Kierkegaard

*Credo ergo sum – at troe er at være*

A project by
Maria Skadkær Hansen

Supervised by
Urula Renz

Roskilde University
HIB 3.1.2
4th Semester
Spring 2009
1 – Abstract

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s work *Sygdommen til Døden* is examined in exploration of how he defines the concept of self. Kierkegaard defines the self as spirit, as a relation that relates to itself, and as derived and constituted by another. These three aspects of the self are studied. It is found that the concept of self is closely related to the concept of faith. This finding leads to a comparison between Kierkegaard’s conceptualisation of faith and the account of the creation of human beings in Genesis.
2 – Introduction

2.1 – Motivation

My sister studies medicine. She tells me that our red blood corpuscles together can make it 2½ times around the globe at equator. That our lungs fill up one football field. That we cough with a speed of 150 km/hour. I find these amazing facts. But I believe that we are also more than body. What is going in my mind and in my feelings I find amazing as well, if not even more amazing.

Because what is it really to be a person? Are human beings immaterial souls, merely substance, evolved animals, or ‘a bundle of perceptions’ only? Or are we a combination of mind (soul) and body as the Cartesian school of Descartes suggests? What is a person made of? And what makes me a unique person? These are just examples of questions within the problem of personal identity which philosophers at all times have discussed. The human subject as including the aspects of living, thinking, feeling, and acting is ground for the philosophy of existentialism of which the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is considered father (McDonald 1996, Olson 2002, 2008).

Kierkegaard believed that man is both soul and body and that this combination is held together by a third which he called the self. He compares the human being with a house consisting of a cellar, ground floor, and premier étage and concludes that the majority lives in the cellar only and therefore do not live out their full potentials (Kierkegaard a 1848:99). He reflects on how the individual instead should occupy the premier étage by being who they really are, by being their true self. A main concern of Kierkegaard was how you ‘become who you are’ (McDonald 1996).
The idea of being your true self is also what lies behind the Greek word *Edaimonia* used by Aristotle to describe happiness gained by living out your potentials, by being all that you can be. Today as catchwords like ‘self-realisation’ and ‘self-development’ become more and more frequent this idea is ground for many happiness studies.

As a product of the present society I am also caught up in the quest of exploring who I really am, of shaping my own identity through reflexivity, to actualise my innate nature, and in all this hope to find happiness.

Last semester I researched the field of happiness studies. Kierkegaard’s thoughts on selfhood appear as an interesting next step in continuation of my exploration of the good life. In order to be happy – and in the eudaimonic sense this equals to live as your true self – we must know who we actually are.

Kierkegaard was a Christian existentialist and was as such inspired by his faith. The belief you identify with impacts deeply the way you perceive the world around you, the people around you, and not least how you perceive yourself. However, naturally over time religion and culture merges and become difficult to discern from another. As Kierkegaard lived in the 19th century his Christian inspiration is a mixture of Western culture and ancient Hebrew and Christian faith.

Some scholars attempt to go back and explore the Hebrew heritage in Christianity and distinguish this from Western inspiration. It would be interesting first to explore what a self is according to Kierkegaard and next to see how well his definition align with the Hebrew heritage in Christianity. A place to search for identity would be the Biblical narrative in Genesis of how human beings were created as this can point at what a human being actually is.
2.2 – Research Question

With a main focus on the philosophy of Kierkegaard my research question becomes two-sided:

- According to Kierkegaard, what is a self?
- And how does his definition align with Genesis?

2.3 – Delimitations and Method

Kierkegaard’s work is massive. He has written more than 30 books and his use of concepts is not definite throughout all these works as also Drachmann 1953:184 notices. For this reason I have chosen to have my point of departure in one book only namely Kierkegaard’s book *Sygdommen til Døden* (Sickness Unto Death). The book was published in the year 1849 under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. In account of different kinds of despair the book develops an idea of what it is to become your self and to be your self.

In order to understand one concept it is additionally often necessary to understand other concepts that are intertwined with the one at hand. Understanding of concepts is undertaken in the philosophical conceptual analysis. The modern form of conceptual analysis has its roots in the ancient philosophy of Socrates and Plato and their search for definitions (Beaney 2003). In defining and analysing key concepts the understanding of them and their impact on the problem is elucidated and with the correct meaning of a concept it is then possible to use it and apply it in various contexts. However it is not possible to come up with absolute definitions and since words are formed by the way they are used often the definition is derived from the
general perception hold of the concept. Therefore, according to Kappel 2004, the goal of this analysis is simply to grasp a piece of the relevant discourse.

