence, or the becoming of human selfhood, then, is Kierkegaard's way of articulating when human potentiality is in the process of being realized, which is a concrete ongoing ascension from the *negative* starting point (i.e., human nature), to something *positive* (i.e., human selfhood as mere self-awareness), to balanced authenticity (i.e., selfhood as self-understanding). The shift from the *negative* nature to the *positive* selfhood is when the human relation is relating itself to itself. This brings us to the second aspect of Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood.

B. Self-Relation: (2) “a relation that relates itself to itself”

In order to fully capture the gravity of Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood, we need to set a contextual framework for the following section. Kierkegaard's statement that the self is (2) *a relation that relates itself to itself*, is essentially a challenge to the underlying Cartesian philosophy, which dominated the continental Enlightenment and motivated the German idealistic movement. By Cartesian, I particularly refer to the transcendental philosophy, which came out of Kant and was further developed via the idealism of especially Fichte (and appropriated by the romantics, for example, Schlegel, Solger and Tieck). The fundamental difference between the Cartesian outline and Kierkegaard's view is that Kierkegaard opposes the idea that we can reduce human selfhood and self-understanding to

³⁴ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110. See also Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2000, pp. 125 f.

³⁵ See Poul Lübcke, “Selvets Ontologi hos Kierkegaard,” *Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 13, 1984, pp. 50–62, especially p. 52. See also Davenport, “Selfhood and ‘Spirit,’” pp. 230–233.

the Kantian and Fichtean idea of mere (spontaneous) rationality. The idea of the self as *eo ipso* rationality was in the Cartesian outline understood more precisely as the ability to act under one's innate self-posed laws. That is, human agency, and thereby freedom, was described as *autonomy*.³⁶

This is not equivalent to saying that Kierkegaard disregards rationality. According to Kierkegaard, the human mind has the ability to realize and relate to its own relation—or to be aware of itself as relational. As Kierkegaard prefers to articulate it (although it is not necessarily informative):

In the relation between the two [psychical and physical] the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical [*Sjel*, i.e., *bevidsthed*] the relation between the physical and the psychical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation becomes the positive third, and this is the self.³⁷

Kierkegaard is here articulating the aforementioned qualitative shift from mere *human nature* into realized *human selfhood*—that is, when the relation (*qua* consciousness or rationality) becomes an issue to itself.

Since the Cartesian outline does not give a relational depiction of human selfhood (*qua res cogitans*), Kierkegaard's (later) concern never became or was an issue for Kant or Fichte. There is, so to speak, no relational issue revealed for the Cartesian ego—only the thinking human self, and later with Kant and Fichte, the dialectic of reason and understanding must essentially be what is meant by selfhood.³⁸ Thus, for Kierkegaard, the qualitative peculiarity of selfhood is signified as an experience of one's own relation of embodiment and consciousness—that is, the human being becomes a self when it experiences itself, or better, when the relation relates itself to itself, which essentially is the initial and rudimentary self-awareness.³⁹ This gives rise to a number of fundamental existential issues, of which I shall limit myself to the following two:

36 Autonomy is from the Greek word αὐτόνομος (auto-nomos), αὐτο meaning *the self* and νόμος meaning *law*. That is, acting under self-legislated laws (cf. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 40f.). A similar scheme is followed by Fichte with the term *Selbständigkeit* or self-sufficiency (cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Breazeale, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1994, p. 19 and p. 39).

37 SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

38 Kant discusses this notion in quite elaborate detail in his first *Critique*; see especially Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, B150-B159, pp. 256–260.

