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Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair and Alienation

Bacheloroppgave i Bachelorstudiet i filosofi og etikk

Veileder: Roe Fremstedal

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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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Alienation is a term often associated with Marx and his philosophical and sociological legacy, which he appropriated from Hegel's philosophy. Kierkegaard, who is also a philosopher within the Hegelian tradition, is however not usually thought of as a thinker of alienation, although there have been a few attempts at linking his thought with the concept. This paper positions itself in agreement with these approaches, but attempts to expand on what exactly this means. First, an in-depth and systematic look at Kierkegaard's theory of the self as elaborated in *Sygdommen til Døden* will be presented. Next, the concept of alienation in general is explicated. First, as it was theorized by Hegel, looking at the term *Entfremdung* and how it was employed by Hegel, primarily in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Second, I will present three other approaches that have been made at linking Kierkegaard with the concept of alienation. This is to establish a somewhat firm ground for analyzing Kierkegaard as a thinker of alienation. Lastly, I will go through Kierkegaard's different figures of despair as they are presented in *Sygdommen til Døden*, and try to show how they relate to the concept of alienation. I will attempt to show two things: first, how Kierkegaard implicitly appropriated and developed the Hegelian concept of alienation and incorporated the individual as a self that relates to alienation in a given way; second, that cases of despair can be explained by using other approaches to alienation as described by the authors explicated. Through this, I believe I will be able to establish a unified theory of alienation that can serve as a perspective on despair in general.

1. *Sygdommen til Døden* and Despair

To lay the groundwork for my thesis, we must begin by elucidating the philosophical system from which I intend to draw, namely the theory of despair from *Sygdommen til Døden*. Written under the pseudonym *Anti-Climacus*, *Sygdommen til Døden* is a negative inquiry into the development of the self (Grøn, 1997, pp. 97ff). Kierkegaard's contribution is in many ways an elaboration of the concept of the Self developed by Hegel and, perhaps somewhat less agreed upon, Fichte (James, 2011). That it is a negative inquiry is a comment on the method employed by Anti-Climacus, and this is so because he explicates what the self is by going through stages where the self has failed at becoming itself. And to fail at becoming oneself is to despair.

But what does it mean to *fail* at becoming oneself? Intuitively, it may seem strange to say that one can fail at becoming oneself, as if there were a better unit of measurement for who I am than who I am. Anthony Rudd (2012, pp. 12ff) lays bare a tension in our everyday way of thinking of the self, however: On the one hand, we seem to accept statements such as “I wasn’t myself” after a fit of rage or a night of binge drinking; on the other hand, a Norwegian turn of phrase, that the truth is told by children and drunk people, is founded on the idea that a lack of restraint and self-control reveals one’s true self. So there seems to be a paradox at play concerning how we come to understand behaviors in relation to the self. In a sense, exertion of self-control, i.e. repressions of impulses and wants, can be considered both an expression of the self, and a hindrance of the self. Phrased differently, we can ask if we are free to create our own selves, or if we already are selves with which we act more or less in accordance, i.e. more or less authentically. Adhering to the expression of failing to be oneself, one can say that the former implies failure when one loses self-control in such a way that one’s actions don’t feel like one’s own, while the latter implies failure when one is somehow acting incongruently with one’s self, whatever the concrete content of the self may be¹.

Having attained some level of understanding for how one can fail to be oneself in a more general sense, as well as established a set of contingencies for its success or failure, namely that of self-expression contra self-control, let us focus the inquiry and ask the same question as pertaining to Kierkegaard. What does it mean to fail becoming oneself according to Anti-Climacus? As has already been noted, to fail at becoming oneself is to despair. So let us then look at what it means to despair. At a fundamental level, despair is a *misrelation*. Arne Grøn (1997) puts it this way: “Når et menneske er fortvivlet, forholder det sig til noget, som det selv står i misforhold til” (p. 111), and the object one stands in a misrelation to, is oneself. It is a misrelation in the sense that one wishes to be rid of some part of oneself, one denies one’s own self (Grøn, 1997, pp. 111-116). But to be in a misrelation to oneself is exactly also holding fast to the part of the self one wishes to rid oneself of. In order to will to be rid of some part of oneself, that part must necessarily exist, and one is fettered to this aspect of oneself *by virtue of* willing it away. An example to perhaps make it tangible, would be the alcoholic that refuses or downplays their issues, demonstratively choosing to drink non-alcoholic beverages around other people to prove a point, and not because they simply want to. In trying to prove the absence of an issue, their behavior is dictated exactly by attempting to negate

1 The literature on the self is vastly more rich than what has been sketched out thus far, cf. the introduction of Rudd (2012). Since the present paper revolves around Kierkegaard and alienation, this is considered to be of lesser importance, and what has been presented thus far should suffice.

this problem.

But what is this self that one can be in a misrelation to? Anti-Climacus gives a famously dense account of what the self is, and I will follow Davenport's (2013) model of Anti-Climacus' account of the self in illuminating it, where he sketches out three orders of relations of the individual's self. The first order is the synthesis. So what is the synthesis? Anti-Climacus introduces the concept in the following manner: "Mennesket er en Synthese af Uendelighed og Endelighed, af det Timelige og det Evige, af Frihed og Nødvendighed, kort en Synthese." (SKS 11, 129/SUD, 13). As Davenport (2013, p. 235) remarks, this mirrors a hylomorphic synthesis, in the sense that one has the physical, finite qualities as one pole, and the mental, immaterial as the other; a synthesis between body and soul. However, importantly, this is not limited to the body and psyche of the individual as a being detached and singled out from the rest of the world. The physical pole is also referred to as the pole of facticity, which includes historical, cultural and societal facts which the individual is embedded in and affected by (Fremstedal, 2019). In short, it is an acknowledgment of the restraints that necessarily come with being situated in the world. For instance, being born and raised in Norway around the turn of the millennium, there are expectations, habits and customs that are likely to obtain for me which do not for someone in, say, Japan. I am familiar with skiing and fish soup, while Japanese traditions and cuisine have an exotic flair to them for me. That is not to say that I am necessarily good at skiing, like fish soup, or am unable to acquire in-depth insight into Japanese culture. However, no matter how uninteresting and boring I find skiing, or how vast my knowledge of Japan may be, this does not change my biographical facts – come what may, I cannot escape the fact that I am a person born and raised in Norway, and this affects the way I relate to the world and the world relates to me.

