

TALES OF DESPAIR AND INTEGRITY¹

Alan Ford

Abstract

We begin with an analysis of Kierkegaard's description of the self in his *Sickness Unto Death*, pieced out with comments by Gilbert Ryle and those made at the end of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. This will develop into a critique of the Mind\Body problem and a proffered solution.

Parallels are established in Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov* with Rowan William's writings on the nature of the 'diabolical'. Much is made in relation to the above of Wittgenstein's statement, at *Tractatus* 5.64 which tells us that the self of solipsism must flip into materialism, its logical opposite. John Macmurray, in his *The Self as Agent*, is introduced and integrated with the above, especially as to his claims that: (a) The self is agent and exists only as agent; (b) The self is subject but cannot exist as subject; (c) The self is subject in and for itself as agent; (d) The self can be agent only by being also subject. Such a self, it is argued, resolves the perceived instability of the human self, which has haunted philosophy since Descartes, and in some quarters still does.

Key Words

Despair, facticity-transcendence, freedom-necessity, narcissism, self-realisation.

I am the spirit that negates.
And rightly so, for all that comes to be
Deserves to perish wretc.hedly;
'T'were better nothing should begin.
Thus everything that your terms, sin,
Destruction, evil represent.
That is my proper element.

Mephistopheles from

Faust: Part One by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.²

1. Introduction to *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849)

Kierkegaard opens with a tortuous description of the nature of the self. Some even think it was done to parody Hegel's philosophical style and not to be taken seriously. I do take it seriously. He writes:

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self.³

This reminds one of Ryle's comments about the systematic elusiveness of the 'I', in his *The Concept of Mind*, when he says that self-referential notions like self-admonition, self-ridicule, self-deception, self-knowledge are all 'logically condemned to eternal penultimacy'⁴. In other words

¹ 1. This article is based on a paper presented to The Gloucestershire Philosophical Society on 14th February 2018, subsequent to an outline version presented to the British Personalist Forum at York St Johns University 21-24 June 2016.

² *Faust*.

³ Soren Kierkegaard *The Sickness Unto Death*, in *Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death*, 146.

⁴ *The Concept of Mind*, 186.

the self is not like a thing, to be discovered and related to as are thing-like things e.g. by position, weight, length, density etc.. Selves, who can relate things to each other, relate things, but this relating depends upon a self, which can relate to itself.

This strangeness is conveyed in the *Tractatus* 5.631 – 5.633,⁵ e.g.:

The subject does not belong to the world; rather it is a limit of the world
(5.632),
Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? (5.633)

Kierkegaard continues:

Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity; in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self.⁶

Above we have just an unselfconscious, perhaps pre-conscious, *combination* of the factors. The self is not relating to itself.

In the relation between two, the relation is a third term as a negative unity, [a mere combination of factors] and the two relate themselves to the relation, and in the relation to the relation; such a relation is that between soul and body, when man is regarded as soul.⁷ (My emphasis)

Is this Descartes' self of pure consciousness, which is unrelated to the other?

If on the contrary the relation relates itself to its whole self, the relation is then the positive third term, and this is the self.⁸ (My emphasis)

This is a synthesis, not a mere combination. Here we have a being conscious of itself as in all the above factors, e.g. Mind and Body etc.. and are all one, and integrated. Now we can take a stance on what to do with our lives: how to act. We might compare Descartes here, where the disembodied self could not possibly act: hence the strange invention by Descartes of psychophysical parallelism.

A negative relation is when one relates and identifies only with one factor of the self (mind or body) by repressing the other half. (This will become clearer below) The self exists when the relation relates to the whole self: is integrated. One can't have one without the other, since in this state of a synthesis, self-consciousness hasn't yet dawned, which would enable us to go beyond a reactive being into a human being: a person. We can, and invariably do, try to destroy this synthesis by repressing one of the factors, enabling self-deception, bad faith, delusions – and all those features, which make it possible, and frequent, for man to be divided against himself. This will be argued more fully below.

I hazard that these two factors are, in a different guise, our old friends mind-body, subject object, self-other etc.. But let us explore this in Kierkegaard's terms, which will flesh-out this account. The 'sickness' in question is the despair at not being able to become oneself, to integrate these factors into a unity, a united person. He analyses this in two broad ways: a) as an analysis of 'the factors of the synthesis' of the self (mentioned above) and b) from the point of view of consciousness. The factors of the synthesis can be seen as the basic parameters of the self, but, as such "... man is not yet a self", he is only potentially a person/self. To achieve self-hood one must do so within the context of consciousness of the self's unity, where the factor are transparent to and acknowledged by the self.