Inspired by this approach I will apply a philosophical conceptual analysis to the concept of self as conceptualised by Kierkegaard and to the concepts he uses in defining self namely spirit, relation, synthesis and constitution. My starting point will be the definition of self that Kierkegaard gives on the first page in Sygdommen til Døden. With reference to this definition I will explore through the book the concepts involved in it. This procedure implies that my perspective on the book will be specific and that certain concepts that play a significant role in the book, for instance despair, will be left out in this particular analysis. Also, the concepts used to define self again bring with them additional concepts and these I neither investigate further.

While having no major objections to reading Kierkegaard without regard for faith as many scholars and laypersons do I will however, as noted in my motivation, stick to a more religious reading of him. I will argue that the approach of comparing Kierkegaard’s philosophy (which is embedded in for instance Hegelianism and the late 19th century’s Romanticism but also Christianity) with Genesis (read in perspective of ancient Hebrew culture) is interesting because it might be an illustration of the detachment of Christianity from its roots or in other words, of the merging between culture and religion. As delimitation is needed I have chosen to work with Genesis only and not other parts of the Bible. The identity of human beings delivered by the Bible can take on numerous expressions according to the perspective with which you read it. Asi want to explore the roots and original context of Genesis I use a book called Our Father Abraham – Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith by Dr. Marvin R. Wilson, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies.
As a supplement and inspiration to the comparison between Kierkegaard’s definition of self and the Hebrew reading of Genesis I will additionally involve secondary literature about Kierkegaard’s philosophy as well as criticism of it.

2.4 – Dimension

As this project regards the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard the dimension of philosophy will be covered.

2.5 – Structure

The project begins with an introduction to the concept of self especially as viewed by Kierkegaard. His definition of self is quoted and presents three additional concepts which I subsequently go through. In this analysis of concepts I account first for the general meaning of the word and then for the specific meaning that Kierkegaard ascribes to it in *Sygdommen til Døden* and I involve views from secondary literature. Next, I shortly present the context in which Genesis is written. Then I discuss the concept of self, reflect critically on the whole process, and finally conclude on my findings.
3 – What is a self?

In philosophy the concept of self is used in different ways. It can denote a human being’s consciousness or it can denote the structure of personality, sometimes these meanings are intertwined. ‘Self’ is often used synonymously with the ‘I’, with ‘human person’, or ‘individual person’ and as such it represents the qualities that identify a certain person. In line with Locke’s definition of a person as a being that ‘can consider itself as itself’, Kierkegaard considers especially the self in regard to your ability to relate to yourself. The mind/body problem is a major issue in the debate of what a person is. As also mentioned in the motivation the views differ as to whether human beings are immaterial souls, merely substance, evolved animals, or ‘a bundle of perceptions’ only, or whether they are a combination of mind/soul and body. Kierkegaard believes that human beings are both soul and body and as will be shown in the following analysis it is exactly the self as that holds together this combination. (Den Store Danske Encyklopædi – selv, Garrett 1998, Evans 1998, Garber 1998, 2003, Drachmann 1953: 184)

In Sygdommen til Døden Kierkegaard establishes a detailed definition of self. I will begin by citing this as it will work as centre in answering my question. Kierkegaard’s rather long and tortuous definition of the self goes as follows (my emphasis in bold):

Forholdet mellem to er Forholdet det Tredie som negativ Eenhed, og de To forholde sig til Forholdet, og i Forholdet til Forholdet; saaledes er under Bestemmelsen Sjel Forholdet mellem Sjel og Legeme et Forhold. Forholder derimod Forholdet sig til sig selv, saa er dette Forhold det positive Tredie, og dette er Selvet.

Et saadant Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, et selv, maa enten have sat sig selv, eller være sat ved et Andet.

Er Forholdet, der forholder sig til sig selv, sat ved et Andet, saa er Forholdet vist nok det Tredie, men dette Forhold, det Tredie, er saa dog igjen et Forhold, forholder sig til hvad der har sat hele Forholdet.

Et saadant deriveret, sat Forhold er Menneskets Selv, et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, og i at forholde sig til sig selv forholder sig til et Andet.”

(Kierkegaard a 1848:73)

(For English translation see appendix A).

The passage is complex. First Kierkegaard asserts human beings as selves. As my emphasis in bold shows he involves the additional concepts of Aand, Forhold der forholder sig til sig selv and deriveret, sat Forhold (spirit, relation which relates itself to its own self, and derived, constituted relation). These characteristics of the self are key concepts in understanding the definition. I will now look at each of them.