Moving on, the other pole is that of the soul and the psyche. As per Anti-Climacus' description, this pole also includes the qualities of infinitude and the eternal, which signifies that this pole, too, should not be considered limited to the psyche or soul as mere things that an individual has. Instead, it denotes the part of us that constitutes our ability to transcend our limitations (Fremstedal, 2019, p. 321). The limitations are provided by our facticity, that one is a human being located somewhere in the physical world, while our freedom allows us to suspend these limitations and conjure up in our minds the possibility of a different reality. So for instance, someone who has no knowledge or skill in playing the saxophone, could in the present tense identify as a person that is incapable of playing the saxophone. However, by virtue of this pole of the synthesis, they are capable of seeing themselves becoming some time in the future an adept

saxophonist after a systematic and devoted training regime. This is the component of the synthesis that allows us to see the possible roads ahead given the limitations of our facticity. So, according to Anti-Climacus, the synthesis is a relation of opposites; on the one hand, we have the things that are, and on the other is the negation of these things, i.e. the faculty that lets us imagine things that not yet are. However, he does not simply state that we are a synthesis of opposites and that's that. As opposed to purely dualist or hylomorphic accounts, Anti-Climacus introduces what Davenport (2013) calls the second order volitional relation, which we now will now turn our attention to.

So what is, then, the second order volitional relation? This is the reflexive capacity of the self that relates itself to the first order relation, i.e. the synthesis, and wills the balancing of the synthesis (Davenport, 2013). The first order relation, that of the synthesis, must in a sense be held together somehow, and this is accomplished by relating to and expressing the synthesis through one's behavior. In returning to the example just put forth: should one find oneself to be a novice saxophone player, one has a choice between accepting the status quo and embracing this as a part of the self, or actively putting in the time and effort required to improve at playing. The second order volitional relation is the one that makes the choices in relation to the synthesis; it is the capacity that sees how things are, i.e. facticity, and then holds them up to how things *could* be, i.e. possibility, and makes choices on how to balance these two in an adequate manner. It is this capacity that Patrick Stokes (2019, pp. 271-273) qualifies as consciousness within Kierkegaardian philosophy. Consciousness is more than just the immediate sensory experiences. Rather, it is the ability to break the immediacy of a pure reflexive relating to the world. To be conscious is to be able to negate what appears to be given, e.g. being a novice saxophone player does not mean one has to be one – to be conscious is to be able to doubt. The second order volitional relation is to be conscious of the synthesis of one's limitations and the possibilities these provide. However, it is not given that we succeed at this or do it in an adequate manner. The balancing act can, in a sense, also go awry, and one can find oneself failing at the task of relating to oneself, i.e. one can end up in despair.

Thus the question is: how can one fail to be oneself by virtue of relating to the synthesis? Recall that the second order volitional relating is that of a balancing act, the implication being that over-emphasizing either side will throw the self off balance. Anti-Climacus explicates the idea of despair as viewed under the synthesis by describing cases of over-exaggerations of the poles of finitude/infinity and possibility/necessity. So, as an instance of the latter, a person who never ceases establishing new grand projects even though they never find the opportunity or inspiration to complete them, is likely to be in despair of possibility. Anti-Climacus puts it thus: "I Øieblikket

viser Noget sig som Muligt, og saa viser der sig en ny Mulighed, tilsidst følge disse Phantasmagorier saa hurtigt paa hinanden, at det er, som var Alt muligt,” (SKS 11, 152/SUD, 36). It is the person that attempts to seize every opportunity, and consequently never keeps track of their existing projects. The balancing act, i.e. the self-relating, is failing because one does not acknowledge that the constant chasing of opportunity does not lead to anything substantial, one is not making an impact on one’s facticity; Anti-Climacus refers to them as phantasmagorias exactly because they are never allowed to materialize. In keeping with our example, instead of devoting time to the saxophone, one keeps on picking up a new instrument around every corner, and thus one never masters any of them. Conversely we find the person succumbing to the despair of necessity. To them, everything that happens is either pre-determined or trivial, and they have no chance of or interest in trying to influence anything. Their life merely *happens*. Our saxophonist could be said to be in a despair of necessity when they are learning the instrument not to fulfill their own dreams and wishes, but because it in one way or another is thought of as imposed upon them, e.g. their father was a revered saxophone player, so they must carry on his legacy. They might even find the endeavor dreadful, but accepts it as what “must be done”. One is failing the balancing act because one does not even consider that one has a choice, an opportunity to quit playing; one is oblivious of one’s possibility. In sum, to be in despair in this sense is to over-emphasize one pole of the synthesis; as a self, one can make a choice on how one relates to the poles, but one cannot choose *that* one relates to them, that they are integral, indispensable components as the first order relation of the self.

Thus far, we have seen that to fail to be oneself is, according to Anti-Climacus, to be in despair, and that this is a state where one stands in a misrelation to the first-order synthesis, a failing of properly balancing the poles of the synthesis. But within the term *failing* lurks an ethical component that is not yet obvious. Why is to over-emphasize a pole of the synthesis a failure, and not merely a peculiar idiosyncrasy of a given individual? This question brings us to the final order of the self as taxonomized by Davenport (2013). The final order of the structure of the self within Anti-Climacus’ theory, is that of spirit². Spirit is a term Kierkegaard appropriates from Hegel, and within Hegelian philosophy it refers to that which animates a human being and upholds an organism as a unity, and is also the “goal” or *telos* of consciousness, to go up into Absolute Spirit. (Davenport, 2013, p. 236). For Kierkegaard, spirit does not simply provide a *telos* of consciousness, or the self for that matter. Rather, it is a sort of ‘energizing force’ that compels an individual to put

2 Danish: *Aand*, German: *Geist*.

themselves *qua* individual selves into situations with a sort of interest, as opposed to the disinterestedness of a purely reflective, cognitive approach (Davenport, p. 237). The word *interest* also has a technical flair for Kierkegaard, as he plays on its latin roots of *inter* and *esse*, meaning ‘being between’. Thus, to be interested is, in a figurative way, to put one’s own self within a situation (Stokes, p. 272), and this is the capacity that spirit both is and normatively prescribes.