39 See Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*, pp. 57–59.

The first issue is that in the self-relation one necessarily meets oneself when one is aware of oneself—that is, there is always a specific entity that one relates to in the self-relation. For example, when I think about myself, I realize that the perceived *I* (the relation of body and mind) becomes an issue to *myself*. Or stated differently, when I think about myself, I am both the one I think about and the one that is thinking about myself. It is a peculiar double signification Kierkegaard is aiming at: The self is a relation, and then again that relation is a self-relation.⁴⁰ Thus, there is already in the self-relation an inbuilt notion of trying to obtain self-understanding, which is central to the entire bundle of psychological states Kierkegaard discusses in his writings, for example, anxiety, despair, melancholy, sorrow, joy, love, etc. That is, the double signification of the self as a self-relation is the possibility for one's being to be an issue to oneself—hence, selfhood is revealed as a problematic task.

The second issue is a time-related issue. That is, selfhood is self-awareness in time—the self is somehow *colliding* with itself in elapsing time, meaning that self-understanding is an ongoing task. The aforementioned double signification is therefore seen as a constant ongoing rupture of one's self-understanding. There is no such thing as a given, final or eternal comprehension of oneself.⁴¹ The idea that selfhood is set or posited as a time-related issue, is also an ongoing topic in Kierkegaard's earlier *The Concept of Anxiety*, where Kierkegaard depicts the difficulty of holding on to oneself in a seemingly paradoxical existence.⁴² The problem for Kierkegaard is, that self-understanding is a task that is only potentially bound for completion, but more likely to conclude in existential failure. The latter idea of failing to reach the status of authentic self-understanding is the core topic of *The Sickness unto Death*—namely, to fail to understand oneself is to be in despair (*Fortvivelse*).⁴³ Kierkegaard's inference, then, is that selfhood, as a self-relation, is understood as an ongoing *misrelation* (*Misforhold*) in either a

⁴⁰ Compare this to Grøn: “*Selvet er altså selvforhold, vel at mærke ikke forholdet, men det at forholdet forholder sig til sig selv. Bestemmelsen er dobbelt: Mennesket er et selv, som igen er det at forholde sig til sig selv*” (Grøn, “Subjektivitet og Selvforhold,” p. 191).

⁴¹ See Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*, p. 173 f.

⁴² See Arne Grøn, “Time and History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 273–291, especially p. 279.

⁴³ Note the Danish etymological precision that the word *fortvivelse* encapsulates. The word *fortvivelse* is composed of two words, *for* and *tvivl*—that is, *for-tvivl*. The Danish word *tvivle* means in English *to doubt* (*at tvivle*). When one places the word (or prefix) *for* in front of *tvivl*, it becomes an intensification of *doubt* (*tvivl*). Despair (*fortvivelse*), then, is an intensified doubt about oneself—or better, an uncertainty, confusion or bewilderment about one's entire relation. Personally, I prefer the English translation or description of *fortvivelse* as innate *intensified perplexity*.

strong or a weak sense—however, always in some sense a misrelation, because of the ongoing (time-related) rupture of one’s self-understanding.⁴⁴

Let us take a closer look at what Kierkegaard means by the idea that the self is a *misrelation*. As mentioned, the bigger psychological issue at stake in *The Sickness unto Death* is the notion of despair, which is a qualitative psychological signification of experiencing oneself as a misrelation—or better, experiencing the dizzying and paradoxical aspect of one’s self-relation. It should be mentioned (and appreciated) that Kierkegaard’s intention with *The Sickness unto Death* was to give a somewhat exhaustive depiction of the psychology and phenomenology behind the concept of despair. In fact, the entire book, except the first few pages, is devoted to this agenda. I will not, however, move into a deep analysis of despair, but merely acknowledge that it plays a crucial role in understanding Kierkegaard’s overall idea of selfhood and morality.

Furthermore, and this is something that is often overlooked, despair is not a consequence of his theoretical understanding of the self as relational; it is rather the other way around. Kierkegaard’s definition of selfhood is a result of his phenomenological and psychological depiction of despair (of course, among other psychological issues). For example, as Kierkegaard notices, animals do not have the potential or capability to despair; therefore human selfhood must necessarily be construed in a different way, since despair is an essential aspect of human comportment and apperception.⁴⁵ Thus, despair functions as Kierkegaard’s empirical phenomenon, which informs us on the genealogy of the human self. One is tempted to say that this is almost a scientific approach of letting the phenomena dictate one’s theoretical depiction.

