



APEIRON

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APEIRON

Apeiron: *unlimited, indefinite*

1. The *arche*, that is the beginning or principle of all things was, according to Anaximander, the *apeiron*, the unlimited. The term is capable of various constructions, depending upon how one understands the limit. 2. More generally, indetermination, i.e., without internal limits, and so without beginning or end . . . 3. An undergraduate journal of philosophy for students of all majors at Washington College.

Foreword

Welcome to the fifth annual issue of *Apeiron*. Philosophical writings often seem out of sync with real human concerns; our authors show this need not be so. Good philosophy distances itself from the merely practical or expedient. Yet, if philosophy seeks truth, it must account for how things are in the concrete and human orders. The great philosophers speak to our inner life. They probe the deepest and often inchoate longings of the human soul.

Capella Meurer and Darla Cornett take up Plato's discussion of the joyous and tragic sides of love in the *Symposium*. Love (*Eros*) reveals our essential dependence on others and our deep willingness to continue in hope. Hope and despair figure prominently in the works of Kierkegaard discussed by Matthew Johnston and Misty Christensen. Our authors in this issue grapple with real life, while not losing sight of the characteristically reflective endeavor of philosophizing.

This issue continues the tradition of superb analysis and debate readers have come to expect in these pages. We continue to offer our readers substantive content, presented in a simple and unassuming format.

Our editor, Misty Christensen, brings her experienced eye and considerable talents to this volume. She has been joining us as both an editor and contributor since her freshman year (2004). Our thanks go out to her and to this year's contributors.

Peter Weigel

Introduction

In this, our fifth edition of *Apeiron*, we are proud to present a broad spectrum of topics which are thought provoking and challenging. These essays contend with issues that, despite being hundreds of years old, still play important roles in our daily lives, and help provide a foundation for the ways in which we interact with the world.

The Editor

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The Search for a Higher State: On Aristophanes and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*

Capella Meurer

“For love, that renowned and beguiling power, includes every kind of longing for happiness and for the good.”
- Symposium

Love has never been easy to define. It seems to be at the center of everything that we as humans do. There is always the drive to find the soul mate, the endless and seemingly fruitless search. Love is something so engrained in our being that we cannot help but try to define it; we are, in a sense, attempting to describe ourselves. But is it even describable, or even attainable for that matter? The characters in the *Symposium* struggle to define love so as to better appreciate and worship it; what they come up with is the fact that love has so many facets as to make it indescribable. Yet, similar to the multi-faceted diamond, love has core features that carry over from description to description. Aristophanes and Diotima illustrate this diamond-like quality of love though their conceptions of love as attainable vary.

Aristophanes speaks of our ancestors, the Circle People, who were split in half as punishment for their attempts to rise against Mt. Olympus.¹ Before the split our ancestors had no need of love because they had their soul mate attached to them; as Hedwig sings in the song adaptation of the myth, “And they never knew nothing of love/ It was before the Origin of Love.”² The split effectively divided our ancestors’ souls in half, and as the story goes, made us into the “lonely two-legged creatures” we are.³ According to Aristophanes we are constantly looking for our other half so that we may once again feel whole. Nothing else penetrates this desire, it is all

¹ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (New York: Penguin, 1999).

² John Mitchell Cameron, *The Origin of Love*. Hedwig and the Angry Inch. Hybrid Records compact disc 20024, 2001.

³ Cameron, *Origin*.

consuming. In this way the gods ensured that we could never rise against them again; we are too busy trying to eliminate the pain of being cut in half.

Diotima describes love quite differently; according to her we are searching for the true goal of love, “the desire for Beauty itself.”⁴ This is achieved by following a series of steps through which the lover begins to appreciate more and more beautiful objects until he finally “see[s] beauty itself, absolute, pure, unmixed....”⁵ This process involves more free will than in Aristophanes’s vision in that the person has to willingly allow himself to understand that there is more to love than the purely physical. The physical is the same across all humans, we all have the same physical characteristics and we can be attracted to any one human characteristic. The mere fact that we are not all attracted to one specific feature illustrates this: some find beauty in the face, others in arms, others in breasts, or behinds and so on. This seems to imply that there is something further than the physical; according to Diotima, this is the attraction to good qualities. Good qualities come from good learning and so we will begin to love this source; then, we will begin to love the nature of True Beauty itself. The beauty we see in other human beings, be it the beauty of their body or soul, is merely a faulty representation of the Ideal Beauty.⁶ Once we reach this goal we will have our eyes opened to the metaphorical darkness in which we once lived, where love was only for such base things as physical beauty alone.

We would do well to note that both of these theories advocate a search for something that would make us complete in some sense of the word. For Aristophanes this completeness comes from reuniting two halves, in much the same way that two puzzle pieces fit together. Aristophanes describes it as an attempt to “heal the wound in human nature,” we strive for our natural state, which is to be joined into the form of the Circle

⁴ J. Etzweiler. “A Philosophy of Love,” *Problems of Philosophy* [unpublished manuscript], 119.

⁵ *Symposium*, 211e. Numbers and lowercase letters refer to the Stephanus numbering system used in all translations of Plato’s works.

⁶ Etzweiler, 120.

People, our ancestors.⁷ Diotima may seem to disagree with this at first glance because she never mentions a soul mate of any kind. What she does say about the involvement of another being is that we use the partner to find beauty in the physical body, personality, and soul. This leads us to a more complete understanding of Beauty, which is considered to be the desire to have the Good forever; achieving the Good is seen by some as the salvation of the soul. While another person is needed to undertake this process, it is the harmonious state of the soul that we should be striving for, not the soul mate. So it would seem that Aristophanes and Diotima are not so different as it once seemed: in both cases we are pushing towards a higher state of the soul. For Aristophanes that state is the reunion of two soul halves, and for Diotima it is the recapturing of the Form of Good.