Already in the opening of *Sygdommen til Døden*, Anti-Climacus equates man to spirit, claiming that “Mennesket er Aand” and “Aand er Selvet” (SKS 11, p. 129/SUD, 13). This means that everyone *is* spirit, but if everyone already is spirit, then the ethical component still seems murky; what is the ethical component if everyone already is what they should be? This is the crux of Anti-Climacus’ theory, for he points out that every individual self has a task of *becoming themselves*: “Selvet er den bevidste Synthese [...], der forholder sig til sig selv, hvis Opgave er at vorde sig selv.” (SKS 11, p. 146/SUD, 30). The self both already is, and is tasked with becoming itself! Everyone is already a self, but crucially, one at all times has the possibility of not exercising one’s own self, e.g. the figures of despair that we have already established, and this is to not be a self in a *spiritual sense*. This is why the Kierkegaardian notion of spirit does not have a clear *telos* like that of Hegel’s philosophy; spirit is not the propulsion towards some peripheral or for the time being unobtained state, but rather that which one already is. The normativity of spirit is to be the spirit one already is (Grøn, 1997, pp. 385ff). As pointed out in the introduction of this part, Anti-Climacus employs a method of negativity of explicating the self. This notion can now be fleshed out, as the negative approach is to establish and explicate the structure of the self through cases where an individual has failed at exactly this task of existing as spirit. The point is made perhaps even clearer by the fact that the term *despair* in Danish (*Fortvivlelse*) and German (*Verzweiflung*) underscores a split where there should not be one, that one is detached from oneself in some capacity (Fremstedal, 2020). One holds a part of oneself as not one’s own, splitting the self into that which one thinks one is, and that which one is not, ending up erroneous on both accounts. Anti-Climacus describes different figures of despair as defined by how they fail at becoming themselves properly³, failing to be spirit. Being compelled ethically to exist as spirit entails the possibility of failing at this, and it is exactly this that is failing to be oneself.

The self is thus for Anti-Climacus a multi-faceted structure. Man is a synthesis, but man is also spirit, which is the self. To wrap up, I wish to present Anti-Climacus’ dense introductory account of the self:

3 The figures of despair will be thoroughly described and analyzed in conjunction with alienation later in the paper.

Mennesket er Aand. Men hvad er Aand? Aand er Selvet. Men hvad er Selvet? Selvet er et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, eller er det i Forholdet, at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv; Selvet er ikke Forholdet, men at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv. Mennesket er en Synthese [...] En Synthese er et Forhold mellem To. Saaledes betragtet er Mennesket endnu intet Selv. (SKS 11, 129/SUD, 13)

Up to this point, I have been systematically deconstructing the account of the self that Anti-Climacus presents by following Davenport's (2013) hierarchical ordering of the structure. However, what Anti-Climacus' account here lets us observe, is how the different components are not necessarily easily discernible as discrete units within the structure. That Anti-Climacus opens by transitively defining man as a self, but concludes with man not yet being a self, is not a grave logical oversight on his side, as much as an emphasis of the duality of being and becoming that is embedded within Anti-Climacus' theory of the self. By this way of presenting how he conceives of the self, he attempts to make clear from the get-go that the self is both something given, up to now presented as synthesis, reflexive relating, and spirit, as well as something to be created by the individual, an ethical obligation to become one with oneself. It is the interplay between the structures that have been separated for clarity in the present text that is the self in its totality – the self is also processual.

One final quality of Anti-Climacus' account of the self must be presented before we can round this section of the paper up. Up to this point, the self has almost exclusively been described in terms of qualities of an individual as detached from the world at large. However, a key point put forward by Grøn (1997) is that to be a self is to be fundamentally intertwined with other people, it is intersubjective and relational. First, Kierkegaard seems to share the Hegelian idea that to become aware of oneself as a self hinges upon seeing oneself through someone else's eyes – in coming face to face with someone else, I experience that I am another than the other that I am currently facing (Grøn, 1997, p. 77). This mirrors Hegel's notion of consciousness attaining self-consciousness first when encountering another, separate consciousness (Williams, 1997). Importantly, a running theme with Kierkegaard's theory is that one relates to oneself, and to relate to oneself is to relate to oneself *as another*, which thus presupposes that one already relates to other people. Furthermore, one normative aspect of Anti-Climacus' theory is that of becoming an individual in oneself in one's relation to others (Grøn, 1997, p. 224). This is illustrated negatively through figures that define themselves through their social roles. For instance, Anti-Climacus sketches up the sorrowful woman that has lost her husband to death or adultery but cannot let go, exactly because her selfhood rests

on her being his wife (SKS 11, 135/SUD, 20). It is here shown how brittle a self becomes when it is grounded in social roles rather than in one's own self. This is not to say that Kierkegaard is advocating a sort of solipsistic or socially detached way of life. As will be more thoroughly covered in that last section of the paper, this way of life is in itself symptomatic of despair. Instead, as Grøn (1997, pp. 223ff) argues, to be a human is to be deeply intertwined in their social relations, and becoming a self-sufficient individual grounded in God within this context is difficult.