⁵ Op. cit., 146.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 165.

The Parameters of the Synthesis are *Infinitude/Finitude*, *Possibility/Necessity*, and the *Temporal and the Eternal*.

2. The 'Synthesis'.

According to Kierkegaard, despair is a universal fact for human beings, resulting from the failure to become oneself, made virtually inevitable owing to our necessary constitution by the factors mentioned (as explored below).

The factors of the synthesis of the self are:

- (a) Despair of finitude is owing to lack of infinitude.
- (b) Despair of possibility is owing to lack of necessity.
- (c) Despair of necessity is owing to the lack of possibility.

For simplicity and clarity I'll tend to couch all these in the broad terms of Possibility and Necessity.

The despair of possibility (is owing to lack of Necessity or Finitude) is where the self tries to *negate* necessity in pursuit of freedom, where action in the real world is put on hold, where one becomes lost in the infinitude of thought and logical possibility. Feelings, which could restrict freedom, owing to feelings of responsibility, of love etc., become abstracted and reduced so that one does not feel either for oneself or others, but e.g. for great abstractions, like 'love of the masses', the perfectibility of Man etc.. Thought becomes a matter of logical possibility, an absurd freedom, rather than a guide to action in the real world, where true freedom can be found. The only castles ever built are in the air. For if one is totally free, a possibility only within imagination, one cannot be free, for freedom depends on action, and one cannot act if there is no resistance from the other. Freedom depends on resistance, from what one is not, which this ploy of escape into 'freedom' is designed to avoid. Freedom, like action is not an abstract absolute. It is not merely theoretical, but totally practical, and depends on wisdom, which comes from the ability to *apply* these parameters in a *concrete* situation. Outside action for some worthwhile and realisable scheme knowledge becomes a mere expansion of itself, or thought doing no work, as Wittgenstein once put it. The logical conclusion to such an endeavour seems to be solipsism, (the logical implications of the Cartesian self) free from and therefore irresponsible to the personal and impersonal Other.

As Kierkegaard puts it:

The self thus leads a fantastic existence in abstract endeavour after infinity, or in abstract isolation, constantly lacking itself, from which it is merely further and further away.⁹

But, this evaporation of the self may not even be noticed:

The greatest danger, that of losing one's self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed.¹⁰

Thus the self lacks reality by evading necessity. No projects are realised, no real choices made, few real actions committed. Perhaps the only action is in avoiding actions that make a difference; and making a difference is surely what action is about – and accepting responsibility for it. All is generally kept in a fluid state of possibility, and as soon as one possibility is thought up, another replaces it. Here one has lost view of the fact of one's limitations, of our contingent state based in necessity, the ability to realise the finite actuality of one's potential. Therefore one goes in pursuit of that for which one merely yearns without taking into account what its pursuit – and capture – might entail. One does not allow for real failure and real success: and this ploy of evasion is no doubt used to avoid the pain and shame of such a state of tension.

If everything is possible, then nothing is possible. The above turns thus into its opposite (a characteristic we shall see below). Possibility becomes necessity – and vice-versa. Both end in the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. 171.

same place because they are motivated by evasion of the real.

In the despair of necessity, owing to lack of possibility/freedom a person might avoid becoming a person in losing himself in everyday 'reality', suppressing imagination and thus possibility. He merges with the crowd and becomes in Sartre's phrase 'a person for others', behaving as if he were a thing, a cog in a machine, but 'free' from the responsibility to act as a person. Above we saw expansion into impotence and oblivion, here we see contraction into narrow-mindedness and meanness of spirit. He merges in the crowd as if a thing with no freedom and hence no responsibility, to act as a perfect citizen in a totalitarian state, fitting neatly into the party machine. Such a being aims at the condition of a robot: deterministic, mechanical and irresponsible. His life and morality is based upon being propelled by the thought of others. So 'adjusted', and maybe successful within the 'machine' (one thinks of Eichmann), such a person will almost certainly not be aware of despair.

Kierkegaard likens the despair of necessity, to being dumb:

Necessity is like a sequence of consonants only, but in order to utter them there must in addition be possibility.¹¹

Possibility, so to speak, provides the vowels. He continues: 'The self of the determinist cannot breathe, for it is impossible to breathe necessity alone'.¹² This is clearly the world as seen by materialism, which implies that action is not possible: which seems incoherent.