3.1 – Spirit

First, the self is spirit “Mennesket er Aand. Men hvad er Aand? Aand er Selvet.”. The word ånd translates in English to spirit and generally it has diverse meanings i.e. consciousness, intellectuality, and breath. Especially in the epoch of Romanticism human beings were understood as being spirit and it was seen as a task for each individual to be conscious of this. (Den Store Danske Encyklopedi – Ånd). An opposing view to humans as consisting of spirit could be that we solely consist of
matter, that we are just biological organisms not much different than animals (Olson 2002, 2008).

In *Sygdommen til Døden* spirit equals the self, the I, the personality, but also consciousness more specifically consciousness of yourself. Self-awareness will show important in understanding of the subsequent examination of self as ‘a relation that relates to itself’. Spirit is an innate potential in the human nature and as a potential it is an attribute that is necessary to acquire. According to Kierkegaard awareness of being spirit, of being a self, implies awareness of the existence of God because there will be no self without God. This claim will be explored in the section on the self as ‘a derived, constituted relation’. Devoid the awareness Kierkegaard believes that life is wasted away. However, in the world it is often seen as a waste of life to want to be spirit and this is one reason that it takes courage to undertake and endure being spirit. While most people are dependent on a constant sociability life in the spirit is characterized by seriousness and a need for solitude. The opposite is a life characterized by superficiality, triviality, the sensuous life, immediacy, philistinism, fatalism, aesthetics, and imitation of others. Spirit gives the human being fullness and the more of it actualised the more self. (Kierkegaard a 1848:84-85, 97-100, 113, 119, 123, 135, 146, 153, 158, 166)

### 3.2 – Relation which relates itself to its own self

Second, the self is a relation which relates itself to its own self: “*Selvet er et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, eller er det i Forholdet, at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv*”. Further, the relation to which there must be related is described as a synthesis “*En Synthese er et forhold mellem to*”.
In Danish *forhold* signifies a relation but furthermore it also means relationship often a relationship between lovers. This meaning will show important when looking at the self as derived and constituted.

Synthesis is a Greek word and signifies that given elements are united in a composition. Hegel used the word to describe how a contradiction between a thesis and an anti-thesis is reconciled through reason. This is a dialectic worldview in which reality is seen as full of essential contradictions. Kierkegaard was very influenced by Hegel. (Den Store Danske Encyklopædi – syntese, dialektik). Kierkegaard’s dialectic worldview is seen in his definition of man as a synthesis between divine and human elements: “*Mennesket er en Synthese af Uendelighed og Endelighed, af det Timelige og det Evige, af Frihed og Nødvendighed*”. Opposed to Hegel’s dialectic Kierkegaard’s dialectic is irreconcilable, that is, the contradiction will always exist and the tension must be hold together in action (Thomassen 2001:121).

A synthesis is a relation between two and the relation itself is a third. An illustration is Hegel’s thesis A and anti-thesis B that together forms the synthesis AB. Kierkegaard calls this AB a negative third. Then, when AB relates to itself as AB then a C is formed and this is called the positive third (Thielst 2007:32). The C illustrates how it is more than simply the two elements – it is the self. Further, Thielst explains how the C is formed due to a consciousness of AB. Remember how consciousness equals spirit. Again it is clear that the self is spirit, it is an awareness of yourself. Thus, the self is not the actual relation but that which relates (Thielst 2007:37). It is not passive but active. In this way it is an ever-ongoing process to become and be a self: “*Dog er et Selv I ethvert Øieblick, det er til, I Vorden, thi Selvet (...) er ikke virkelig til, er blot Det, der skal blive til.*” (Kierkegaard a 1848: 88) (For English translation see appendix B).
So to be a self is a task of becoming (Søltoft 2009) and as a relation that relates to itself through consciousness the task is to assure balance between the elements of the synthesis, between the human and divine. God created man as a well-balanced synthesis and it is not possible to discard any of the opposing elements. Therefore it is a challenge and a task to remain balanced in spite of the persistent tension. When this happens man lives as his true self. For instance, balance between possibility and necessity results in freedom, so the self is freedom. An illustration of the necessary balance is seen in Kierkegaard’s example of how endelighed (finitude) is a limiting factor and uendelighed (infinitude) an expanding factor. While the first makes us adjust ourselves to everyone around us in fear of standing out as ourselves, the latter expresses itself through fantasy and if it gets out of control everything becomes abstract. None of these are optimal whereas a balance between them is.