Despair is for Kierkegaard an intensification of the misrelation that makes up the human self:

Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself. But the synthesis is not the misrelation; it is merely the possibility, or in the synthesis lies the possibility of misrelation. If the synthesis were the misrelation, then despair would not exist at all, then despair would be something that lies in human nature as such.⁴⁶

44 SKS 11, 132–134 / SUD, 16–17. Again, this stands in contrast to the Hegelian notion of selfhood as a passive mediation or a resolving of the paradoxical constituents of one’s being (Hannay, “Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair,” pp. 26 f.), where Kierkegaard is articulating selfhood as an ongoing active process of *becoming* a self.

45 SKS 11, 131 / SUD, 15.

46 SKS 11, 131–32 / SUD, 15–16.

We see here again that despair reveals itself as an empirical and psychological proof of the relational characteristic of human selfhood. The self-relating relation—selfhood *as* a self-relation—is essentially an experience of always already posited complexity as perplexity, given that the self that we are aware of is never fully grasped or understood. Selfhood is that which can never be fully synthesized and thereby never completely meaningful. The self emerges not as self-understanding *in concreto*, but as a mundane and illusive self-relational awareness.

In summary, the subjective understanding of oneself will initially be comprehended as an *existential task* of acquiring self-understanding, which is the qualitative shift of the *becoming* of oneself. Specifically, this means that the human self by default experiences itself as an imbalance, or misrelation, due to the perplexity of the initial self-experience. The existential task, then, is to achieve a balance (*Ligevægt*), which conclusively is a self-relational understanding of being posited as a relation (between body and mind). Note again that Kierkegaard's definition deviates fundamentally from the Cartesian outline. The human self is not understood as this stable ground, from where self-understanding can freely blossom. There is initially a complete lack of self-containment, in the sense that the self-relation is somehow understood as a surplus—a surplus that initially reveals itself as meek awareness, and that itself is the self-relation.⁴⁷

So far, one criticism could appear obvious. The initial definition of human selfhood as an existential task may not reveal any substantial complexity to some readers. Surely, one could ask: How difficult can it be to understand oneself? Well, this is so far, in accordance to our initial definition, the wrong questions to ask, since we are still lacking the third aspect Kierkegaard ascribes to human selfhood. This third segment, i.e., *relating itself to another*, is seen as a further complication of Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood, and also the segment that has given rise to confusion in the secondary literature. I take the following section to be crucial to the overall statement of the present paper, which is why I shall elaborate in more detail on this issue.

C. Exteriority: (3) “in relating itself to itself it relates itself to another”

The third and last description of the compositional character of human selfhood is a characterization of selfhood as a relation to exterior dependency. That is,

⁴⁷ See Grøn, “Subjektivitet og Selvforhold,” pp. 188f.

Kierkegaard wants to emphasize that human selfhood can never be fulfilled as self-understanding unless one accepts that one is always already in some experience of dependency to something exterior to oneself. Or to put it in Kierkegaard's terminology, the self is experiencing itself as being *posited* by something other than itself, which the self cannot (existentially) abstract itself from. The task of becoming is therefore further complicated by the exteriority of one's being.⁴⁸ It should here be noted that Kierkegaard again takes this further complication as a consequence of the genealogy of despair. That is, the form of despair Kierkegaard calls *the despair of defiance*, "In despair to will to be oneself,"⁴⁹ would only be possible if the human self stands in relation to a positing exteriority, which the self, in despair, attempts to sever itself from. If the self did not stand in a posited relation to a concept of exteriority, *despair of defiance* would simply not arise as a psychological issue.⁵⁰ Therefore, selfhood must be understood first as a relation (between body and mind) that relates to its own relation, i.e., mundane self-awareness, but also understood as standing in relation to one's exteriority, i.e., relating to (or comporting) oneself *as* self-relation.