One could see this, less radically, as the world of the philistine, who glories in his lack of imagination, even embracing a philosophy of 'common sense'. It is fortunate that such a person has no imagination, and is incapable of taking these materialist notions to their logical conclusions, for philistinism is the tranquilised version of fatalism, un-awakened to the real horrors of total contingency. The philistine is so objectionable because, not only does he dismiss possibility in himself, but wishes to control it in others. Perhaps this is because, in this suppression he can remain unaware of the emptiness, and absurdity, of his position and the barbs of possibility that may otherwise awaken him to the necessity of becoming a person. One thing seems clear: both sides evade the real, for all kinds of existential reasons: and no doubt we all do to varying extents, (as Kierkegaard argues) because 'being real', becoming a real person, calls us to responsibility, and this can be disturbing. Again, both the above ploys make it possible to evade responsibility but, importantly, it is only persons, faulty though we are, who can be responsible. Only those who can fail morally can also be good. This shows the necessarily paradoxical nature of persons, which will be enlarged upon below.

These oppositions should, of course, be seen dialectically, since otherwise they slip into absurdity and contradiction in what I have called 'philosophical narcissism', after Lawrence Cahoon¹³. The pursuit of freedom implies necessity, since total freedom would make action, or the freedom to do something, impossible. I can walk only because the ground resists me. Necessity lays down the laws of what is, which make action possible – and hence freedom itself. But one can slip unaware into fantasy, of too much freedom on one hand; or into too much necessity on the other. The fact is that this dialectical relation means that an escape from self is constantly open and often accepted, both routes leading to irresponsibility, which, no doubt was the initial, self-deceiving aim. Yet this leads to erosion of the self.

The despair of too much freedom is a fantasy of hope; that of too much necessity, a fantasy of fear: which is the mere flip side of the former. In fact both are *afraid* of relating and being responsible to the self and other. Thus the self needs both 'sides' of the synthesis:

The self ... is just as possible as it is necessary; for though it is itself, it has to become itself. In as much as it is itself, it is necessary, and in as much as it has to become itself,

¹¹Ibid. 173.

¹²Ibid., 168.

¹³*The Dilemma of Modernity*

it is a possibility.¹⁴

Thus, we start from what is the case, the past, and have the freedom of choice to act in the future: and to be responsible for those actions. Perhaps Kierkegaard emphasises the relation of the self with itself too much to the exclusion of its relationship with the personal other. We shall return to this.

So, for Kierkegaard :

...despair must be viewed under the category of consciousness: the question whether despair is conscious or not, determines the qualitative difference between despair and despair.¹⁵

Consciousness is involved in the notion of despair, although the person involved need not be conscious of his despair. He goes on:

Generally speaking, consciousness, i.e. consciousness of self is the decisive criterion of self. The more conscious, the more self, the more consciousness the more will, and the more will the more self.¹⁶

To will implies intention in which the person becomes explicitly aware of his relationship with himself, and the other, and the actual possibilities within which to act, which constitutes his freedom. The failure to relate oneself to oneself in this way produces evasion and 'double mindedness', and self-deception.

What follows is a simplified version of Kierkegaard's argument, I hope adequate for the purposes of a paper. Thus there are several categories of despair where consciousness is the central feature:

(A) Despair that is not conscious of despair;

(B) Despair that is conscious of despair and in which there is:

(i) Despair of weakness: which consists of a feeble awareness of despair and one tries to hide from it; or where one is really aware of despair and does not know what to do.

(ii) And then the 'highest' form of despair, where one wills despairingly to be oneself.

3. Despair as examined from the point of view of consciousness, exemplified by characters from Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky's works.

Ivan Illych, in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illych*,¹⁷ spans the first two categories: unconscious of despair and then, when consciousness arises, wants to hide from it. At first he is unconscious of despair, being caught in immediacy: happiness and sorrow come directly from circumstances, based on good and bad luck. Good luck restores him to happiness and his despair is forgotten. Yet the possibility of self-knowledge enters, despite himself, when his death approaches. At first he sees it as an unfair blow, with no consolation or escape. Yet the real companionship of the young peasant who sits with him quietly and merely holds his feet in fellowship, enables Ivan to become real at the very end of his life, in relation with his family and friends, and to face death selflessly by seeing through and repenting of all the lies and evasions that his life had been based upon.

Kierkegaard implies that it is possible to be fully conscious of despair and make the 'leap of faith' in what he calls 'the power that posits me', but the structure of the self, as described, makes it difficult to sustain this. For Kierkegaard the power that posits is God. To avoid the thickets of theology and to depart, crucially, from Kierkegaard's rather subjective musings, I would suggest this power is also the personal and cultural context of the person: all those that 'I' am not and to whom I might relate with integrity – or evasion.