I wish now to conclude this first part of the thesis by tying together what has been discussed thus far. Recall the dichotomy established initially as a way of understanding how one expresses the self. On the one hand was the idea that one is free to create oneself, that one's own conception is the correct conception, in a sense. On the other hand we had the concept of an already existing self to which one more or less adheres, that one has no real freedom in choosing who one is, only that one can choose to which degree one in a sense "lets it out" or expresses it. Where does Kierkegaard fall within this categorization? The answer seems to be both. Not in the sense that he falls somewhere in between, as if we are dealing with a continuum, but rather he agrees that both extremes are in different ways representations of how we relate to ourselves. The side of this binary that perhaps has hitherto figured most overtly, is that of the latter, an adherence to a given self. As human beings, we are spirit, and we can act more or less in accordance with this capacity of ours. Furthermore, everyone is a synthesis of opposites, where the opposites can be exaggerated and repressed in a manner that does not harmonize with ourselves – we can be in despair. But at the same time, the expression of our selves in the concrete world as behaviors is left open to the individual. As Rudd (2012) puts it, to be a self in the world is in a sense a creative endeavor. The synthesis underscores the relation between the limits of facticity, and the possibilities this entails for us as human beings – we cannot transcend the limits imposed on us in our behavior, but we can make a decision as to how to expand the boundaries and impact the finite world in a self-expressing manner. The self is that in a relation to the self that is self-relating, and also the constant, fluctuating holding together of a synthesis of opposites; it can densely be construed as both being and becoming. As Grøn (1997, pp. 57ff) remarks, in being a self, man is in a sense outside themselves, holding the constituents of the synthesis more or less together.

Thus far we have looked at how Anti-Climacus conceives of the self, and also what it means to fail to be a self. However, a full account of *Sygdommen til Døden* and despair cannot be given without insight into the methodology that is employed by Anti-Climacus in the book. The next

section will thus deal with the approaches Anti-Climacus uses in order to gradually uncover what to despair means.

2. The methodology of *Sygdommen til Døden*

The methodology that Anti-Climacus employs in *Sygdommen til Døden* will be the focus of this section. Thus far, we have looked at what the self is, as well as what it means to fail as a self. However, Anti-Climacus does not simply give an account of the self as such. Rather, he employs a negative method to gradually uncover how despair comes to be and makes itself known. To initiate this analysis, I believe it to be fruitful to establish an understanding for the progression seen in *Sygdommen til Døden*. It was remarked at the very beginning that the negative method is a scrutiny of the self in different stages of failing to properly become itself. Grøn (1997, pp. 97ff) makes the case that Anti-Climacus' use of negativity is an emphasis on the normative aspect of becoming a self. Negativity poses a state of failure that at the same time indicates the road to success. This is important, because Anti-Climacus does not see despair as a be-all and end-all state of failure that necessarily condemns the individual for all eternity. He puts it thus: "Er Fortvivlelse et Fortrin eller en Mangel? Reent dialektisk er den begge Dele." (SKS 11, 130/SUD, 14). The state of despair is in and of itself a detrimental state in the sense that it is a state of a misrelation to oneself, a state that is not the way it should be. But it is also a state that makes possible the ascension into a proper, unified selfhood, it is a state that in it contains the possibility of being rectified. Grøn (1997) refers to it as "at holde negativitetens sår åbent" so that one can go "igennem enhver negativitet for at nå sandheden." (p. 98). The key underlying possibility here is the common remedy of attempting to close the wound – the analogy highlights both the discomfort of remaining open to negativity, as well as the easy, comfortable way out of simply band-aiding it. Despair is a possibility – *if* one remains open and receptive to it as such, i.e. refrains from repression. The method of negative inquiry is, then, the illumination of the different stages if one does *not* remain open to the possibilities that despair presents.

So what exactly changes between the different stages of despair? To say that more despair is simply more despair would be begging the question, a circular definition. Rather, Anti-Climacus analyzes an ascending level of consciousness. We have already seen what consciousness is in a qualitative sense, i.e. the ability to doubt or call into question (Stokes, 2019). However, Anti-Climacus introduces a quantitative dimension to it – the figures of despair represent different amounts of consciousness. Of what is one conscious? One is conscious of oneself. Recall that despair is a misrelation to oneself, so the stages of despair denote ascending levels of consciousness

of being a self. The figures of despair that have been looked at in the initial section of this paper, have been defined solely by the synthesis; despair as over-emphasis on either side of the synthesis at the detriment of its opposite. However, *Anti-Climacus* makes clear that looking at despair as detached from degree of consciousness, i.e. only by reference to the synthesis, is an abstract approach; amount of consciousness is “det kvalitativ Forskjellige mellem Fortvivlelse og Fortvivlelse” (SKS 11, 145/SUD, 29). In other words, the concrete figures of despair are also contingent on the amount of consciousness.

There is a final theme within *Sygdommen til Døden* that must be elucidated before we carry on looking at the figures of despair, namely that of phenomenology and will. *Anti-Climacus* undertakes a phenomenological analysis of despair (Hühn & Schwab, 2013; Welz, 2013). The phenomenological aspect is characterized by his use of the figures that we will look at shortly, where the figures are, as Grøn characterizes them, despair presented as subjects (Grøn, 1997, p. 138). It is the disconnect between how the figures present themselves and act in the world, and how they appear for us as onlookers, a disconnect which emphatically underscores the dissonance between the presented self they wish to be and the self that they are, which is core to *Anti-Climacus*' phenomenological methodology (Grøn, 1997, pp. 35ff). Furthermore, this dissonance is not something that simply is, but is something that is brought about by the despairing individual, which is the key point to understanding despair in normative, ethical terms. As was just remarked, for despair to be constructive, one must hold oneself open to the content of the despair, one must not remain idle to it. Importantly, this is also compounded by the Kierkegaardian insight regarding the relationship between will and consciousness: Consciousness is not some neutral prerequisite for being and willing, but is rather intimately tied to and contingent on the will of the conscious agent (Grøn, 1997, pp. 218-221). Indifference to despair is only indifference up to a point, as being indifferent is always a choice. By willing indifference or hardening of oneself, one changes the phenomenal character of despair in such a way that it can be endured, that consciousness does not change. *Anti-Climacus* also remarks that the level of consciousness and the level of will are intimately tied together: “[J]o mere Bevidsthed, jo intensivere Fortvivlelse” (SKS 11,157/SUD 42), meaning that the highest levels of consciousness of despair also have the highest level of willing to be oneself. To summarize, despair is not just something with which one is afflicted, it is something that one is responsible for sustaining.