So far, the reader may have noticed that I have been using the words *established* and *posited* in order to signify selfhood as a somewhat *given* paradoxical relation. As Kierkegaard puts it: "The human self is an established relation."⁵¹ However, interchanging the words *posited* and *established* is essentially an incorrect usage of Kierkegaard's terminology. The reason why I highlight this issue is that this switch in terminology is found in several of the English translations—although, Kierkegaard always use the same Danish word (namely, *sat*). The etymological detail between *posited* and *established* may appear to be of minor trivial relevance, but as I will show in the following it reveals an important interpretative nuance.⁵²

If we rewrite the first segment (1) *the human self is a derived established relation*, to (1) *the human self is a derived posited relation*, we should be able

48 See Lübcke, "At 'have sat sig selv,' " p. 3. See also Marius Mjaaland, "Alterität und Textur in Kierkegaards *Krankheit zum Tode*," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, vol. 47, 2005, pp. 58–80, especially pp. 62ff.

49 SKS 11, 130, 181–187 / SUD, 14, 67–74.

50 SKS 11, 182 / SUD, 68.

51 SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

52 I will later argue briefly that there is a connection between Kierkegaard's choice of the word *sat* and the equivalent in Hegelian terminology. Since I take Alastair Hannay to be one of the respected authorities on the Hegel-Kierkegaard connection, I wonder why he has made the same translation mistake, namely, translating the Danish word *sat* with the English word *established* in his 1989 translation of *The Sickness unto Death*. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. by Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Classics 1989, p. 43.

to anticipate what Kierkegaard is really trying to articulate here.⁵³ Kierkegaard's idea is that the self is a posited entity in the sense that the self is derivatively *put in place* by its natural constituents (body and mind). The self is posited as a given relation, which one conclusively experiences as an inherent facticity of one's selfhood. Thus, it would be wrong to say that the relation is somehow *established* in the way that it is *ontologically created*, since this would not leave room for an imbalance or *misrelation*. One can only *misrelate* to oneself if one's relation is posited in a *weaker* sense, different than being *firmly* established or constituted.

In fact, Kierkegaard illustrates the difference between *established* and *posited*, by implicitly showing that a firmly *established* existence is an existential impossibility, since the self has the possibility to self-posit. The self, Kierkegaard holds, can experience itself as a way of positing itself—that is, the self can experience that there is a possibility to choose one's own character as a free self-positing being. Indeed, Kierkegaard keeps this option open in his analysis: "Such relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established [*posited*] itself or have been established [*posited*] by another."⁵⁴ However, Kierkegaard later denies that there can be a self-reliant pure self-positing self, *qua* the psychological status of *despair as defiance*. That is, even if we do try to self-posit, we will always be aware of being in relation to some other exterior and compelling (positing) reality. Thus, we can indeed self-posit, but only by also being in despair.

This may be demonstrated better by example. Imagine a president who can surely depict and posit himself outwardly as a caring, responsible and an honorable politician, despite the fact that he has perhaps been responsible for social-political catastrophes. A person like this is somehow claiming to have the power over his self-understanding—that is, he is somehow self-positing his own existential quality, regardless of the actual (exterior) reality. Conclusively, Kierkegaard denies self-positing as an ontological category, but instead makes room for it within the domain of despair. Such a president, then, must be in despair. That is, according to Kierkegaard, one can only arbitrarily claim to be self-positing, but one cannot ontologically realize it, since this existential way of self-positing essentially is self-deception.⁵⁵ Thus, we would simply be wrong

53 Compare this to George Pattison's use of the English terminology, where I assume he deliberately alters the translation from *established* to *posited* (George Pattison, " 'Before God' as a Regulative Concept," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1997, pp. 70–84, here p. 73).