¹⁴op.cit., 168

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷*The Cossacks and Other Stories.*

3.1 The Despair of Defiance is the highest form of despair: in which the person is despairingly determined to be himself.

Here the self relates itself to itself in the most merciless way, but refuses to relate itself to the power that posits. The enterprise of self-knowledge is taken on as an individual – in isolation. It is essentially egotistic, a DIY road to salvation. All dependence is refused, the ego is inflated and pride becomes devilish! Stavrogin, the anti-hero in Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, with his meaningless glamour and emptiness, and Peter Verkhovensky, his more active and cynical reflection, are examples who both are, in Rowan Williams's analysis '... seeking invisibility, seeking to be beyond the scope of any other's gaze. It is a mark of their inhumanity.'¹⁸

They are both strikingly inhumane and despise others. They refuse the next, necessary step to relate to that personal other, for it would be too demeaning to see themselves alongside and in solidarity with their fellow human beings: hence their seeking 'invisibility': freedom from the Other and hence in isolation. Stavrogin detaches from the other in pride, losing himself in infinitude and arbitrary freedom; Verkhovensky manipulates persons as if he were a malevolent force of nature, and persons were mere things. Like Mephistopheles, they negate the power that posits, no matter how conceived, and, in their arrogant isolation, negate themselves: in pursuit of either absurd, absolute freedom or iron necessity.

They attempt to take upon themselves the power that posits in infinite egotism: in principle, to replace God. As Kierkegaard says, this is despair 'by the aid of the eternal', since they are willing, with some insight, to face themselves, but not to see themselves as 'merely' human like the rest of us. Such despair has insight, but in its refusal to relate, is an abuse of it, and thus infinitely remote from it. They prefer unrelated, deluded, egotistical magnificence, as exemplified by Stavrogin – or invisible influence and power over the other, as seen in Verkhovensky. Despair of Defiance negates the integrity of the self and at the same time the integrity of the other.

The self now becomes an abstraction, unable to love, bereft of boundaries that the other would provide. It moves into infinite freedom and possibility, a supreme and perfect being: the illusion of Lucifer at the Fall. The arrogance is devilish, the consequent charisma seductive! Kierkegaard adds:

He is not willing to attire himself in himself, nor to see his task in the self given him; by the aid of being the infinite form he wills to construct it himself".¹⁹

Although searching for significance, despite his magnificence, and because of his detachment, he is fundamentally lacking seriousness, because he is in illusion – unreal and isolated:

... and is able only to conjure up a show of seriousness when the self bestows upon his experiments its utmost attention.²⁰

Since all is possible for this self, nothing is possible, for:

...just at the instant when it seems to be nearest to having the fabric finished it can arbitrarily resolve the whole thing into nothing.²¹

It is this arbitrariness that seems to resolve Stavrogin to commit suicide, his freedom dissolved into the ultimate necessity of death. It is a rage against the fundamental fact that we are, necessarily, limited beings, constituted by others in relation. The ultimate indignity is that God's world (or the world as it is) is not as perfect as Stavrogin's abstract one, which he sees as a great injustice. He clings to his hurt so he can put God (the world/other) in the wrong: he plunges from the dizzy heights of infinite possibility, Satan-like, to the depths of necessity: a 'flip', characteristic of this condition.

¹⁸Rowan Williams, *Dostoyevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*.

¹⁹op.cit. 202.

²⁰Ibid. 201.

²¹Ibid. 203.

Since he can't be God, he will put God in the wrong, making Him an unjust tyrant. In this way he still remains special: this pain marks him out. To relinquish it 'he ... might rid him of his ... infinite advantage over other men...'. He clings to it '... in order with this torment to protest against the whole of existence.'²² (cf Mephistopheles)

Williams comments on this in relation to mutuality:

Dostoyevsky's characteristic insistence on the acceptance of limit, and therefore of suffering, as against the diabolic temptation to seek for an identity not bound by limit and therefore supposedly invulnerable, is a translation of the principle of mutuality into the most uncompromising terms of narrative risk, self-venturing, and self loss.²³

Williams makes much of the demonic, and in doing so provides an apt description of the despair of defiance. He says about *The Devils* that it is: '... an exploration not of freedom denied but freedom perverted, seen as the essence of the diabolical'.²⁴ He associates the diabolical with the urge to end narrative, history, to create a world without dialogue as each of the anarchists are locked into their very private versions of freedom and revolution.²⁵ This is the diabolism of Mephistopheles, who wants to end existence itself, with all its imperfections, injustices, uncertainty, pain, sadness, risk and inf.