The positive third – the self – is in a relationship itself: “men dette Forhold, det Tredie, er saa dog igjen et Forhold, forholder sig til hvad der har sat hele Forholdet”. Kierkegaard describes a relation between the self and God who constituted the self. The C comes via consciousness, via spirit and as explained above spirit exactly demands awareness of God. The self as a derived constituted relation will be examined now.

(Kierkegaard a 1848:73-76, 84, 87-92, 100)

### 3.3 – A Derived, Constituted relation

So far we have seen that the self is spirit and as such needs awareness of God. Further, the self is a relation that in consciousness of itself relates to itself as a synthesis of human and divine. Kierkegaard claims that in relating to itself it also relates to another, to that which constituted the self. The opposite of a derived, constituted self could be as Crites argues a self-created self (Crites 1992:59). But this
is not Kierkegaard’s concern. The self is derived and constituted by another and it engages in a relation with this other: “Et saadant deriveret, sat Forhold er Menneskets Selv, et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, og i at forholde sig til sig selv forholder sig til et Andet.”.

That the self is derived implies that there is something more basic than the self from which the self originates. From this the self is constituted or as it says in another translation: ‘established’ (Kierkegaard b 1848:273). The Danish word *sat* does literally mean ‘put’, ‘set’, ‘allocated’ or ‘placed’ and in old Danish this could mean for instance to be placed in a position or to be assigned a task (ODS 2007-5). In light of the above it describes how man is established as a synthesis and the self as spirit and further how it is a task to be a self. In Kierkegaard’s philosophy this constituting power is God.

In *Sygdommen til Døden* Kierkegaard describes how the self in itself cannot achieve the before-mentioned balance but is dependent on the constituter, that is, on God. Equilibrium can be attained and remained when the self relates to that which constituted it. As it is impossible to dispose yourself of the conflicting elements of the synthesis so it is also impossible to tear yourself away from the constituting power. You must acknowledge God and that your abilities come from God and therefore you must also let God be the master. This implies that you are humble before God, worship him, and receive his help, as well as submissively follow his will and plan with your self. Kierkegaard describes that if the self wants to be its own master it only build castles in the air.

It is worth noting how *forhold* in Danish not only means relation but also relationship and the relation between the self and God is in the book described as an intimate relationship in which dependence on God is for the self’s best. This relationship is not
only compliant. In love God has sacrificed himself for man and therefore man can at all times talk intimately with God. In fact Kierkegaard compares the believing person to a person in love. A person in love is enthusiastic and talks constantly of his beloved yet he never tries to prove or defend that he is in love. In the same way, even stronger, is a believer in love with God. And therefore the believer should not prove or defend his faith – neither can it be grasped through reason.

The relationship between self and God that occurs when the self relates to itself describes the condition of a well-balanced self: “i at forholde sig til sig selv, og I at ville være sig selv grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt i den Magt, som satte det” (Kierkegaard a 1849:74) (For English translation see appendix C). Interestingly Kierkegaard’s definition of a well-balanced self is identical to his definition of faith: “Tro er: at Selvet i at være sig selv og i at ville være sig selv gjennemsigtigt grunder i Gud” (Kierkegaard a 1849:136) (For English translation see appendix D). Therefore, in the book the aspect of faith plays a major role in the explanation of what it means to be a self. Descartes formulated the famous statement on what is means to be: cogito ergo sum. In Sygdommen til Døden Kierkegaard rephrases this to “at troe er at være” (to believe is to be) (Kierkegaard a 1848:146) (in Latin it would be credo ergo sum). The significance of faith in regard to the self is hereby clear. (Kierkegaard a 1848:73-76, 79, 87-88, 102, 117, 123-125, 136, 138-139, 146, 154, 164)

3.4 – Sub conclusion

The main part of my research question – according to Kierkegaard, what is a self? – has been clarified through analysis of Kierkegaard’s definition of self in Sygdommen til Døden. I will outline the points:
The self equals spirit which again equals consciousness. Man has an innate potential of being spirit. Through self-awareness you acquire this potential and thus become a self. The self is a relation that relates to itself. The relation is a synthesis of human and divine elements and a balance between these opposing elements is needed. When as spirit you are conscious of this synthesis and relate to it then a *positive third* is formed. This is the relation that relates to itself, this is the self. The self is derived and constituted. When the relation relates to itself in addition it naturally relates to the power which constituted it and according to Kierkegaard this power is God. The condition in which the relation relates to itself and to God is described as faith. In this condition a well-balanced self is assured. To be a self is a task. The self can never be a passive entity but will always be a movement, an aim you reach for but never fully achieve.