54 SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

55 Cf. SKS 11, 184 / SUD, 69; the Danish idiom Kierkegaard uses is particularly interesting: "Det fortvivlede Selv bygger altsaa bestandigt kun Luftcasteller."

in saying that the self is established. The notion Kierkegaard is aiming at is an existential experience of being posited as a relation, but also posited in relation to an exterior reality. Again, the articulation is double.

As I shall demonstrate, the third segment of the definition of selfhood, (3) *in relating itself to itself it relates itself to another*, is Kierkegaard's way of articulating this problem—namely, that (authentic) self-positing self-understanding is an existential impossibility. In Kierkegaard's framework, the self is not just positing itself in relation to, and on the conditions of, its own inwardness as undisturbed creative spontaneity. Kierkegaard argues that there is a sense in which the human self is being *posited* by another *outward* or external force—that is, it is entangled in some compelling (heteronomous) concept of exteriority.

Kierkegaard's premise is that a human self is always already aware of its relation to exteriority. In other words, the self-relation is simultaneously also a relation to an external *power* (*Magt*) that somehow is an inescapable part of being self-aware. Conclusively, this power will heteronomously affect one's self-understanding (but not establish or dictate it). Now, it is well known that Kierkegaard's pseudonym from *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus, ascribes this experience of exteriority to the religious epiphany of being before an omnipotent Christian God,⁵⁶ or that this epiphany at least has the structure of an experience of being before some *conception* of a God.⁵⁷ However, as I have briefly argued, this aspect of being posited by exteriority is a consequential view of the psychological facts revealed by the structure of despair. It is the structure of selfhood that makes room for despair as a psychological issue. If humans were not disposed to be in despair (of defiance), this epiphany of exteriority would not be an existential issue.

This means that the psychology itself is far from grounded on a religious premise. It is the other way around—namely, the philosophy of selfhood can lead to a religious conclusion, in order to give meaning to a foundational psychological phenomenon. Therefore, a central argument for the present paper is to bracket Anti-Climacus' candid assumption that the exteriority is exclusively explained by the Christian notion of God. This is an important interpretative distinction, since the third segment, i.e., exteriority, later will function as the *moral* link in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Thus, I am basically suggesting that we should refuse to understand Kierkegaard's ethics exclusively as Christianity.

In order to build a stronger argument, I will now return to the translation fallacy mentioned earlier—namely, the translation of the Danish word *sat*, and

⁵⁶ Cf. SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14.

⁵⁷ Cf. SKS 11, 191 / SUD, 77. See also Pattison, “‘Before God’ as a Regulative Concept.”

the difference between *established* and *posited*. I will try to illustrate why it may have been that a sizeable part of the (Anglo-American or English) exclusive-theological reading of Kierkegaard's third segment of selfhood rests on the idea of selfhood being *established*, and not merely *posited*. I grant that it is open to discussion whether or not we are dealing with a, strictly speaking, incorrect translation, or whether we are merely dealing with a deviation of contextual meaning between the words *established* and *posited*. However, it is undeniable that the translation itself gives rise to terminological and contextual confusion. To people who think that the translation difference is minor, one could point to a funny observation, that this translation confusion is always avoided in biblical English writings. We have yet to see a biblical translation that says that *God posited the world*. Here, *established*, *constituted* and (preferably) *created* are the proper wordings in, for example, the Old or the New Testament.⁵⁸

One of the stronger arguments for emphasizing the difference between *established* and *posited* would be that Kierkegaard most likely borrowed the concept *sat* (posited), and its technical usage and meaning, from Hegelian philosophy and terminology—namely, Hegel's concept of *positedness* (*Gesetztheit* or *Gesetz*).⁵⁹ However, it would be more appropriate to take a closer look at the context where Kierkegaard actually uses the concept *sat*, and also take a look at the particular etymological meaning of the Danish word *sat*, in order to build a better understanding of why the aforementioned passage in *The Sickness unto Death* is subject to such great confusion.