Solipsism and quasi-materialism hovers over their enterprise, which makes impossible the freedom of persons to shape their identities over time, for in time we are introduced to chance, change, the unknown, lack of control and responsibility. In these states of evasion from time and speech the absolute freedoms sought flip from freedom into a paralysis of decision and commitment, as in Stavrogin; while Verkhovensky accepts such paralysis joyfully, seemingly identifying with the force of nature, manipulating people as ciphers within it, and thrashing about in meaningless activism, whose motivations no one can quite grasp. Their narratives seem to be missing: they don't seem to inhabit a form of life. They don't inhabit a communal and dialogical reality. William's adds:

Paradoxically, to emphasise the absolute liberty of the choosing ego is finally to eradicate that freedom to go beyond the given: because the isolated will can only ever return to itself and is impervious to otherness.²⁶

Thus, in the demonic:

... the true profaner has elevated his or her will against reality, chosen isolation from what is commonly known and acknowledged. Blasphemy becomes a sort of trial of strength between the will and the real.²⁷

Williams believes, and I concur, that Dostoyevsky's demonic types:

... are characters who have been brought to their own individual post-cultural moment, brought to a situation in which they are isolated and powerless, where they cannot create any meaning out of their own resources.²⁸

²²Ibid. 206.

²³op. cit., 210-1.

²⁴Ibid. 221.

²⁵Ibid. 210.

²⁶op. cit. 210-1.

²⁷Ibid. 226.

²⁸Ibid. 231.

It could be argued that we are all, more or less, now living in post-cultural times. Williams think so and argues for his position persuasively.

3.2.1 Despair as seen in The Brothers Karamazov

Although not such a total egotist, like Stavrogin, such a person reminds one of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's great novel,²⁹ where Ivan, in conversation with his brother, the saintly Alyosha, announces dramatically that, after all, it is not really a matter of not believing in God, but since God allows cruelty, Ivan most respectfully returns his ticket to paradise. Yet he is not quite lost and the above shows he exists in a moral dimension, but his dramatic rejection of what is the case marks him out.

Ivan is the family intellectual, who falls gradually into a world of abstractions and logical possibilities as he moves toward possible insanity. We never quite know what becomes of him, but his intellectual erosion of the, albeit thin, ethical layer in the soul of the psychopathic half-brother Smerdyakov, causes the latter to murder their father: since if there is no God then all is permissible. Indeed, the novel can be seen as an exploration of humans according to Kierkegaard's categories. Old Karamazov and Smerdyakov represent the totally unconscious despairers; Dimitri, the passionate sensualist, is a man in despair at not willing to be himself as he tries to lose himself in the orgiastic; Ivan is the despairer of defiance, escaping into an abstract self as the Faustian rebel against God; whilst Alyosha, who with all his acknowledged faults, knows himself concretely in relation to the 'power which posits him'. The book ends, not in the sense of a tale of moral retribution, but as a logical and spiritual conclusion to lives led according to certain modes of despair. Death for Old Karamazov and Smerdyakov; prison for Dimitri; probable madness for Ivan, and what seems will be an active life in relation to others for Alyosha.

What seems evident is that humans are a synthesis of their freedom and the necessity of what is the case; but these must be integrated, It is the attempt to escape into inauthentic existence that dissolves this synthesis, the basis of integrity. Sartre adapts these very notions in his central theory of 'bad faith', where he calls the escape into too much possibility/freedom, 'transcendence', and into too much finitude/necessity, 'facticity'. He gives the example of the girl who, when her would-be lover takes her hand, escapes into transcendence by dissociating from her hand, seeing her true self as her disembodied mind and the hand as a thing for which she is not responsible – it's only a hand, a material object! His other example is the homosexual who says that he is homosexual only because of his genes, and is therefore not responsible for his sexuality. He thus escapes into facticity, into his body. But he too can switch into transcendence by saying: "I'm not just an homosexual, and in this sense my true nature is not homosexual", as a chair is a chair. "If I'm not an object, I must be a subject – and only a subject". One can see how easily this logic can be thrown in reverse for convenience. The self, the person, is a unity of the factors, mind and body etc., and the integrated self acknowledges this transparently and responsibly.