Kierkegaard’s definition of self implies that we are not just biological organisms; we are not animals, but much more than solely matter, we are even divine. We are not self-created but derive from a loving God who wants to have a relationship with us. This leads to a high view of humans in which every human being as an image of God is valuable. It also leads to a challenging view of humans as it matters what we do with our life, whether we live in relationship with God or choose to be our own master. Whether we acknowledge our nature and take on the task. The consequences of our choice will be clearer in the discussion.

For the moment I will proceed to an introduction to Genesis and its anchoring in a Hebraic mindset.
4 – Genesis and a Hebrew Perspective

The second part of my research question regarded the alignment between Kierkegaard’s definition of self and the Biblical narrative about creation of human beings as it is told in Genesis. The comparison makes sense in the way that Kierkegaard affirms human beings as selves. To facilitate a qualified discussion on this I will first cite some relevant verses from Genesis and next introduce some implications of reading them in the perspective of ancient Hebrew culture.

In Genesis is it written: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Later: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” And in another verse: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” And lastly: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

(From Genesis 1 and 2, New International Version).

Dr. Marvin R. Wilson, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, makes clear that since this narrative is rooted within ancient Hebrew culture it should be read differently than literature inspired by e.g. the Greek worldview. It is ancient storytelling and not rationally academic literature. I will mention some implications of this, all of them mentioned in Wilson’s book. First, the narrative is poetry and should therefore not be understood literally. Second, Hebrews worked with block logic meaning that contrasting viewpoints (blocks) easily could be true all of them, these paradoxes only showing the greatness of God. The opposite of this is Greek step logic. Third, the point in their narratives was not the details but instead the story as a whole. Fourth, they did not have doctrines of faith or a philosophy of God but
instead faith was lived out in a relationship with God who was understood functionally. Fifth, the Hebrews believed that human being’s physical, psychological, and spiritual functions formed an inseparable whole, and also they did not distinct between sacred and secular areas of life. God is present in all and they are in relationship with Him by bringing Him into it all (Wilson 1989: 135-161).

With these points in mind I will move on to the actual discussion for a completion of answering my two-sided research question.
5 – A Discussion of Self

I began the project asking the following questions:

- According to Kierkegaard, what is a self?
- And how does his definition align with Genesis?

So far I have examined the concept of self in Kierkegaard’s book Sygdommen til Døden. Further I have shortly presented the Hebraic context of which I want to be aware in my comparison between Kierkegaard’s definition of self and the Biblical narrative about the creation of human beings. For a more multifaceted discussion I will engage secondary literature about the philosophy of Kierkegaard.

Following Kierkegaard’s definition I divided the analysis of self into three parts: spirit, relation which relates itself to its own self, and derived, constituted relation. In the discussion I will follow this structure and therefore start by looking at the self as spirit.

5.1 – Spirit

First, in Sygdommen til Døden the self is equal to spirit which is an innate potential in human beings.

In Genesis is says that God: “... breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, ...”. As mentioned in the section on spirit, breath has traditionally been equivalent to spirit. With this in mind it says that God breathed the spirit of life into man. As God himself is spirit (“the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters”) this is also an indication that man is created in the image of God. According to Genesis Kierkegaard then seems right in his claim that spirit is an innate potential in us.
Spirit also equals consciousness. This point was connected to the fact that man is a synthesis of human and divine and self-awareness opens your eyes to this fact. In this light the temptation in Genesis can be read as a description of how Adam and Eve not wanted to acknowledge their humanity. They wanted to be like God. Instead of being in a relationship with Him they wanted to be independent. This had fatal consequences. In *Sygdommen til Døden* Kierkegaard warns against living as if you are your own god and he thus also indicates that if we do not acknowledge our human limits then serious consequences will follow.

We are spiritual beings created in the image of God though not gods ourselves. But what does it further mean to be spirit? Thomassen, a Danish associate professor in philosophy, has a proposal on this question. He explains how, in the Kierkegaardian discourse, spirit is connected to the personal life in the same way as breath is connected to the bodily life. Spirit represents a strong *lidenskab og inderlighed* (passion and fervour). Therefore, Thomassen emphasises, it is not solely religious experiences that may be defined as spiritual. To live spiritually is to be driven by passion and fervour vs. superficiality. Then everything may be characterised as spiritual including sexuality and orgasm, humour and laughter, sensuous pleasures and not only seriousness. (Thomassen 2001:169-177).