The first thing we want to recognize is that *The Sickness unto Death* is not the only place where Kierkegaard dwells on the idea that the human self is *posited* (*sat*). Actually, the notion of something being *posited* in the self (values, feelings, moods, etc.) is a topic Kierkegaard constantly returns to. However, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard makes use of the term *sat* in an (almost) identical context as in *The Sickness unto Death*. In the English (*KW*) edition of *The Concept of Anxiety* the Danish word *sat* is correctly translated with the English word *pos-*

⁵⁸ See, e. g., Jer 51:15: "It is He who made the earth by His power, Who *established* the world by His wisdom, And by His understanding He stretched out the heavens" (my emphasis).

⁵⁹ A view underlined by Hannay: "But Anti-Climacus's definition of the self as a relation that 'relates itself to itself' is neither empty parody nor a pretentiously decked out truism [on Hegel]. It states elegantly, and I believe accurately, a crucial principle of Kierkegaard's thought—only, however, to the appropriately programmed reader. By this I mean a reader familiar with the tradition from which Kierkegaard's terms derive their connotations: the Hegelian tradition." (Hannay, "Spirit and the Idea of the Self," p. 24). The philosophical affiliation with Hegel is often overlooked, due to the overall depiction of Kierkegaard as nothing but a fierce critical opponent to everything Hegel wrote and did both as a philosopher and person (cf. Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 2–13).

ited. However, the same editorial committee simultaneously accepts a different translation in *The Sickness unto Death*, where the Danish word *sat* unexpectedly appears as the English word *established*. It may be true, however, that *The Sickness unto Death* has a slightly heavier religious connotation than the earlier *The Concept of Anxiety*. This may explain why the translators decided to make use of a different translation in order to accentuate the religious differences. Surely, as already mentioned, the word *establish* has stronger religious connotations than the word *posited*. One can only speculate how the Anglo-American reception of *The Sickness unto Death* would have developed, had the word *established* been correctly translated with the word *posited*. This paper, however, is no place for such speculative advance.

Let us now have a look at the etymology and usage of the word *sat* in the Danish language, in order to better represent Kierkegaard's intended meaning. The Danish word *sat* is *praeteritum*⁶⁰ (or past tense) of the verb (*at*) *sætte*—which literally means *to place*, for example, *to place something somewhere*.⁶¹ One peculiar aspect, which I believe is especially relevant for the Danish usage is when *sat* serves to describe a particular aspect of a situation, or a person's relation to a certain event. In these cases, *sat* becomes a peculiar way of speaking almost *figuratively*. A demonstration of this usage could be when one gets married (however, note that essentially all situations and events, which one is consciously aware of, have aspects of being posited (*sat*)). Here the married person experiences the notion of being *sat*—meaning that one is *arrested* and *compelled* by the exteriority in his/her particular social position, which marriage implies, for example, having a partner, living up to matrimonial obligations, the legal difference, or the social status of marriage. Being *sat*, for example, by marriage, merely means that one necessarily has to relate oneself to the exteriority that marriage implies. One could say that the exterior affective reality is somewhat inescapable—it somehow entangles you in a compelling way. This is how marriage reveals itself as an affective matter of self-relation—it *posits* us in a peculiar contextualized way.

The reason why we cannot translate the Danish word *sat* with the English word *established* is simply because we are not talking about a dominating creational process. Rather, the word *sat* is understood as something that is externally compelling, something that affects us; it essentially hinders the ability to experience oneself as freely self-positing. This does not imply that one cannot try to

⁶⁰ In Danish: *kort tillægsform* or *datids tillægsform*.