3.2. Despair and the Mind-Body Problem.

What is striking here is that despair and bad faith depend on those concepts fundamental to western philosophy: the distinctions between Mind and Body, Subject and Object, Form and Content, even Fact and Value etc.: that ingrained distinction that we see as the logical bases for knowledge: 'I think, therefore I am' is a powerful version, that makes integration of mind and body impossible, leading to the dualisms of Idealism v Materialism. I've discussed this elsewhere, under the name of philosophical narcissism,³⁰ and I would like, albeit briefly, to relate this to my discussion.

So I claim that the non-relationship between mind and body etc. is related to Kierkegaardian despair and Sartre's bad faith, and more to the point enables despair and self-deception. The source of original sin?

Kierkegaard certainly shows the ethical and religious consequences of the opposing isolations of

²⁹*The Brothers Karamazov.*

³⁰Cahoone, op. cit.

mind and body in his discussions of possibility and necessity, but I believe Wittgenstein shows the logical consequences for this structure. Wittgenstein writes at *Tractatus* at 5.64:

Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.

Solipsism = Materialism:
and vice-versa.

Subject=Object:
And vice-versa.

In both instances the integrated self and other, along with sense, collapses. Radical, unintegrated difference ends in identity!

This applies to possibility and necessity too, since it's the material (including the body) that ushers in necessity, and the mind that makes possibility possible, that is, in this un-integrated state, one, as above, can flip into its opposite. The only thing that prevents this is the integrated self, which can choose freedom or necessity according to reality, but which for reasons of its structure, can fall into the excesses of subjectivism and objectivism, which enables it to ignore what is the case and therefore reality and responsibility. This situation can lead to sins of omission, (by going along with the crowd to do evil. 'I was just following orders' etc.) as in those motivated to remain unconscious of despair; and of commission, as in cases of those fully conscious about their despair, but who won't accept deliverance from anyone but themselves in their solipsistic grandiosity and/or their sly manipulation of the other for reasons of power.

I'm arguing that this is the conclusion that must arise from the structure of the Cartesian self, because it insists that the self is essentially a thinker. Fortunately the responsibilities of life make very few take this seriously. It's the necessity for action that is real, not the theory.

But Kierkegaard's self is essentially active, and makes choices as to the life the person chooses by relating subject and object etc., those factors constituting the syntheses, and the consciousness of what is the case which takes us necessarily into the moral realm, and in this way avoids all those pseudo problems of Mind and Body, Subject and Object and Fact and Value etc.. These are important distinctions, which only a self can make, but that is because they are concepts within a self, not logical foundations for creating a world, as phenomenalism and other versions of materialism seem to suggest. They are, so to speak, 'negatives' within the self, which constitute the 'positive', but cannot exist without it, nor can the self be reduced to them.

Kierkegaard's theory also resolves, by implication, lots of seeming contradictions that seem integral to human experience: for example self-deception, which Sartre considered impossible, since to deceive myself means that I persuade myself to believe what I know to be untrue. Although 'impossible' I find I manage it regularly: and it is clearly part of human nature.

This could be because the unconscious part of the self can repress unwelcome thoughts from coming to consciousness in the first place, because those factors of the syntheses can, as we have seen, offer evasion from what is the case by escape into possibility or necessity, which implies that consciousness contains the unconscious as a constituent element, which can negate it. Again, Aristotle defined man as a rational being, although some might not always live up to it. Yet this does not gainsay Aristotle, because only a rational being can behave irrationally. The irrational is necessary to the constitution of the rational whole, which the irrational can negate. And again, thinking is about drawing true conclusions, but a thinking that could not be incorrect could not be correct either. If I could not think incorrectly, I could not think at all, but the irrational can negate the rational, as we can see.³¹

All this indicates that the self is constituted by its capacity for self-negation: a positive that

³¹See John Macmurray, who develops such thoughts in his 'The Form of the Personal' in *The Self as Agent*.

includes its own negatives, as John Macmurray puts it. Those ‘contradictory’ elements in Kierkegaard’s ‘syntheses’ enable us to go in two directions according to convenience, and form the contradictory choices that the self often maintains – and can negate the self. (The source of original sin?) It is the integrated self that can become aware of these negations and act accordingly.

4. John Macmurray and the form of the personal

Based on such considerations, John Macmurray argues in detail that the self is constituted by a positive, the ‘third term’, used by Kierkegaard, which contains these two broad negatives as described in the above syntheses of factors.³² He states that the Self is essentially an agent (the *positive*) containing, in broad terms, those contradictory notions Kierkegaard calls the factors of the syntheses, which he too considers to be constituents of the self (that Macmurray calls ‘negatives’). Descartes’ self as thinker limits itself to just one of these negatives: the other being the body (a feature of necessity). And, because the self is reduced to subjectivity only, makes the self, along with the ethical etc., incoherent and a total mystery. The equal and opposite version, that of ‘identity theory’, which says that consciousness can be reduced to material processes, is the equal and opposite mistake. Like Macmurray, Kierkegaard sees the self as an agent, engaged in moral activities, which applies, relates these ‘negatives’ by choosing its way of being, in action.