That all aspects of life can be seen as spiritual seems to be in well accordance with the Hebrew context in which God was present in all and also taken into all areas of life as they did not even distinguish between sacred and secular areas of life. In this view the sensuous life, immediacy, and aesthetics might not have to be opposites of a spiritual life as Kierkegaard states they are. Passionate behaviour is the way in which spirit brings fullness to human beings but as Kierkegaard states it takes courage and
endurance to live as spirit and this is also true for a passionate life. At times it costs to let passion run your life.

A self must have self-awareness and acknowledge that it is a synthesis of human and divine elements. In the following section about self as ‘a relation that relates to itself’ this will be discussed further.

5.2 – A Relation that relates to itself

Man is a synthesis of ever conflicting elements and the self is a relation that relates to itself. We saw above how important it is to have awareness of this synthesis and to know your limits.

In Genesis it is written that: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Using Kierkegaard’s vocabulary man can be understood as a synthesis of dust and breath/spirit, that is, of human and divine. We are fragile yet we have a spark of the divine in us and as found above this spark is what brings fullness to life.

Kierkegaard claimed that man is a synthesis of constantly conflicting elements and that these at all times generate tension. He states that from the beginning we are created as well-balanced syntheses but from there on it is a never-ending task to stay well-balanced due to the basically contradictory qualities. That it is good in the beginning is indicated in the verse that says that: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” That tension appears later is suggested in the temptation of Adam and Eve. They experienced how the desire for possibility conflicted with the necessity – their limits as humans. But does this imply that the tension is provoked by irreconcilable elements within the human being? The Hebrews viewed the physical,
psychological, and spiritual aspects of man as a whole. Their concern was to live in a relationship with their God and then this can be seen as what determined the equilibrium.

Thomassen also argues that Kierkegaard is pessimistic without need in his view of man as a being filled with tension. He acknowledges that divisions and contradictions mark the life of human beings but not that they are ontological structures in us that threaten our happiness and deem us to a life of struggle (Thomassen 2001:139-147). Though we are a synthesis of the earthly and the divine, we are created as good and as whole. In this perspective the dialectical worldview held by Kierkegaard is not reasonable.

The positive third that relates to itself must relate to God also. This point comes next.

5.3 – A Derived, Constituted Relation

Kierkegaard claims that the self is derived and constituted by God. To attain equilibrium the self must have a relationship with its constituter. Also in Genesis this constitution is described: “The LORD God formed the man” and “God created man in his own image”. It is clear that man and God are in a relationship. God walks in the garden and converses with man. Kierkegaard writes that God must be the master and Genesis illustrates what happens when instead man chooses to be his own master – the relationship between man and God breaks. Adam and Eve then feel shame and become afraid of God: “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). In breaking the convention man puts at stake the relationship – the relationship which for Hebrews played a major role in life as they did not have doctrines of faith but a life of faith.
Thomassen agrees that to be your true self you must relate both to yourself and to another. This will lead to familiarity and peace which again leads to a unity of self-confidence and confidence in the other necessary for a whole identity. Yet he believes that this confidence can be found in the finitude and not only in God. The other might as well be another person or it might be nature (Thomassen 2001:326-345). Actually a reason why Kierkegaard writes *Sygdommen til Døden* is that many people, like Thomassen, believe they can find rest in the finitude. To Kierkegaard and this is not true happiness.

Crites, Hedding Professor of Moral Science and professor of philosophy, views the relation between man and God in a different perspective that somehow can be seen as a cross between the literal relationship so far generated and Thomassen’s view that God is not essential. Crites uses Kierkegaard’s own vocabulary when he states that God is possibility: “*som nemlig for Gud Alt er muligt, saa er Gud det, at Alt er muligt*” (Kierkegaard a 1848:97). In this way the relation is established by and connected to “*a divine horizon of possibility*” (Crites 1992:61). This possibility draws the self into the future. Again the self is not a passive product but is in the process of becoming. In line with the Hebrew context faith is not a creed but faith is action. Crites uses the words ‘*given self*’ to describe the self we have and which is coloured by our past, our habits, and our problems. Next he introduces the ‘*potentiated self*’, the active self that has faith in God that is, faith in possibilities. Faith is to have balance between these two selves. Adam and Eve saw a great possibility however because they did not acknowledge their necessity they lost themselves as they grasped for possibility. Crites illustrates it this way: like a former alcoholic needs to acknowledge his former problem so must you acknowledge your limits and then turn to the God of possibilities (Crites 1992:59-64).
5.4 – Sub conclusion

I have discussed Kierkegaard’s definition of self in light of Genesis and secondary literature. I will in short account for the points drawn.