⁶¹ It can also mean *to suggest* or *to pitch*, which by analogy is closer to the Latin word *posito* or *positum*, in which the English word *posit* is rooted.

escape the notion of being *sat*. In praxis one can indeed deny the contextual affection—for example, one can get a divorce and annul one's marriage, but the situation still leaves a trace regardless. That is, when one divorces, one is thereafter *posited* in a new context—namely, *being divorced* (and all the exterior contextual affections that follow from this). Therefore, *sat* should not be understood in the sense that one is being firmly or ontologically *established* (or created), but rather, that one's self-understanding is being forcefully affected, limited and contextualized from a multitude of exterior connections. These adjectives are simply an inescapable part of our self-relational understanding; actually when we think about it, it turns out to be a mundane aspect of human subjectivity.

What Kierkegaard is aiming at, then, is something qualitatively different from being *established*. Instead, it is an explanation of the self in association with existential affection and limitation. Such a relation calls for one's earnest attention. One can easily ignore the experienced force of being *sat*, but it will, nevertheless, still appear as a non-escapable relation. The English word *posited* is in my view the best translation we have to signify this (figurative) meaning in Kierkegaard's terminology.⁶²

Let us return to a passage in *The Sickness unto Death*, where this wording becomes relevant: "Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established [*sat*] itself or have been established [*sat*] by another [*et Andet*]." ⁶³ Formally speaking, Kierkegaard keeps open the opportunity that one's selfhood can either be *sat* (posited) by oneself, or by another: It must be, Kierkegaard holds, that either we can posit our own selfhood entirely, or else something is positing it alongside with us.⁶⁴ Now, it is quite explicit from the rest of the book that Kierkegaard accentuates the latter notion. This leads us to the other perspective—namely, if some other also posits us, then it follows that human existence has in it certain qualitative, inescapable affections, which

⁶² Although the word *posited* is, to the best of my knowledge, not strictly applied in this sense in the English language, it still serves the purpose of explaining that one's self-relation is being put (forward) into a qualitatively different relation, different from a mere self-relation deprived from externality (in the Kantian or Fichtean manner).

⁶³ SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

⁶⁴ Note that Kierkegaard is not underlining the formal logical outcome of the sentence—since this would imply that it is an *either/or*, that *either* we posit ourselves entirely, *or* we are posited entirely by this other. The word *or* should not be understood as a logical disjunction, since Kierkegaard later changes the *disjunction* to a *conjunction*, so selfhood is a peculiar and paradoxical experience of both self-positing and being posited at the same time (one could easily claim that this would be illogical, which I believe Kierkegaard would have been fully satisfied with).

ultimately are beyond human deliberation and control—and essentially incomprehensible. The latter depiction is Kierkegaard’s view. In other words, according to Kierkegaard, human self-relation must also be an embracing of the positing external conditions that are forced upon one’s existence. Authentic self-understanding, then, involves compliance to the exteriority one is posited by. According to Kierkegaard, this is a factual aspect of human nature. Whether or not we agree with Kierkegaard (and Anti-Climacus) that this is further a God-relation is less important. The crucial part is to recognize that selfhood entails an exterior compulsion as a foundation of its essence.

II. Concluding Remarks on Selfhood, Theism, and Morality

So far I have attempted to illustrate the non-theistic foundation, which I believe Kierkegaard is revealing with his philosophy of human nature (selfhood). It is quite appealing to argue that the Christian idea of a divine creator plays no role in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. In other words, the issue that gives rise to the existential problems, which Kierkegaard is primarily engaged with, is disclosed through a philosophical approach. Strictly speaking, the theistic part of Kierkegaard’s system does not provide any substantial argumentative work. We can indeed make sense of Kierkegaard’s philosophical project without invoking any Christian overtones—actually, the theory is perfectly understandable if we fully bracket (or remove) the theism suggested by Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus.