So the Self relates Mind and Body in Action: or a Positive (the self) containing two negatives (Mind and Body³³), and that the self and these ‘negatives’ relate in the following ways, which Macmurray describes as ‘The Form of The Personal’³⁴, whose structure he describes under four headings.

A. *The Self is Agent and exists only as agent.*

This has already been argued above both from Kierkegaard and from Macmurray’s viewpoints. Yet, as has been stated briefly, Kierkegaard tends to leave out the role of the personal other in the creation of personal identity and puts the emphasis on one’s relations with God – the power that posits the person. It is Macmurray who makes much of the relation with the personal other, which, although Macmurray is a religious writer, makes what he has to say about the nature of the self as congruent with the atheist as the believer. Persons as such, *related* in a culture of their making, can be seen as the power that posits us: and much for good or ill turns on this relationship.

In this context we can see what is lacking in Descartes’ position, for, as the *Tractatus* at 5.64 shows, a self, based on thought as pure subjectivity cannot exist, since there is nothing to stop it flipping into the material - *and vice-versa*, ending in mere, contentless phenomena, signifying nothing.

Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.

Descartes yearned for the indubitability of logic, but logic can exist only in a realm of embodied persons who invent it and put it to use.

There are other reasons for denying Descartes self e.g. Lichtenberg pointed out that all Descartes could say is ‘there are thoughts’, since it is not a logical conclusion that there must therefore be a thinker with identity involved in ‘I think therefore I am’. PF Strawson³⁵ following on Lichtenberg, showed that the Cartesian position cannot create an identity, because from this ultra-subjectivist position there is no way that one could know that the thoughts ‘one’ was thinking belonged to a self: how do we know that each thought one has does not belong to a separate self – or any other number of selves? Pure thought cannot provide identity nor, consequently, the concept of the other. In a

³²Ibid.

³³And also allied aspects of the self-other, subject-object, fact-value, etc. that have caused so much fruitless philosophising.

³⁴op. cit. 100-3.

³⁵*Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, Chap. 8 from ‘Self, Mind and Body’.

Cartesian world there is no way of distinguishing between subjects and objects. Descartes makes integration and identity logically impossible, whilst Kierkegaard and Macmurray describe the necessary structure of a self, which *does* have identity.

The distinctions, mind-body, self-other, subject-object, value-fact etc., are necessary distinctions, but, for the reasons given can make sense only in a world of persons who *make* these distinctions, since such distinctions can exist only in an integrated person who, because of this, has a re-identifiable self which can relate to a re-identifiable other, personal or impersonal. These distinctions are fundamental, only because the self is more fundamental. They are necessary but not sufficient aspects of the self, (i.e. ‘negatives’) which make thought possible: but without the identity of the self they are nonentities:

Why is it so difficult to shake off subliminal Cartesianism? It could be because the subjective/objective distinction seems to us to be so fundamental – and indubitable: but this is, as argued, a piece of logical legerdemain. Yet Kierkegaard, at least implicitly, and Macmurray explicitly is denying that the distinction is fundamental, and that it leaves out this ‘third term’ – the self. It is the self which, when mature, makes the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, and puts them to work in action.

Perhaps Kierkegaard’s tortuous ‘definition’ of the self, below, might now become less tortuous:

But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self.

Here the self, the ‘positive’, (a) relates itself to its ‘negative’ aspects (e.g. subjectivity/objectivity, mind/body, freedom/necessity etc. – even fact and value) (b) but *does* something with them by being that in the relation that relates these elements; c) but the self is not the mere relation of parts for it has its own identity, albeit *constituted* by these ‘negatives’, as being greater than the sum of its parts – which enables action. Or it can now, as described by Kierkegaard, enable evasion of one aspect in order to escape from what is the case. But all this can take place only in an existent and re-identifiable world where action is possible.

Macmurray then adds:

B. *The Self is subject but cannot exist as subject. It can be subject only because it is agent.*

As already argued, subjectivity cannot exist on its own: it has to be related to the self and the other. Pure subjectivity cannot constitute identity. This is the Cartesian error, which *assumes* existence and identity: which make subjectivity and thought possible. In other words the self would be impossible without a body in a material world, which introduces necessity and makes action viable. The self relates these two ‘negatives’, and so action is possible. The Mind-Body problem, founded on Cartesianism, is incoherent and an illusion.