Kierkegaard understood the self as spirit indicating innate divinity and as a potential of being consciousness of your true nature. This is in line with the story of Genesis. Kierkegaard opposed a spiritual life to a sensuous life characterised by e.g. aesthetics and immediacy. This view was challenged by the Hebrew context which saw all aspects of life as a whole as well as by the philosopher Thomassen who understands spirit as passion which then can be motivation in all aspects of life.

The view of man as a synthesis of human and divine elements that are well-balanced from the beginning and must be so constantly is also shared by Kierkegaard and Genesis. However, Kierkegaard’s view that innate tension rules in man is challenged by Thomassen who argues that this view is unnecessarily pessimistic. According to him as well as to Genesis read in the Hebraic context we are created as good and as whole.

Faith is a relationship between self and God and plays a crucial role when looking at self as derived and constituted. Faith is action: In Hebrew culture it was lived out and for Kierkegaard it was a constant process. Both Kierkegaard and Genesis illustrate that God must be master to assure a good relationship. This relationship also played a major role in the Hebrew culture. Challenging views to faith as a factual loving relationship with God characterised by intimate talking are faith in God as equal to possibility and miracles in life, or faith in the finitude e.g. another person. All the way the point remains that something exterior is essential for a balanced self.
6 – Critical reflection

My delimitation established frames in which I examined Kierkegaard’s concept of self and put it into perspective of the creation story found in Genesis. However, a broader knowledge on the philosophy of self through the ages would have served well in the project. It would have been just to Kierkegaard to investigate deeper the context in which he wrote and the Christianity with which he lived. Also, it would have been beneficial to use not only one story from the Bible but instead involve more aspects of Christianity as well as study even deeper the Hebraic context.

The concept of self was intertwined with concepts which again were intertwined with additional concepts. I did not examine them all. For instance it would be helpful to attain a more comprehensive understanding of concepts like man, faith, and God as well as the separate elements in the synthesis.

Further, as Genesis is written as poetry and as such should not be understood literally or in detail it may be argued that the way I have used it in my argument is not valid. However, I consider my points as part of the bigger picture that Genesis generates according to Wilson and others.
7 – Conclusion

In the motivation I mentioned that a main concern of Kierkegaard was how you become who you truly are. This concern seems more relevant than ever as catchwords like ‘self-realisation’ and ‘self-development’ flourish and prompt thoughts in me on how to actualise my innate nature – my true self. This was reason that I began this project. Further, an interest in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard as well as an interest in the Biblical context outlined the structure in which I explored the concept of self through the questions:

- **According to Kierkegaard, what is a self?**
- **And how does his definition align with Genesis?**

Put in few words the answers to the questions are: according to Kierkegaard a self is spirit, a relation which relates itself to its own self, and a derived and constituted relation. Overall, this definition aligns well with Genesis.

The title of the project *Credo ergo sum – at troe er at være* indicates my finding that for Kierkegaard the concept of self is inseparable from his concept of faith. To be is to believe. In order to live as your true self, to become who you are, to actualise your innate nature, you must have faith in the God of possibilities. This is also reason that I compared the concept with the story in Genesis.

Overall I found that most of Kierkegaard’s definition of self aligns well with the identity of human beings seen in Genesis. A self is spirit and must have self-awareness that it is both human and divine. This will lead to an understanding of your limits as a derived self but also of your possibilities as an image of God. Crucial is to
live in a relationship with God and this must be nurtured in a constant process of becoming. In this way it is a task to be a self.

Still, divergence appeared for instance with regard to the question of whether the self has an ontological structure of division that generates tension as Kierkegaard states. This aspect is crucial in self-perception as it can lead to either excuse of wrongs due to this ontological structure or instead to a hope that you can make it well as you are a whole and good being.

Kierkegaard’s definition of self opens up for various interesting questions. What does it involve to have self-awareness? What does it imply to be divine and at the same time human? As a synthesis of opposing elements how fragile is the self? And does this tension not lead to a feeling of division instead of wholeness? How do I know if I am in imbalance? What does it take to have faith and as such be well-balanced? Is it my own self when God is master? How do I enter into an intimate relationship with God? Who is God? Is it not stressing to find myself in a constant becoming? In other words, what kind of identity will I have if I adopt Kierkegaard’s philosophy?