The structural definition of human selfhood explicated here is in a larger Kierkegaardian context, of course, still somewhat simplified. But the goal of the present paper is merely to illustrate that Kierkegaard’s structural foundation is non-theistic. In summary, the foundational premise is that human selfhood is a self-relation. This is a crucial aspect, since it is Kierkegaard’s way of articulating the complexity and dis-unification (i.e., misrelation) that selfhood always already represents. The self emerges as mundane self-awareness—that is, awareness as conscious of its embodied existence. Furthermore, *qua* one’s cognitive abilities, one is bound to exteriorize, project, or self-relate oneself in time—meaning that one’s existence constantly becomes a renewed issue to oneself. Selfhood as self-awareness reveals itself as a task of gaining self-understanding, to become a balanced or authentic self, as opposed to the intensified misrelation of despair as *intensified perplexity* about one’s life.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Cf. Grøn, “The Embodied Self,” pp. 27f.

Selfhood as authentic self-understanding is further complicated by the actual compelling affection of the exterior context one is receptive to. Such a relation that relates itself to itself, and in relating itself to itself also relates to another—such a relation, Kierkegaard claims, is the human self. The self can only experience itself as existing in this world, both as self-awareness and in relation to the positing exteriority. In other words, the Cartesian infinite free self-positing self-understanding is an existential impossibility.

Kierkegaard's concepts of theism and morality are, from an exegetical perspective, undeniably interconnected. However, as I have alluded throughout the paper and explicitly argued in the last section, Kierkegaard's theism (Christianity) does not necessarily follow from the philosophical premises he presents. That is, the theism Kierkegaard seems to be introducing is better understood as a solution to the existential problem of becoming a self. Without the concept of *faith (Tro)*, which is here understood as the religious life-comportment (or attitude), the human self is bound for an existence in despair. Faith becomes Kierkegaard's antidote, or existential armament (so to speak), which can finally get rid of despair, or at least keep despair an arm's-length away, by having the attitude of a passionate believer. Faith is therefore just as much an attitude toward one's existence, as it is a Christian orthodox concept. It is a way of realizing and accepting that certain aspects of one's life are beyond freedom—beyond comprehension. Selfhood, therefore, can only be fully actualized through a realization of conducting one's life through faith: "The opposite to being in despair is to have faith."⁶⁶

I believe that the mistranslation in *The Sickness unto Death*, which I discussed in the last section, exemplifies an overly ignored aspect in Kierkegaard's theism. Kierkegaard (or Anti-Climacus) is not articulating an ontologically *established* relation between God and human being. Instead, Kierkegaard is pointing to a peculiar feature of human nature—namely, that we stand in qualitative relation to the exteriority of our worldly existence. Human selfhood is a posited relation, both inwardly and outwardly. The English mistranslation illustrates why the exclusive-theological reading is simply linguistically and conceptually incorrect. If Kierkegaard thought that selfhood was something *exclusively-theologically* constituted, he would have used a more rigorous terminology. But then again, if God ontologically establishes human selfhood, then despair would hardly become an issue. The possibility of despair is exactly to be a posited relation, opposite to a created established relation.

66 SKS 11, 163 / SUD, 49.

The larger portrait Kierkegaard is setting is not a story about religious dogmatism. Quite the contrary, it is better understood as a non-theistic philosophical insight. As noted earlier, Kierkegaard's religion is merely a *solution* to an existential problem he uncovers *qua* a profound philosophical analysis. Thus, the different aspects we find with his concepts of theism and morality are derived from his view that human existence is exteriorized—in other words, human selfhood is compelled. Morality, then, reveals itself as a compelling demand to live accordingly. The motivation for a moral life does not come from within (for example, as Kantian rationality), but instead gets posited externally to oneself.

Moral values are only appreciated properly when one comports oneself *religiously*, which essentially means that one submits oneself to the compelling exteriority. It is, as Kierkegaard states in *Either/Or*: “Either the sadness of the tragic or the profound sorrow and profound joy of religion.”⁶⁷ Only through a religious life-attitude do we come to enjoy the value of life in its highest potency. And that, Kierkegaard claims, is the profundity of authentic selfhood as self-understanding. The moral life, then, is the salvation of the existential problem selfhood implies.

67 SKS 2, 146 / EO1, 146.