Having attained insight into the progress of despair on a methodological level, and how it

relates to the self, we will now make a detour to look at the concept of alienation in order to establish a concept up to which we can hold Kierkegaard's figures of despair.

3. Alienation and Kierkegaard

Alienation as its own isolated concept has been notoriously elusive, owing to it being employed in a wide variety of manners without any apparent uniform foundational definition (Schacht, 1970). Its modern, more or less systematic usage is to a large degree inspired by Marx, whose analysis in turn is heavily inspired by Hegel. The Hegelian terms that are often translated as alienation, are *Entfremdung* and *Entäußerung* (Arthur, 1986, pp. 147-149). For Hegel, these terms are not the same. Both terms appear in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, which is where he puts forth his theory of the development of consciousness towards absolute spirit. Hegel's dialectical approach shows the development of consciousness from a primitive state, describing the different stages where consciousness is expanded through its experiences (Welz, 2013; Williams, 1997). Kierkegaard, despite being heavily influenced by Hegel, never appropriated or systematically employed these terms in the same way Marx did. He criticized the Hegelian notion of *Entäußerung* in his book *Frygt og Bæven* (SKS 4, 161/ FT, 71) on theological grounds, but this is of lesser importance for the matter at hand. I do wish, however, to draw attention to the former term, *Entfremdung*. It is employed by Hegel to denote the experience of affective adversity that comes to be as consciousness faces its negation (Schacht, 1970). The term is made most clear with in the following paragraph:

If this Idea lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative, then it lowers itself into edification, even into triteness. In itself that life is indeed an unalloyed sameness and unity with itself, since in such a life there is neither anything serious in this otherness and alienation [*Entfremdung*], nor in overcoming this alienation (Hegel, 2018, ¶19).

If spirit were to not experience this affective adversity, then it would stagnate and deny itself acquaintance with the objective world, it would not ascend towards absolute spirit. In coming into awareness of and contact with things that are not itself, consciousness is undertaking on the arduous process that is ascending towards absolute spirit. The reason I wish to draw attention to this concept, is because the German term also figures in an interesting manner in Kierkegaard's writing:

Næstefter at klæde mig ganske nøgen af, Intet at eie i
Verden end ikke det mindste, og derpaa at styrte mig i

Vandet, er det mig behageligst at tale et fremmed Sprog
helst et levende for paa den Maade at blive mig selv
entfremdet. (SKS 19, 209, Not7:11 / KJN 3, 205)

Here, Kierkegaard describes how actively becoming alienated from himself by employing a foreign language is *pleasant*. Kierkegaard employs a striking shift in how he uses the term as opposed to Hegel, as it seems to be considered a position of comfort as opposed to that of strife. It is too far removed from the purpose of this thesis to embark on an in-depth analysis of this brief piece of text. Rather, the reason I wish to bring it up, is that I believe it hints to a key insight as to how Kierkegaard views the affective content of being alienated. He highlights the blissfulness of simply escaping from one's own status quo – there is a certain comfort in seeking alienation from oneself. This serves as a foreshadowing of a theme that will be made clearer in the final section, where the figures of despair and the concept of alienation will be viewed together.

In addition to a brief look at the historical development of the term alienation, I believe it to be useful to see how other authors have tried to interpret Kierkegaard in terms of alienation before we carry on with our own analysis. To this, I will highlight three contributions. The first I wish to bring up, is that of Rahel Jaeggi (2014). She positions herself as a contributor in the dialogue around the concept of alienation in general, attempting to establish a systematic and technical definition of alienation. Thus, her approach does not tackle Kierkegaard in isolation, but places his thought within a historical context of the usage of alienation as a concept. To this end, she understands Kierkegaard as a sort of post-Hegelian, proto-existentialist thinker of alienation, bringing up his idea of leveling (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 9). Leveling refers, in short, to the tendency of the norms and ethics of society to subdue individuality, keeping people from properly becoming themselves (Stewart, 2019). Jaeggi here sees Hegel's philosophy of alienation to take on two distinct forms, where one is the economic-political strand that is developed by Marx, and the other is the social and ethical strand that, according to Jaeggi, begins with Kierkegaard. The point of bringing this up is to show how Kierkegaard has been thought to fit within the discourse on alienation at large, i.e. a social kind of alienation, where it is perhaps more a diagnostic tool for pinpointing the ills of society than a technically robust concept (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 6). The crux of this conception of alienation is that *society is at fault* in a sense, its focus is very rarely on the individual *qua* individual. Therefore, it is a very different perspective than that of *Sygdommen til Døden*, which does not explicitly deal with societal forms of alienation in any systematic or direct way, but rather focuses exactly on the individual. The reason for bringing this up in the present paper, is to

show how Kierkegaard was not oblivious to society as a source of alienation. On the contrary, he has been credited with making substantial contributions to its theorizing. Although the present paper will not deal with his philosophy and theorizing on the concept of leveling beyond in leaving them mentioned in the current section, I believe it is important to keep in mind both this perspective for understanding alienation, as well as the fact that this line of thinking was embedded within Kierkegaard's philosophy; the despairing individual is situated in a more or less 'healthy' society.