Some of these questions I have touched upon in my discussion. Others are still unwrapped waiting to be explored through reflection and study.
Søren Kierkegaards værk *Sygdommen til Døden* bliver i dette projekt studeret med henblik på at forstå begrebet *selv*. I sin definition af selvet beskriver Kierkegaard hvordan selvet er ånd, et forhold der forholder sig til sig selv og et deriveret, sat forhold. Disse tre aspekter af selvet bliver analyseret og det viser sig at begrebet selv er tæt knyttet til begrebet tro. Der bliver kort redegjort for den hebraiske kontekst i hvilken man kan læse Bibelens skabelsesberetning og med denne i mente diskuteres begrebet selv i en sammenligning med den identitet som skabelsesberetningen promoverer.

---

**8 – Summary in Danish**

Søren Kierkegaards værk *Sygdommen til Døden* bliver i dette projekt studeret med henblik på at forstå begrebet *selv*. I sin definition af selvet beskriver Kierkegaard hvordan selvet er ånd, et forhold der forholder sig til sig selv og et deriveret, sat forhold. Disse tre aspekter af selvet bliver analyseret og det viser sig at begrebet selv er tæt knyttet til begrebet tro. Der bliver kort redegjort for den hebraiske kontekst i hvilken man kan læse Bibelens skabelsesberetning og med denne i mente diskuteres begrebet selv i en sammenligning med den identitet som skabelsesberetningen promoverer.
9 – Bibliography

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analysis/ (April 16th 2009)

Bible, the, New International Version, Genesis chapter 1 - 3:
http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book_id=1&chapter=1&version=31
http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%202;&version=31

Den Store Danske Encyklopædi http://www.denstoredanske.dk/ (April 16th 2009)


Drachmann, A.B. (1953) – notes in Kierkegaard (1849 a)


Image on the front page: http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https://academics.skidmore.edu/weblogs/students/l1brody/selves%2520portrait.jpg&imgrefurl=http://academics.skidmore.edu/weblogs/students/l1brody/archives/2005/10/&usg=__55leU1EwJxYZYRN7k0Ss7hg7lU0=&h=1536&w=2048&sz=201&hl=en&start=13&sig2=GpJVpQYbVAdlTOnBSWqNNw&um=1&tbnid=J2tRb14_tTX7M:&tbnh=113&tbnw=150&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dselves%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1B3PBEA_enDK234DK240%26sa%3DG%26um%3D1&ei=Px8VSRHYBlaQ_qaaxqvDA (May 21st 2009)


Kierkegaard, Søren (1849 a) *Sygdommen til døden* by A.B. Drachmann, Bind 15 Published by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange. Gyldendal 1963


10 – Appendices

10.1 – Appendix A:

(Kierkegaard b 1848:146):
Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to its own self, or is that in the relation (which accounts for it) that the relation relates to its own self; the self is not the relation but (consists in the fact) that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self.

In the relation between two, the relation is the third term as a negative unity, 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. If on the contrary the relation relates to its own self, the relation is then the positive third term, and this is the self.

Such a relation which relates itself to its own self (that is to say, a self) must either have constituted itself or have been constituted by another.

If this relation which relates itself to its own self is constituted by another, the relation doubtless is the third term, but this relation (the third term) is in turn a relation relating itself to that which constituted the whole relation.

Such a derived, constituted, relation is the human self, a relation which relates itself to its own self, and in relating itself to its own self relates itself to another.

10.2 – Appendix B:

(Kierkegaard b 1848:163):
However, a self, every instant it exists, is in process of becoming, for the self (...) does not actually exist, it is only that which it is to become.

**10.3 – Appendix C:**

(Kierkegaard b 1848:147):
By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it.

**10.4 – Appendix D:**

(Kierkegaard b 1848:213):
Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself is grounded transparently in God.
Søren Kierkegaard. First published Tue Dec 3, 1996; substantive revision Fri Nov 10, 2017. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (b. 1813, d. 1855) was a profound and prolific writer in the Danish “golden age” of intellectual and artistic activity. His work crosses the boundaries of philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction. Kierkegaard brought this potent mixture of discourses to bear as social critique and for the purpose of renewing Christian faith within Christendom. Søren Kierkegaard: Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher, theologian, and cultural critic who was a major influence on existentialism and Protestant theology in the 20th century. A life of collisions. Kierkegaard’s life has been called uneventful, but it was hardly that. The story of his life is a drama in four overlapping acts, each with its own distinctive crisis or “collision,” as he often referred to these events.