To quote Macmurray in this context:

When therefore we indicate the experience to which the idea refers, we have to point to the fact that the Subject can exist only as an aspect of the Self as agent. It is the negative aspect of the existence of the Agent.³⁶

The Self is subject in and for the Self as Agent

It must be said though, that these ‘negative’ aspects enable the enrichment of the self, being necessary constituents of thought and provide the possibility of culture itself, in which persons swim like fish.

The self as subject, as we have seen, is a *necessary* aspect of the self as agent and thus of action:

³⁶op. cit. 101

... and consequently it is not merely *in* action but also *for* action. This signifies that knowledge, in its primary aspect at least, arises in action; that is to say, in an activity which does not *aim* at knowledge.³⁷

This is congruent with Heidegger's ideas, when he says that thought only begins when the person runs up against a practical problem, and this presupposes a prior knowledge gained in experience and action, and thought must be, logically, based on such. We can only think about what we already know. This primary knowledge is the knowledge that arises in action, apart from any theoretical intention.³⁸

Once more we see the logical priority of the self as agent, the self of choices, moral and otherwise, the positive self in charge of its necessary, though insufficient 'negatives'. It is also worth remembering that:

... theoretical activities, in which the intention is knowledge, fall within action and have an essential reference in action... In other words, the question which a theoretical activity seeks to answer can only arise in practical experience, directly or indirectly; and the answer can be true or false only through reference to action³⁹

It is not that thought is a criterion of truth, but only that thought can point to the correct, (or incorrect), process of thinking.

C. *The Self can be agent only by being also subject*

This vouches for the importance of thinking as a necessary, though insufficient, aspect of the self. The self can be an agent *only* by also being able to be a subject and not an agent, by isolating the self from action in thought: 'the Self exists in virtue of its own self-negation'.⁴⁰ (This *isolation* is ushers in possibility, imagining what is not: thought itself. Macmurray writes:

To act and know that I am acting are two aspects of one experience; since if I did not know that I was acting I should not be acting.⁴¹

Action implies knowledge and is logically prior to it, for if there were no knowledge in an activity, it would be just a reaction to a stimulus, or similar to sleepwalking. So, from what has been said, we can see that persons (selves) can, owing to the structure of thought, escape from the real, and in the process become unreal themselves, owing to the need to believe their own illusions. This clearly has moral and ethical implications, especially if those 'negatives' become negations, as described in the passage from Goethe's *Faust*, which heads this essay.

It is interesting to ponder the major theme in Karen Horney's seminal book *Neurosis and Human Growth: the Struggle Toward Self-Realisation* which argues that neurosis is like the selling of the true self for the illusions of neurosis: just as when Faust sells his soul to the Devil's henchman, Mephistopheles. It might be useful also to return to just what Mephistopheles is saying:

*I am the spirit that negates.
And rightly so, for all that comes to be
Deserves to perish wretchingly;
'Twere better nothing should begin.
Thus everything that your terms, sin,
Destruction, evil represent.*

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid. 102.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

That is my proper element.

And then compare this with what Kierkegaard says is the highest, yet most dangerous, form of despair, the Despair of Defiance, and then compare those characters selected from Dostoyevsky as exemplars. Ivan, who blames 'the power that posits' for not making a better world; Stavrogin who, in his pride, rejects the world in suicide; Verkovhensky who, in his desire to negate what is good, inhabits the socio-political in order to destroy, to negate. All this is nihilism, the negation of what is. It also inhabits religion itself in many forms e.g. in the case of the Cathars, who hoped to become so pure that procreation and consequently humanity would come to an end, since existence is evil; or the equal and opposite medieval sect, the Bogomils, who raped and pillaged, believing that they were greater than God, and consequently could do anything they wished.⁴²

In short the desire is to reject or negate the other, the whole of that which one is not, and to blame it for not pandering to one's needs. Of course, the sin expressed here is that of Pride, as spelled out by Kierkegaard, and by Karen Horney as that which invariably lies behind all neuroses. Most Christian theologians see it as the source of all those Seven Deadly Sins. One could see such as this in terms of a negation of the real, a settling for the comfort of the fake, a selling of what is for an illusion of grandeur and perfection in an act of seeming and a lying – but which the other, the real, constantly denies and reveals.

Alan Ford
fordsatbree@gmail.com

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⁴²See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.