Jon Stewart (2019; 2021) agrees with Jaeggi on Kierkegaard's theory of leveling representing a case of alienation. However, Stewart wishes to show how several of Kierkegaard's philosophical contributions can be understood as denoting cases of alienation, which also includes cases of despair understood as such. He does this by establishing alienation as a sort of (somehow problematic) separation between two entities, i.e. a division that should not be (Stewart, 2019, p. 196). On the basis of this definition, he is able to establish all cases of despair at the same time as cases of alienation. So the over-emphasis on one part of the synthesis to the detriment of the other is then an alienation from the neglected pole. It is a problematic division in the sense that it is a division of something that is supposed to be unified, as we have seen in the initial section. Importantly, he identifies this as cases of *self*-alienation, because one is in some capacity alienated from oneself (Stewart, 2019, p. 208). Since man is a synthesis of two opposites, to neglect one side is to be alienated from some part of oneself. If we take this perspective on alienation one step further, a corollary seems to be that one is not only alienated, but in fact also alienating. Recall from the previous section of this paper the importance Anti-Climacus places on despair as something that is willed by the agent. This means, courtesy of Stewart's definition, that to be in despair is to be alienating oneself from one's own self. However, Stewart limits his analysis of cases of despair being alienation from the entities one is despairing over, so his analysis ends up being somewhat superficial in this regard. Nevertheless, his contribution has provided an important perspective on how to understand despair as alienation, where a (willed) separation can be interpreted as a case of alienation.

The final approach to understanding Kierkegaard as a thinker of alienation which I wish to bring up, is Justin White's (2019) contribution. White is positioning himself within a similar debate as Rudd (2012), in that he looks at willed as opposed to involuntary actions and movements, and to which degree they are ascribed to oneself as one's own. White's project is positioned within a philosophical discussion which is somewhat removed from what we are currently dealing with, looking at the shaping of one's identity and to which degree a behavior is considered an expression

of one's self, and to which degree it is considered alien. However, I think he brings up two important aspects of alienation that are relevant for the present task. First, he points out how behaviors that one does not own up to are perceived or experienced as alien by the one performing them; he says the following of two persons who are experiencing uncontrollable outbursts of emotions: "[T]he agents [...] experience the emotions as alien and their agency seems compromised" (White, 2019, p. 313). The crucial point here is that to be alienated from something has itself a phenomenal, experiential character. In line with Hegel's conception of *Entfremdung*, there is a sort of discomfort to it, and this discomfort seems to be distinctively alien, especially concerning things that should not be so – one does not experience an arbitrary lamppost that one happens to pass by as alien. The second aspect, which pertains more directly to Kierkegaard, is how this feeling of alienation can in fact be the impetus for becoming better acquainted with one's own poles of the synthesis. In acting in the world, there can be a sense of alienation within both actions where we do something novel, i.e. where we alter our facticity to bring about a willed change, and in forcefully becoming acquainted with our synthesis, i.e. our already existing selves. This last point is somewhat convoluted without reference to concrete examples, but will be made palpable in the following section. The core idea is that novelty also has an alien tint to it, meaning both willed and imposed self-development can appear to one as alien. A sufficient interim summary of White's contribution to our analysis, is that alienation has a distinct phenomenal character, and the experience of alienation can itself be an experience that causes a change in one's relation to oneself.

To sum up this section, a wide variety of approaches to Kierkegaard in the context of alienation have been presented. One could be left with the impression that 'alienation' is simply a chimera of unrelated phenomena and concepts arbitrarily subsumed under a single term. However, the goal has not been to establish a uniform definition of alienation, but rather highlight different ways in which it has been used, especially in context of Kierkegaard. As was highlighted in the introduction of the section, the term is notoriously elusive, but it is still being employed in various ways; it is not the case that it does not denote anything, even if it is not employed systematically. Up until now, we have simply been provided a basis for how to analyze cases of despair also as cases of alienation. We have looked at how Hegel and Kierkegaard have employed the term *Entfremdung*; Kierkegaard's contribution to alienation as a critical social term; how despair can be viewed as a self-imposed self-alienation; and how alienation has a possibly distinct and constructive character to it. The next section will thus bring the thesis together, where we will look at how despair develops over different stages, and how alienation can come to be a part of this.

4. Figures of Despair and Alienation

As already pointed out, Anti-Climacus gives an account of despair by ascending levels of consciousness. His point is that in attaining higher levels of consciousness, the individual comes to be aware of themselves as a self in the world, in a way coming outside of themselves (Grøn, 1997). Crucially, he points out how increasing consciousness also increases will, which also increases self (SKS 11, 145/SUD, 29). To increase self might seem strange at first glance, but the idea is that in attaining consciousness of being self, i.e. of being spirit (cf. first section), one increases the awareness of the normative and structural aspects of being a self in the world. The ramifications of this concept will become clearer as we go through the different stages, but it is important to bear in mind that an ascension in consciousness is at the same time an ascension of will and of self.

4.1 Unconscious Despair

The lowest state of consciousness is a complete absence of consciousness of being spirit, i.e. a self. With Davenport's (2013) taxonomy, we could say that they lack the third order of the structure of the self, which means that they have no acquaintance with being spirit. In this sense, they can form second order volitions, but they are not able to reflect on these volitions as expressions of their own self, because they lack the consciousness of their self. The one lacking consciousness is the aesthete that does not call their immediacy into question. Because they pay no mind to their being in the world in any broader scope than that of their immediate surroundings, they live a predominantly hedonistic life, where sensuous pleasures and discomforts make out the only relevant measures of happiness and success; “[H]an lever i det Sandselige Kategorier, det Behagelige og det Ubehagelige, giver Aand, Sandhed o.d. en god Dag.” (SKS 11, 158/SUD, 39). As Anti-Climacus himself remarks, it might seem strange to categorize a complete lack of awareness as despair (SKS 11, 157ff/SUD, 42) – how can one be in despair if one is not aware of it at all? The answer lies in the explication that has already been done, that to be in despair is to stand in a misrelation to oneself. One stands in a misrelation to oneself in the sense that one is completely oblivious to being spirit (Grøn, 1997, 125ff). Then the question becomes: what is the role of the will, if one is oblivious to being a self? Surely one cannot blame someone that has no awareness of their existence *as selves*? To this, I think it is fruitful to bring forth a figure presented by Anti-Climacus: The man with a complete lack of consciousness of despair is the man living in a multi-storied house of high quality, but prefers to live in the basement. Furthermore, should you attempt to bring him in awareness of this peculiarity, he would respond by being offended (SKS 11, 158-159/SUD, 43-45). There is a twofold normative statement hidden within this figure. First, in living in the basement of

a multi-storied house, we see the implication that he *should* notice himself that he is living in the basement; one can be unconscious of one's existence as a self, but life is ripe with obvious signs that he *ought* to attain self-consciousness. Second, even in being made explicitly aware of the strangeness of his way of life, he refuses to acknowledge his being a self. Delusion is comfort.