Is that enough though? We are forgetting the whole reason why the Circle People were split apart, their thirst for power and immortality. The act of storming Mt. Olympus is seen as a direct attack on the gods and, therefore, an attempt to usurp their power. Our ancestors were strong because of their joined souls, they wanted for nothing except the immense power of the gods, and so they conspired to take it. Their spilt was meant to keep humans in existence but also to make them “too weak to carry on their wild behavior.”⁸ While we may be able to find our other half, we will not be able to join together completely. The act of sex is seen as an attempt to “shove ourselves back together” but, as our basic anatomy evinces, we will never be completely joined.⁹ So while we may find peace in the proximity of the other half, it will never be the same as the strong union of our original state. It must also be postulated that even if we were once again joined, would we still be happy? After all, our ancestors were not satisfied with what they had, and how are we to know that once rejoined we would not be the same way? Perhaps this is our mortal fate, to live out our lives so close to our other half and yet to never be

⁷ *Symposium*, 191d.

⁸ *Symposium*, 190d.

⁹ Cameron, *Origin*.

completely joined. That pleasure may be reserved for the realm after death when the two souls rejoin.

Diotima gives no complete description of what it is like to understand True Good; what little description she does give is rather abstract, saying that we would be seeing Beauty without the human clutter.¹⁰ This state, she says, would be the best one that a human could be in. Because of it we would give birth to true virtue, and from that we would become immortal.¹¹ This progression from physical love to spiritual love always leads to a “greater perfection of and in love.”¹² Plato himself talks of the experience of glimpsing the pure Forms (of which Beauty is one) through Socrates, saying that, “But of this place beyond heaven no one of our poets has yet sung nor will ever sing in a manner worthy.”¹³ The state is indescribable, so how then will we know that we have attained it? As Plato describes to Meno, in the dialogue of that same name, learning is merely recollection of something we learned in a past life because our souls are immortal. When we reach this divine state we will know it instinctually as our souls will have experienced it before and we will find it to be a much more favorable state than the one we once lived in.

So herein lies the problem with the ancient theories on love: it is unattainable. Regardless of how we believe we find true love it will never be quite enough on its own. This proves to make the whole process much less attractive. We, as humans, want to be working towards something; we need a goal. Once we reach that goal we want to be sure of ourselves and have something to show for it. Both of these theories fail to provide those incentives. With Aristophanes we may have the soul mate, but we do not have the benefit of bodily union. The aching desire to be joined is still present, and we can do

¹⁰ *Symposium*, 211e.

¹¹ *Symposium*, 212a.

¹² Luce Irigaray and Eleanor H. Kuykendall, “Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima’s Speech,” *Hypatia* 3, no. 3 (1989): 32.

¹³ Plato, Meno, as noted by Louis J. Pojman in *Philosophical Traditions: A Text With Readings*, (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998), 90.

nothing to dull that pain regardless of the presence of the soul mate. We are constantly yearning for one more thing. With Diotima, we are shooting for something unknown, a scary fact by itself. Forging forward into unknown territory and not knowing whether or not we will achieve our goal, or if we will actually have something to show for ourselves at the end of the ordeal, is not something that most would willingly do.

Do not lose hope! Love is not so pessimistic as that, otherwise we would have all died off long ago. Zeus took pity on the split Circle People and moved their genitals to the front so that there could be the imitation of union when the two halves engaged in intercourse.¹⁴ In this way we are able to remember what it feels like to be one being and, while we may have to separate for a time, the memory and anticipation of union can carry us through the pain. Nor is our daily experience all torment. Aristophanes describes the feeling of finding the other half in luscious detail, saying that we become “overwhelmed, to an amazing extent, with affection, concern and love,” and that we “live out whole lifetimes together.”¹⁵ We know that this is a good feeling, something that we continuously want to experience, but we cannot fully articulate it except to say that we know we want to be together for all eternity. How can this be seen as a bad thing? True, there is the sense of something missing but there is also the knowledge that we have found our other half and that can be enough to hold us over until death. Humans are capable of enduring extreme suffering and in light of the suffering we could be experiencing, this is mild and easy to endure.

Diotima, on the other hand, poses a problem. We are supposed to be shooting for something we do not even fully understand. Perhaps we do not even know that we are shooting for it at all. Plato claims that once we do reach this state, however, we will know what it is because we will be able to compare how we are in the new state to how we once were, and that we will find the former to be much more agreeable. The state which we would live in is a transcendent realm where we

¹⁴ *Symposium*, 191b.

¹⁵ *Symposium*, 192a.

focus more on the mental aspects of our lives, paying less attention to the physical. We are basically on a “quest for what is deemed the highest reality and often situated in a transcendence inaccessible to our condition as mortals.”¹⁶ This is a very hard concept to grasp, living physically and yet not, both at the same time, which can make it decidedly less appealing to most humans. It is a sad fact that we are not so spiritual as we once were. In times past this may have been a perfectly acceptable goal, monks and nuns from many religions still strive for this state today, but the layman is much more focused on such base desires as wealth and status. In light of this, Diotima’s theory is outdated. The happiness and contentment felt in the end state described by Aristophanes is something we can feel while still enjoying more physical luxuries in the form of sex. These physical luxuries are not the sole basis for the relationship; there is still the unity that both parties feel when together. Aristophanes appeals to everyone because it is so universal. Diotima calls to those who have a spiritual side.

Neither Diotima nor Aristophanes is wrong, as they both aim for the completion of the soul. The means differ, which is what makes one more appealing than the other, but by no means is one more correct than the other. Both of are significant because they aim for the same thing, a wholly different and enlightened soul state. In the end, we are all striving for the same thing, a completion of soul. This struggle is our fate, we are born separate and we strive to find someone who is similar to us in order that we may share our lives.

¹⁶ Irigaray and Kuykendall, 40.

The Symposium: The Underlying Tragedy in Plato's Humor

Darla Cornett

Plato's dialogue *Symposium* might appear to be a humorous and light hearted discussion on the nature of love. It includes strange and amusing stories on the creation of love and a friendly discussion among a group of comrades who are partaking in the discussion merely for their own pleasure. On the outside, the dialogue seems to have all the makings of a comedy, but that is just the appearance it presents. The reality is that the *Symposium* is actually a well thought out tragedy, full of symbolism and references to Plato's other writing. The work arguably meets the definition of a tragedy, a "form of drama that depicts the suffering of a heroic individual who is often overcome by the very obstacles he is struggling to remove."¹ Although Socrates is not completely overcome in the dialogue, it does foreshadow what eventually happens to the philosopher when he is put on trial for the corruption of the youth of Athens. The continual reference to Socrates' trial and death becomes the essence of tragedy in the dialogue. Plato uses two main methods to transform his writing into a tragedy, irony and the theme of appearance versus reality, both of which can be found throughout the dialogue.

The use of irony can be found throughout the *Symposium*. The first example can be found in the name of one of the main characters, Agathon. Agathon's name, translated from Greek, means "the good man." The irony of this is that while Agathon may indeed be a good man, Socrates is, by far, a better man than Agathon and every other man at the symposium. As the men at the symposium discuss love, Socrates comes up with the best argument and is able to refute the ideas of all the others or alter them so that they comply with his theory. Also, when Alcibiades interrupts the party near the

¹ *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition* Copyright © 2003, Columbia University Press. Licensed from Columbia University Press.

end of the dialogue, he spends a his entire speech raving about how intelligent Socrates is, how he is brave on the battlefield, and how he is strong enough to be able to resist the advances of his handsome student. Finally, after the symposium has drawn to a close and the party ended, Socrates is the only man who remains sober and is able to go about his daily routine while the others recover. This shows that Socrates has a balance in his life that all the other men at the party lack. He is able to control himself, unlike the others. However, despite the fact that Socrates is such a good man, he is the one among this group who, as we read in Plato's *Apology* and *Phaedo*, ends up being put on trial and condemned to death. This is ironic because Socrates was one of the best men Athens had, yet ends up being characterized as a bad person. In putting Socrates to death, Athens brings tragedy upon itself by taking away from itself one of its best resources of knowledge and wisdom (though Socrates himself would probably argue that point).

Plato starts off the *Symposium* with irony, and he ends the dialogue with it too. The last few lines of text describe how Socrates is the only one left awake at the end of the party and how he goes off alone to go about his daily routine. The irony of this is that, in a story that was all about love and people coming together, Socrates winds up alone. This is similar to what happens to Socrates in the *Apology*. In that dialogue, Socrates also ends up alone, though in that case he is alone in his defense of himself among a large jury of fellow Athenians. Like the men at the symposium, the jury in the *Apology* does not fully comprehend the beliefs and ideas Socrates puts forth, nor are they at the same level as the philosopher. Throughout the *Symposium*, there is a sense that Socrates is being put on trial as his ideas are questioned and he is accused by Alcibiades of, in a sense, leading the younger man on. This further adds to the irony of the situation because Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades becomes one of the underlying reasons for his being put on trial. The tragedy here is in the failure of both groups, the men at the symposium and the jury at Socrates' trial, to understand the true meaning of Socrates' words. The men at the symposium lose out on a chance to better understand themselves and lead a more examined life, and the people of

Athens completely eliminate the possibility of Socrates ever sharing his knowledge again.

One final point of irony in the *Symposium* is the failure of understanding by the people at the symposium and by the people of Athens. A symposium is a discussion of a topic, and this symposium is held in the company of some of the best and brightest of Athens. However, while all of the participants in the symposium give their own presentation on love, none of the men, not even Socrates himself, ends up truly understanding what love is. There is a parallel to this in the dialogue as well. Just as no one can ever truly understand love, no one can ever truly understand Socrates either. In the beginning of the dialogue, Agathon wonders why Aristodemus arrives at the party without Socrates, and Aristodemus comments that Socrates probably stopped to think like he usually does. The other men are used to seeing Socrates behave in this manner, but none of them really understand why Socrates does it. Similar to their understanding love, neither man has a full understanding of Socrates, and neither is ever able to fully understand him because they do not put forth enough effort. This is how the majority of the citizens in Athens react to Socrates. They either choose not to try and understand what he says, they ignore him, or they become too angry at his words to quickly to even try and understand. This becomes one of the main reasons Socrates is sentenced to death.

Along with irony, the theme of appearance versus reality is used to add to the tragic tone of the *Symposium*. One example of this is how Alcibiades compares Socrates to the satyr Silenus in his speech praising his mentor. Both Socrates and the satyr were known for being ugly in appearance, and, in this story, Socrates drinks a large amount of alcohol, much like the satyr typically did. Satyrs are associated with Dionysus, the god of wine, because of their love of drinking and wildness. One might naturally assume that one who is constantly enjoying revelry in such a way is an idiot, a drunk, or both. However, this is not the case with the satyr Silenus, nor is it the case with Socrates. Mark David User, in his article "Satyr Play in Plato's *Symposium*," notes that "Though it has only been recently adduced as a source, much of the scene involving

Alcibiades and Socrates is modeled on the myth of King Midas's capture of the satyr Silenus," and Socrates turns out to be more like Silenus than in just appearance.²

The myth of Silenus starts with the supposedly wild and drunken satyr being captured and taken to the court of King Midas. Instead of causing a wild ruckus like one might expect, however, the satyr sits down with the king to share a meal and some drinks. During this time, Silenus tells the king, in great detail, about the geography of the world and the people living in it. Just as one would not think a satyr would be knowledgeable about geography, one might not expect a physically unpleasant man like Socrates to know much about beauty. Despite the fact that he is ugly, Socrates proves during his speech at the symposium that he is well versed in the subject of beauty. In this instance, Socrates proves that any man can be well versed in a subject if they adequately study it and give it thought and consideration, and he shows the reality of the situation, that appearance does not matter when it comes to knowledge about any subject. Unfortunately, there were very few men besides Socrates in Athens who actually undertook giving such subjects their close attention. This further adds to the overall tragic message of the *Symposium* because Socrates could have been saved from death if only more men were willing to commit themselves to examining their lives like Socrates did.

Plato incorporates another example of appearance versus reality into his writing when he has the drunken Alcibiades interrupt the symposium. Plato brings Socrates' then student into the cast of characters to disprove what many people thought was a reality: that it was the direct influence of Socrates that caused Alcibiades and some of Socrates' other students to take over Athens as the tyrannical Thirty Tyrants. When The Thirty were in power, many people in Athens were hurt or killed, angering many, and these feelings stayed with the people after the group was removed from power. Since a number of Socrates' students were members of the group,

² Mark David User, "Satyr Play in Plato's Symposium," *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 123, No. 2 (Summer 2002): 207.

people used him as a scapegoat (which also relates back to the appearance of Socrates as a satyr) at his corruption trial and gave him a punishment he did not deserve.