Already, we see some key themes of alienation as it was presented in the previous section of the paper. As we shall see, there is a running theme within Kierkegaard's description of despair and the comfort of being alienated from oneself – the unconscious man is offended in being made aware of their shortcomings, they prefer to remain *sich entfremdet*. This is the role of will in the ascension of consciousness. In becoming acquainted with the possibility of attaining awareness, the alienated man forcefully wishes to preserve the status quo – it is a willed state. Thus, as was seen in the previous section, one is actively alienating oneself. I also wish to point out a to this thesis somewhat peripheral, but, within the literature on alienation, important question which Jaeggi (2014) takes up: can one be alienated without being aware of it oneself? If we accept Stewart's claim that to be in despair is to be alienated from that over which one despairs, then this would seem to be the case, and Kierkegaard gives us, as has been seen, a key to understanding how this can come to be. To be unconsciously despairing, is to be unaware of being alienated.

4.2 *Despairingly not Willing Oneself, Despair of Weakness*

Anti-Climacus then goes on to describe the ascending levels of consciousness regarding one's own despair. Some key themes are already hinted at within the title. On the one hand, this level of consciousness is characterized by not willing oneself. This is because the individual in a sense actively wills not being a self, they try to avoid awareness of being a self. Should they have some level of reflection within them, then they become aware of a self that they do not want; they wish that they could not have a self. The second half of the title, despair of weakness, refers to the idea that individuals suffering from this type of despair relate to themselves as suffering from being selves. They relate to their selves as something to be shunned, something to be ashamed of. These concepts will become more tangible as we move on to describe the different levels of consciousness within this category of despair.

The lowest level is despair over the earthly, where there is still no inherent awareness of the self. This is the immediate man, which means that their existence is not mediated, i.e. there is no conscious reflection of their being selves (Stokes, 2019); they relate to themselves and the world as it all appears. As such, they have no concerns about anything outside of the present tense, not paying any mind to the eternal, the eternal being, as already shown, an expression of one pole of the

synthesis. They only relate to the world as it is given, and cannot see how it could be any different. The lack of self-awareness inherent in the obliviousness to the eternal means that the immediate man must be shook into awareness by some peripheral event. In relating to the world only immediately and being in despair over the earthly, being shook into awareness means to have something happen to their earthly possessions or physical being in such a way that they consciously despair over it. This can for instance be the destruction or loss of a car or other object with which they intimately identify, which forces them to reflect on what it means to fundamentally be themselves. As Anti-Climacus points out, though, the preferred solution to this is a return to things as they were; should they receive a redress, then they will resume their unaware despairing (SKS 11, 167/SUD, 51). Alternatively, there can be some trace of reflection within the immediate man, in which case despair and awareness do not necessarily require something taxing striking him from without. Instead, it arises from the reflection itself, for the immediate man then has a minute self-awareness. He still, however, clings to the immediacy and lives in all relevant ways the same life as the unaware, for the immediate man does not will his self. He to some extent recognizes the state of despair, but patiently waits for it to pass rather than attempt to expand his consciousness. A core quality of despair at these levels, is that one relates to despair as something one *suffers from*. As Grøn (1997) emphatically underscores, and which is inherent in becoming a self being an ethical project, despair is something that is being done by the agent. This means that, at this level, there is a fundamental misattribution of the responsibility of despair.

Anti-Climacus goes on to describe the next level of awareness, being despair of the eternal. This is because on this level of awareness, the person is conscious about his self, i.e. of the eternal pole of the synthesis, and despairs over it directly. So how do they despair over themselves? Having attained an awareness of the self that used to despair over the earthly, they come to shun their own perceived weakness. That these truly mundane things should have such a profound impact on the self is viewed as despicable. They see their self as something to be suppressed and hidden away because they are ashamed of it. Thus, they tend to seek loneliness and introversion, and in a sense live a masked life. They assume a position of *inclosing reserve* [*Indesluttethed*]. As Grøn (1997, pp. 82ff) remarks, this is a sort of closing oneself off from the world one lives in, repressing the self that one shuns. Considering that, as has been seen in the first section, to properly be a self is to be a self among others, this means that refusing to let the self out, is a form of denial of development of the self. “Som naar en Fader gjør en Søn arveløs, saaledes vil Selvet ikke vedkjende sig sig selv efterat have været saa svag.” (SKS 11, 177/SUD, 62). In suppressing and hating their own self, they are

actively trying to deny it any acquaintance with the world – they are actively holding the poles of the synthesis separate rather than together. Thus, their everyday life can appear normal to a spectator, but they are in a sense behaviorally forced to seek out pockets of loneliness to dwell on their weakness, because they cannot escape their selves.