It appeared to many people that Socrates and the things that he taught others caused of the decision of The Thirty to take over Athens. Plato uses the *Symposium* as a forum to teach people the reality of the situation. He does this by having Alcibiades directly state that he blocks his ears and walks away from Socrates whenever he starts talking because the older man always makes him feel ashamed and inferior.³ Plato's point is to show that there is no way Alcibiades or any other man could have been acting in response to the teachings of Socrates when they took over Athens. If they had listened to Socrates, they would have followed his example and tried to lead an examined life instead of one so concerned with political gain. Bruce Rosenstock elaborates on this in an article he wrote by saying "Plato wants us to see Apollodorus and Alcibiades as responding in contrasting ways to Socrates, with each displaying a marked emotional excess in this response."⁴ Apollodorus, the narrator of the *Symposium*, is described as a very melancholic character while Alcibiades is obviously very excitable and erratic. Neither of these men is like Socrates, despite both trying to follow his teachings for parts of their lives. What is tragic about this is, though, is that it should have been clear to many that Socrates had no influence over Alcibiades or any of The Thirty, he was still blamed for their crimes and sentenced to death by people who wanted revenge. As he does in a number of his other works, Plato uses the *Symposium* to point out this flaw to the people of Athens, and anyone else who might happen to read it, changing the tone of the dialogue from one that looks like a comedy to a tragedy.

It is true people may chuckle to themselves a few times while reading the *Symposium*. Alcibiades' drunken actions, the

³ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1999), 216b-e.

⁴ Bruce Rosenstock, "Mourning and Melancholia: Reading the Symposium." *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (October 2004): 243.

description of love by Aristophanes, and many other events stand out as being at least a little humorous. However, despite its pleasant overtones, the *Symposium* is actually a well planned tragedy by Plato. What makes the story tragic is the message it gives about human understanding. Plato repeatedly uses irony and the theme of appearance versus reality to show the failure of human understanding not just at the symposium, but in life in general. The dialogue is actually a parallel to the story of Socrates' trial and execution. Just as the men at the symposium fail to fully understand what love is, the people of Athens fail to understand Socrates and label him a problem of society rather than a valuable contributor, and he is put to death. Plato uses this story to remind us of that fact, among other things, which drastically changes the genre of the dialogue from that of a comedy to a great tragedy because of the failure of man to try and lead the examined life.

Kierkegaard: An Exposition and Defense, with Particular Regard to Hegel and Christianity

Matthew W. Johnston

Exposition

Søren Kierkegaard is a philosopher of irony who is deeply influenced by his faith in Christianity and his antipathy towards the work of G. W. F. Hegel. Kierkegaard's philosophy comes together as a functional whole, for me, in his work *Fear And Trembling*, specifically in his treatment of the Biblical tale of Abraham, the father of faith. Yet to fully understand Abraham it is necessary to examine his other writings. This slightly ironic thesis is a reflection on Kierkegaard as a whole; he is as much a dialectical poet as he is a serious philosopher, and this is no disparaging remark. Our task, then, is to understand the fragments which allow Abraham to exist as the father of faith; only after we have done so can we fully understand his somewhat ironic attack on Christendom and his disdain for Hegel, themes which are intertwined. Before we can begin in earnest we must sketch out some central themes which flow like warm currents in the stream of Kierkegaard's thinking.

The most important principle of Kierkegaard's thought is his emphasis on the subjective individual. Without this principle, Kierkegaard's stages of life, notion of faith, criticisms of Christendom, knight of infinite faith and the teleological suspension of the ethical could never have come to be. This principle is largely a reaction to the Hegelian philosophy which was prevalent during Kierkegaard's time. In his *Journals And Notebooks*, Kierkegaard writes, "If Hegel had written the whole of his *Logic* and then said... that it was merely an experiment in thought in which he had even begged the question in many places, then he would have been the greatest thinker who had ever lived. As it is, he is merely comic."¹ Kierkegaard refers to Hegel as a "professor," which is

¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals And Notebooks*, in *The Kierkegaard Reader* ed. Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 18. All further citations of Kierkegaard refer to

certainly not a term of endearment.² A distinction is made between professors and real thinkers: real thinkers struggle endlessly with paradox, but professors use their system to eliminate the paradox. Being that a larger number of people can now understand the professor, the professor's theory is thought to be truer.³ Here we can see Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective truth coming into play: the paradoxical subjective truth that we cannot make others understand is held in esteem, while the truth of the masses, as it were—objective truth—is sneered at by Kierkegaard.

Subjectivity is further emphasized in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Subjectivity is not important for Kierkegaard only on a dry, philosophical level, as one might profess Lockean materialism over Berkeley's idealism. Instead, subjectivity is the core of existence, and further—religious life. Objective thinking, on the one hand, is not interested in its own thinking; it is "indifferent to the existence of the thinking subject."⁴ On the other hand, the subjective thinker is *essentially* interested in his own thought.⁵ The thought and its awareness of its existence are contemporaneous and completely intermingled. Subjective thought is a dialectical process: the subjective thinker thinks the universal (i.e. with language), yet because its thinking is its existence this thought-existence becomes more and more subjectively isolated, even in its universality.⁶ However, the emphasis on subjectivity should not mislead one into believing that Kierkegaard is suggesting that subjective thinkers are always physically isolated. Indeed, subjective thinking is directly related to communication: between man and man, and between man and God. Since we exist in our thought as subjective thinkers, we cannot assume that if we make a

page numbers from *The Kierkegaard Reader* unless otherwise specified.

² Ibid, 24.

³ Ibid, 21.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 232.

⁵ Ibid, 232.

⁶ Ibid, 232.

statement, and it is repeated back to us by an interlocutor, we are in complete agreement and mutual understanding.⁷ The words we use to communicate are objective universals, but we *always* attach our own subjective meaning to words if we are subjective thinkers; thus, Kierkegaard says, "If [we] are not aware of the doubleness of thought-existence... [we] will have no idea that this kind of agreement could also be an immense misunderstanding."⁸

Perhaps the first response to this criticism of language would be a call to systematize our language into strict, atomic universals with one and only one given meaning. For Kierkegaard, however, this is not only implausible but ethically reprehensible: "Direct communication would amount to an attempt to swindle both God... and ourselves... Direct communication would be a... contradiction to our entire thought."⁹ We would be denying ourselves, ignoring our own thought-existence, if we sought direct communication; and we would be denying God our whole, subjective, individual worship. Whereas Hegel saw contradiction and sought to resolve it via mediation, Kierkegaard *insists* that contradiction of subjective thought be allowed to remain—be encouraged to remain—as it is this which makes us human. This point of subjectivity is absolutely crucial to an understanding of Kierkegaard, and we would not be able to understand Abraham without it.

The first stage, the aesthetic, is described in *Either/Or*, in a section called "Crop Rotation." The other two stages, the ethical and the religious, are the subject matter of *Fear And Trembling*.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, 233.

⁸ Ibid, 233.

⁹ Ibid, 234.

¹⁰ I am only speaking here of selections in the anthology, *not* of these books as wholes; for instance, the ethical is dealt with at great length in the second volume of *Either/Or*.

Three Life Stages

The aesthetic stage should not be understood to refer to intellectual refinement and taste in music or art; it is wholly unlike the aesthetics of philosophy. Rather, the person in the aesthetic stage is concerned only with experiential pleasures. Kierkegaard gives us an extended example of how such a person might live in "Crop Rotation: An Attempt at a Theory of Social Prudence." It is a guide to living well—that is, as well as one can—in the aesthetic stage. To do so, one must avoid boredom; the first thing that Kierkegaard states is that "all men are boring."¹¹ There are two ways in which the aesthete may do so: the first is to change the soil, and the second is to rotate the crops. That is, the first is to deal in aesthetics in the infinite, and the second is to put limitations on oneself: "The more you limit yourself, the more resourceful you become."¹² For example, to change the soil would be to move from one location to another, to take a new job, to learn a new instrument, to see opera instead of theatre, and so on. This is the technique of the rich aesthete who inevitably becomes bored with freedom. If, however, one limits oneself instead, one becomes creative and finds enjoyment in the most bizarre things.

How can we find a cure for boredom in the mundane? Kierkegaard says, "The whole secret lies in arbitrariness."¹³ The key is to change the form of the cure for boredom, rather than the content. In fact, Kierkegaard suggests ridiculous activities such as reading a random section from a book or walking out in the middle of a play.¹⁴

Of course, this all must be taken with a large grain of salt. Kierkegaard is not actually instructing the reader to do these things; rather, this is an exposition of the aesthetic stage. Take a moment to examine this under the light of subjectivity: changing the soil, so to speak, is changing the objective conditions for enjoyment. One sees a play, then tires of the

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

theatre and sees a symphony instead. The person, the observer, does not change—only the situation. Crop rotation, however, is the *subjective* way of fighting boredom. Regardless of one's external conditions, one *finds* enjoyment in whatever one's surroundings may be. While Kierkegaard is not advocating this as a life strategy for any normal person, it is interesting to note that he advises in favor of subjectivity—even if he does so ironically.

After the aesthetic stage comes the ethical stage, and after the ethical comes the religious stage. These stages can be understood through Kierkegaard's description of the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of infinite faith, respectively. These characters are exemplars of their respective spheres of being. Kierkegaard offers a story about a young man who falls in love with a princess whom he will never be able to marry, and three different ways in which the man may handle the situation. Suggestive of the aesthetic stage, the first possibility is to simply find a girl who is an equal match in beauty and respectability and distract oneself with this other woman.¹⁵

This suggestion is quickly ignored, however, because this character is in the ethical stage. Instead of finding another girl, he allows himself to fall madly in love with the princess. In doing so he makes the move of infinite resignation, best explained by Kierkegaard by saying that "This impossible [love], however, the knight makes possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by waiving his claim to it."¹⁶ Though the knight of infinite resignation is pained by the physical impossibility of his love, his infinite acceptance of its impossibility gives him some sort of Stoic redemption. He *chooses* this pain, commingles it with his love and embraces the pain as his own desire. While this infinite love is fully embraced, he stops caring about the princess in the finite—her daily activities, whether she loves him as well, etc.¹⁷ He is no

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear And Trembling*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology* ed. Robert Bretall (New York: Modern Library, 1938) 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

longer concerned with the particulars of his love's physical existence; rather he has universalized his love into the infinite.

Before moving on from the ethical stage to the religious stage, we must note well that Kierkegaard explicitly states that the movement of infinite resignation must precede the move into the religious.¹⁸ The importance of this fact will become clear after we learn about the knight of faith.

Next, Kierkegaard describes how the knight of faith handles the situation. The very same move of infinite resignation is made, but then the knight says, "I believe nevertheless that I shall get her, in virtue, that is, of the absurd, in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible."¹⁹ The knight of faith's power lies in his ability to simultaneously believe both that he will not have the princess, and that he will, in virtue of the absurd. The movement of infinite resignation, the necessary precursor to faith, is not subsumed by God's omnipotence; for the knight of faith, these two moments absolutely *must* be held together, in infinite tension and complete absurdity. Recall our previous discussion of paradox. Hopefully it is clear why for Kierkegaard paradox and contradiction must *not* be reconciled by the System. The paradox of faith is Kierkegaard's conception of religion, of spirituality; and to attempt to go beyond faith by reconciling the contradiction is a step backward into the ethical—or worse, a forward-stepping-backward around the circle which brings one to the aesthetic again! Hence we see Kierkegaard's antagonism towards Hegel and his followers, and his critique of abstract thinking.

We are now armed in such a way that we can tackle the problem of Abraham. The problem of Abraham is whether there is such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical. In the section of *Fear And Trembling* called "Attunement," Kierkegaard gives four possible interpretations of the story. The important background details common to all are that Abraham, in his old age, is given a son, Isaac, by God; but God later speaks directly to Abraham, telling him to give Isaac back

¹⁸ Ibid, 125.