The different forms of despair of weakness are unified in the despairing person's unwilling to be oneself. Any awareness of the self is despair on this level, and the recurring preferred solution is to attempt to escape from the self and from the eternal. The mundane is comfortable. Recall this theme also from the former subsection: to live a carefree, immediate life is comfortable, to attain more consciousness of the self is arduous. Kierkegaard in a sense appropriates Hegel's idea of the painfulness of alienation as a possibility for ascension, but underscores the individual's penchant for remaining alienated rather than to remedy the situation. Another concept that can be linked to alienation which is introduced here, is that of being shook into awareness of one's self. Recall White's (2019) contribution, that experiencing something as alien hints at it being a possibility for self-development. Since Anti-Climacus is employing his negative methodology, all the figures he lists in a sense fail the task of becoming selves. However, being shook into awareness by a peripheral force also represents a possibility. To have the car with which one fundamentally identifies destroyed or stolen, is to be struck by the up until that point completely alien idea that one is actually something else than just the owner of that car. This is, as we have seen, what Grøn (1997) talks about in staying open and receptive to despair as a possibility. Exactly because these events open up the possibility of something that is experienced as fundamentally alien, they require a certain level of bravery and willpower to be received as opportunities to become oneself properly.

4.3 Despairingly Willing to be Oneself, Defiance

Should the despairing person take the next dialectical step and reach an awareness of why they do not will their self, then they will reach the point of despairingly willing to be oneself. This is so because one no longer experiences despair as something one suffers from from the outside world, but rather as originating in one's own self. One is at this point aware that one has an eternal self, i.e. one is conscious of the pole of eternity within the synthesis. Furthermore, as opposed to despair of weakness, one is now in a despair of defiance. Whereas the former levels of despair were characterized by in a sense falling prey to the despair, by experiencing despair as something with which they are afflicted, this level forcefully tries to subdue the despair – they defy it.

Anti-Climacus sketches out two categories defiant despair: acting or suffering. The acting person finds themselves constantly attempting to achieve some self-referential grandiose goals. Every

action is an attempt at doing what the self is not, frantically attempting to overcome the self. The negation of the self is what the despairing actor strives for. Agency is employed to show that they are more than their apparent constraints, so their actions mainly serve the purpose of defying the self rather than being purposefully one with themselves. When they fall into the latter category, and suffers in their despair, then he has perhaps in his manic attempts at becoming their self's negation come to a whiplash-inducing halt. One suffers from the limits inherent to their actual self. In a sense they have repeated the experience described initially, where some misfortune in the world has condemned them to self-awareness, but the movement has now come full circle, as the insurmountable hurdle forces an awareness of one's finitude rather than one's eternal self, i.e. it is now the other pole that is forcefully made apparent to the despairing self. When, however, one is suffering from this despair, the person becomes one with their suffering and incorporates it as what fundamentally defines them, for at this level, i.e. despairingly willing to be oneself, one is in defiance. By suffering from one's despair, one defies all attempts at rectifying the state of things. Should the person attain the highest level of consciousness of their despair, then they risk falling into a demonic despair. At this point, they are in opposition to life in general; they passionately hate everything, and fundamentally identify with their raging rebelliousness. Their pain and suffering is not a problem, it is who they perceive themselves to be. To accept help would thus be to admit defeat. For this person, as with the highest level of not willing to be oneself, there is a tendency for inclosing reserve (Fremstedal, 2023). At this point, they both deny the possibility of things becoming better, and actively refuse any and all help at achieving change, and as such they rather stick to themselves, nurturing their hatred for the world.

We see in some sense a shift in the pleasure of the mundane here, which has been a major theme in the foregoing cases of alienation. Rather than a refusal of becoming acquainted with oneself, we see a refusal of being limited by the self. This can be interpreted as a form of violent self-alienation. One forcefully subdues a self that one is very aware of, in favor of trying to be what one is not. We are led to think again of the alcoholic introduced in the first section, who in his defiance of facticity, i.e. refusal to acknowledge his alcoholism, demonstratively bought non-alcoholic beverages around other people. This at the same time highlights the performative aspect of exercising one's self in the world. The reason for bringing this up again, is to show how the self-alienation that is especially present within this level of despair (although one could argue that the despair of the eternal also incorporates this aspect), has an important social function. This can also be seen in the idea of despair as defined by assuming social roles, as was explored in the first

section. This alludes to the idea of leveling that was superficially mentioned in the previous section, but most importantly it is a way to emphasize the idea that becoming a self grounded in oneself and God is difficult. It is more easy and less alien to remain in the roles that one has already assumed, even if this would be a state of despair, regardless of if one's role is the self-aggrandizing defiant actor or the suffering individual considering their purpose in the world to be a proof of the world's imperfections.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to highlight some themes of alienation that are present within Kierkegaard's theory of despair as it is presented in *Sydommen til Døden*, and how the different stages and figures of despair also embody different forms of alienation. Thus, I wish here to make a summary, and through this establish a clear conclusion. First, we established how Anti-Climacus conceives of the self proper, employing Davenport's (2013) taxonomy to give a clear picture of the different processes and structures at play, before moving on to showing Anti-Climacus' methodology. Then we looked at some approaches to understanding Kierkegaard as a thinker of alienation, both in a historical context and how his specific philosophical contributions can be understood as denoting cases of alienation. Lastly, we held these approaches to alienation up against Anti-Climacus' ascending levels of consciousness of despair.

A major recurring theme in the cases of despair as pertaining to alienation, is the duality of alienation as experienced by an individual self. On the one hand, Kierkegaard agrees with Hegel that alienation (*Entfremdung*) is a possibly arduous and affectively taxing state. On the other hand, Kierkegaard underscores how individuals seem to remain alienated from their own selves as states of comfort rather than taking on the challenge that alienation presents. All cases of despair denote a certain refusal of the change that a case of alienation seems to warrant. If to be in a state of despair is to be alienated, as I have tried to argue there are reasons to believe, and what one is alienated from is the part that one, ethically speaking, should become properly acquainted with in order to integrate it and become a unified self, then it seems that despair denotes a state of willed self-alienation on the levels which I have illustrated in the foregoing. This could possibly be of importance to how one understands alienation at large, especially in trying to interpret cases of alienation and whether society or the individual is 'at fault', but that would be a topic for further inquiry. For now, I believe it has been shown that despair can be viewed as a willed form of self-alienation.

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