¹⁹ Ibid, 125-126.

as a sacrifice. Abraham takes Isaac to the mountain, and at the last instant God stops Abraham's hand. Our hope is that we can redeem Abraham as the father of faith, and not have to leave him as a murderer. For if there were no teleological suspension of the ethical, in that brief instant before the knife would have reached Isaac, Abraham becomes a murderer. In fact, he fully intended, via the movement of infinite resignation, to kill his son. It is the second movement, that of faith, which we will seek.

Kierkegaard is certain that there is a teleological suspension of the ethical, for without it, there can be no faith—and Abraham would be tried as a murderer. A teleological suspension of the ethical would be a case in which the function of the ethical was suspended by its purpose. That is, if the ethical is man's understanding qua particular of God's will qua universal, then teleological suspension of the ethical occurs when God speaks directly to man qua particular, and man—Abraham—understands God's will *qua particular*. The trouble in speaking of this matter is due to the paradoxical nature of faith: Abraham must infinitely resign to losing Isaac, yet fully believe that God will not let him lose Isaac. Kierkegaard says that "Abraham cannot be mediated."²⁰ He cannot speak the universal, i.e., language, to explain his situation, or to relate it to the ethical, i.e. the universal. He receives explicit orders from God. This is not direct in the sense of direct communication as discussed earlier, because Abraham does not directly communicate *back* to God; rather, he *acts*, as particular. To communicate directly would be, as we have said, to swindle via the universal. Instead, Abraham must act to prove his faith to God.²¹

So it seems that there is a teleological suspension of the ethical in faith, and Abraham is saved. He resigns infinitely to God's will, i.e., the ethical, upon the order from God to sacrifice his son—this is the precursor to faith. He does not communicate directly, but rather acts as particular individual, thus vaulting himself above the universal. And in doing so, he

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear And Trembling*, in *The Kierkegaard Reader*, 88.

²¹ *Ibid*, 88.

finally suspends the ethical, and participates in God's will as particular. He has an I-Thou relationship with God, unmediated, and deeply bound in absurdity: for he truly believes, at the core of his being, that he must both lose and keep Isaac via the power of the absurd—the power of God. As Kierkegaard says, "How did Abraham exist? He had faith... The paradox is that he puts himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute."²² While in the terms of the Hegelian systematizers Abraham is irredeemable, in Kierkegaard's worldview of subjectivity and particularity he remains the father of faith.

Throughout this exposition there have been strands of Kierkegaard's disapproval of abstract thinking: the anti-Hegelian formulations that stand in stark contrast to the System. This finds its culmination in its particularly Christian form in Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom. We have experienced Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity: the paradox of faith, the power of the absurd, and the emphasis on subjectivity. His conception is a reaction against the universal, mediated Christendom for which Hegel's system provides a support. Thus we will tie our understanding of the attack on uninterested abstract thinking in with our understanding of Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom.

Christendom

Christendom is, for Kierkegaard, the manifestation in actuality of the abstract, objective philosophy of Hegel reconciled with Christianity. A distinction here is made between Christianity, a personal faith, and Christendom, the state church of Denmark. Characteristic of Kierkegaard, the *Attack* does not occur in one organized, systematic approach; rather, it is composed of many related but differentiated polemics against Christendom. Kierkegaard is intensely interested in the difference between the so-called Christians of his day and what he calls the Christian of the New Testament.²³ While books could be written on the *Attack* as a whole, we will

²² Ibid, 89.

²³ Kierkegaard, ed. Bretall, op. cit., 437.

focus in on two sections which are particularly strong points of the attack.

The first section to be discussed is "The Religious Situation." This section is useful as an example because of how its content is intricately tied back with the rest of Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard provides a contrast between the Jesus Christ of the New Testament and the Christian of today. Christ "stands in a world which in turn absolutely expresses opposition to Him and to His teaching."²⁴ To be a follower of Christ in the New Testament sense was to risk life and limb for one's faith—for instance, to be exiled by the Jewish community or persecuted by the Roman government. The Christian of the New Testament is following Christ in opposition to the world, but the "modern" Christian follows Christ in order to reconcile with the world. For the modern Christian, to be Christian is to obediently blend in with the status quo: "To call oneself a Christian is the means whereby one secures oneself against all sorts of inconveniences and discomforts..."²⁵ Abstract, objectified Christianity is merely a label which brings social benefit rather than a confession of faith. Kierkegaard seeks to profess Christ in opposition to Christendom in an attempt to move closer to his ideal of the New Testament Christian.

The second piece of the *Attack* which we will find fruitful is entitled "When All Are Christians, Christianity *Eo Ipso* Does Not Exist." Suppose, Kierkegaard asks us, that we are all considered thieves, under suspicion from the police. How will this help the police's investigation? It will not, for if *everyone* is a suspicious character, this label means nothing.²⁶ To investigate only the suspicious characters would lead the investigators only to investigate the entire populace. We can apply this line of reasoning, then, to Christianity: if everyone is considered a Christian, being a Christian is basically meaningless. The individual struggle of the Christian against the establishment, which was apparent in the New Testament, is lost when the entire nation calmly asserts itself as Christian

²⁴ Ibid, 436-437.

²⁵ Ibid, 437.

²⁶ Ibid, 446.

by default. To say that one is a Christian is not to make any differentiation between one and another, and so Christianity's meaning is destroyed by Christendom.

This is the truth of the masses which becomes truer as more people understand it; this is Hegel's all-encompassing System. The spiritual torrent of individual, paradoxical Christianity is mediated and subsumed into the establishment Christendom. Hegel's dialectic and Christendom are almost inseparable concepts in Kierkegaard's thought. Hegel seeks to use objective thinking to grasp the dialectic and mediate the paradox of contradiction, and sees this as the miracle of faith. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes how the mediator, "a conscious Being," ministers between the unessential individual man and the divine.²⁷ While Hegel is not explicit, this certainly sounds like the Jesus Christ of Christendom. He is the link between man and God, who is both man and God at the same time (although Hegel describes the mediator as a third party).²⁸ For Hegel, Christ is the mediator of the following paradox: how can the physical, unessential man be reconciled with the transcendent, unchangeable God? Yet as we have seen, for Kierkegaard, *the paradox is the reconciliation* between man and God. Faith occurs only in explicit contradiction between infinite resignation and subjective faith.

As a sort of footnote to this, we can conclude our exposition of Kierkegaard's thought with a discussion of his unfinished work *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est: A Narrative*. It is a story about its titular character, a young man in love with thinking who keeps to himself.²⁹ Johannes finds himself at a university, where he becomes acquainted with modern philosophy, whose three principles he finds to be: "(1) Philosophy begins with doubt; (2) in order to philosophize one must have doubted; and (3)

²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 136.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 136.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, in *The Kierkegaard Reader*, 347.

modern philosophy begins with doubt."³⁰ He wrestles with these theses, and comes to various paradoxical conclusions. For instance, how does one profess these statements to another? For as soon as one teaches another these theses, the other must *doubt* the theses. If that is true, there could be no meaningful philosophical discourse because of the endless cycle of doubting.

Perhaps, however, this is precisely Kierkegaard's point. In his *Journals And Notebooks*, he states, "My doubt is terrifying—nothing can stop me—it has the hunger of a curse. I consume every [argument], every comfort and assurance."³¹ Again and again, we return to subjectivity in thought. Kierkegaard cannot be satisfied with the dogma of the priest or the System of the professor. And is doubt not the component of primary importance to faith? An onlooker, observing Abraham as he raises the knife and prepares to kill his only son, might object: "My God! What are you doing? You'll kill him—you'll lose your only son!" And Abraham, smiling, lifts his gaze to the heavens; and with perfect faith he whispers—"I *doubt it*."

Assessment

I must fully admit that I have found Kierkegaard quite irritating; thus, it is ironic that others have presented criticisms which force me to come to Kierkegaard's defense. First I wish to address a possible criticism of Kierkegaard brought on by a Hegelian, and second I wish to defend the *Attack On Christendom* from a criticism raised by a Christian.

Kierkegaard presents Abraham as manifest contradiction as particular in opposition to the universal, i.e. the law of non-contradiction. The law of non-contradiction states that it is not the case that both A and not-A; symbolically, $\sim(A \ \& \ \sim A)$. Yet if Hegel can show that the universal is also contradictory, then there is an identity between the universal and particular. Without the uniqueness of the

³⁰ Ibid, 355.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals And Notebooks*, op. cit., 18.

particular, the particular becomes universal and vice versa, and our defense of Abraham is lost.³²

Hegel can show a contradiction in the universal by examining Kantian ethics. The Kantian ethical system of universal duties under which particular actors are subsumed seems to be what Kierkegaard has in mind when he speaks of the ethical stage. Kant's ethic is an *ought* which cannot compel us to *be* ethical, or to act ethically. The ought is not an is. It is an ought based in reason, but ethics can only be realized in action. It is the potentiality, whereas the act is the actuality. Thus it is contradictory because it seeks to compel actuality via potentiality, action via non-action. If this is the case, the essence of both the particular and the universal is contradiction, and the difference between them is a so-called difference that is none.

However, we can never *express* a manifest contradiction in universals, based on the nature of logic and the concept of the universal. Kierkegaard can allude to or demonstrate the paradoxical nature of the contradictory particular, but it cannot be expressed in language properly; Abraham, as previously discussed, *acts* individually instead of communicating directly to God in universals. Thus the contradictory nature of the particular is secure. It is not so, however, with the universal, for the universal is attempting to express a contradiction. This cannot occur. Any sentence reducible to $(A \ \& \ \sim A)$ is a pseudo-sentence which, breaking the foundations of our language, is literally meaningless. It has no objective meaning, and, since it *is* the objective universal, it is devoid of content. The particular contradiction is saved because it contains subjective content which cannot be expressed; its paradox is secure in its particularity. It does not matter that the particular contains a contradiction because the particular cannot be expressed whether it contains contradiction or not. But as soon as Hegel attempts to express a contradictory universal, the meaning of the expression disappears. Once one accepts contradiction, all objective meaning is lost: for to affirm contradiction is to simultaneously affirm non-

³² This criticism was originally raised by Dr. Howard Ponzer.

contradiction. To affirm or deny anything, once accepting contradiction, is to affirm or deny its opposite. Contradiction affirms non-contradiction. Non-contradiction, being stable, does not re-affirm contradiction. That is, if we affirm non-contradiction, and someone suggests contradiction, we can rule it out by using the law of non-contradiction: $\sim(\text{LNC} \ \& \ \sim\text{LNC})$. But if we first accept contradiction, and someone else suggests non-contradiction, our logical orientation has no way to defend our claim. Thus the universal does *not* contain a contradiction, and so it is differentiated from the particular.

Next I must defend the *Attack On Christendom*. It may be suggested the *Attack* is overly pessimistic: it takes the example of the worst possible Christians, and inflates this example to be the whole population of Denmark. The *Attack*, then, would be an attack on a straw man of Christendom. Kierkegaard fails to be charitable to Christianity by making a vast generalization about modern Christians.³³

I think that, on the surface, this is a fair evaluation of the *Attack*. However, it is an evaluation, and not a criticism, because it is incomplete. While Kierkegaard may have been uncharitable towards Christendom, I suggest that he has done so on purpose. The *Attack* paints a picture of Christendom which is fully systematized, but I think the evaluation is correct in contending that individual practicing Christians are not all so objectified an abstract. Further, I believe that this was precisely Kierkegaard's thought in writing the *Attack*. It is an indirect means to bring people closer to the Christianity of the New Testament by *opposing* Kierkegaard's attack and defending their faith.

For instance, every Sunday, in every church in Denmark, the priests have gathered their congregations; and they will use all manner of devices to encourage faith. Some believers may be moved by the effects of communal chanting and prayer; some believers engage their faith via the singing of hymns; some believers find a connection in the sermon delivered by the priest. Yet for all their efforts, the priests are

³³ I believe that this criticism was raised by David Hosey in discussion.

not wholly successful (at least not to a degree which would satisfy Kierkegaard). Some of the people still do not have much faith; they may continue to act unethically, or only consider their faith for those few brief hours of worship on Sunday.

Kierkegaard's attack succeeds where the priests fail by being an indirect defense of Christianity. In using harsh, polemical arguments against Christendom, and sometimes against a pessimistic straw man of Christendom, Kierkegaard encourages the individual Christian to think about and defend his or her faith. Precisely the fact that one would become offended by the *Attack* and attempt to raise the criticism with which we are dealing is proof of Kierkegaard's success. Had Kierkegaard failed, no one would react to the *Attack*; instead, people actively engage their faith when they encounter the attack. It is a brilliant psychological move on Kierkegaard's part.

The criticisms which I have discussed I have chosen very specifically: one dealing directly with Hegel, and one dealing directly with Christianity. I have done so because of how formative these forces were on Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard can best be understood as a reaction of the particular man against complacent, Hegelian Christendom. Through the unresolveable paradox of faith Abraham, the father of faith, is redeemed as the knight of faith. While Kierkegaard would most assuredly not have considered himself a knight of faith, his focus on subjectivity saves the individual Christian of the New Testament from the *eo ipso* meaninglessness of Christendom. As Kierkegaard says in *Journals And Notebooks*, "*Philosophy and Christianity can never be united... [his emphasis]*"³⁴ Christianity and philosophy, or reason, are kept apart in the contradictory nature of absurd faith. Where Hegel saw contradiction as a problem to be resolved through the mediation of establishment Christendom, Kierkegaard is a shipwrecked survivor in an ocean of subjectivity, clinging to a piece of debris marked faith. The idea that one might survive, floating adrift in the ocean, by holding onto a plank of wood is somewhat

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals And Notebooks*, op. cit., 16.

absurd—and this is precisely Kierkegaard's message: "With men this is impossible; *but with God all things are possible.*"³⁵

³⁵ Matthew 19: 26.

**Finding Freedom Through Despair:
An Ironic Sense of Freedom from Self-Conscious Despair
in Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky**
Misty Christensen

Introduction

When one hears the word ‘despair,’ the response is typically negative. The word elicits a sense of hopelessness, defeat, and intense sadness. In this article, I hope to show the opposite. What is despair? Kierkegaard calls despair a “sickness of the spirit.” What does self-consciousness have to do with despair? Dostoevsky refers to self-consciousness as “a disease.” I intend to show that both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky portray self-conscious despair as the key to one's freedom, and they do so ironically. I plan to accomplish this goal in three chapters. In the first chapter, I will discuss despair as it is given to us by Søren Kierkegaard in his essay, *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard gives us three ways in which an individual can be in despair, each of which will be explained in detail. I will then give his account of self-consciousness, and show how each of Kierkegaard's three categories of despair relates to self-consciousness. It will also be made clear that Kierkegaard asserts the idea that to be a self-conscious individual is to be in despair. Kierkegaard also describes different forms that despair can take, and I will focus on the form most relevant to my argument, namely, despair as a result of possibility and necessity. In the second chapter, I will shift my focus over to self-consciousness as it is discussed by Fyodor Dostoevsky through the “Underground Man” in his novella *Notes From Underground*. I will make the important distinction between self-consciousness and simple consciousness. Here, Dostoevsky's concepts of the “spontaneous man of action” and the “acutely [self-] conscious man” will be introduced, and it will be shown in what ways each of these two types of men are defined by their differing levels of self-consciousness. I will also show that Dostoevsky supports Kierkegaard in saying that self-consciousness is the same thing as despair, and indeed being a self-conscious

individual is the same thing as being a despairing individual. In the third and final chapter, I intend to show that while despair and self-consciousness are referred to as “a sickness” and “a disease,” both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky find self-conscious despair to be beneficial, something that is beautiful about humanity. Here, Dostoevsky's concept of the “Crystal Palace” will be introduced as a place governed by necessity. I will explain how both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky use irony in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Notes From Underground*, respectively, as a way of showing that it is through self-conscious despair that an individual finds true freedom. That is to say, freedom is found first through the realization of life's vast possibilities, and then through revolting against the Crystal Palace.

Chapter One: Kierkegaard on Despair

Because it is Kierkegaard, rather than Dostoevsky, who focuses most intensely on the concept of despair, it would be useful to first establish his definition of despair. The reason for doing so is the following: a person, who first recognizes that he or she is in despair, discovers upon further investigation that he or she is in this state simply because he or she is a self-conscious being. Establishing how Kierkegaard defines the three main types of despair, and then showing how each type relates to self-consciousness, lays the foundation for Dostoevsky's thorough discussion of self-consciousness. We also need to consider simple consciousness, to see how it is different from self-consciousness. Kierkegaard starts discussing self-consciousness in *The Sickness Unto Death* when he says that the self is a relation “which relates itself to its own self.”¹ That is to say, a human being is a synthesis, or a “relation between two factors.”² He mentions that we are a synthesis of the “infinite and the finite,” of the “temporal and

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974: 146.

² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 146.

the eternal,” of “freedom and necessity.”³ From this, he means to say that those “two factors” are an individual's body and that individual's soul. Just being a synthesis of body and soul alone is not enough to be considered a 'self,' but rather one becomes a self once this relation (that is, the relation between body and soul) relates itself (the body/soul combination) to itself (the body/soul combination). Because despair is a sickness of the spirit, it does not manifest itself in the body as would a physical sickness, but instead it affects the soul.

Kierkegaard starts out section B of his text *The Sickness Unto Death* by making the claim that “there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not... [carry] around a sickness of the spirit...”⁴ This is a bold claim, and one might find it rather depressing or hard to believe. One might wonder if it is, in fact, true that every individual has experienced despair at some point in his or her life. This claim would seem to be true, by virtue of Kierkegaard's first definition of despair as being “an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety...,”⁵ as these are all characteristics one is accustomed to experiencing in his or her life. It would be unreasonable to say that an individual, when looking back at his or her life, could not find at least one instance in which an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, or an anxiety took place.

Although despair usually refers to some kind of unhappiness, Kierkegaard views despair in a different light. Instead, he refers to despair as a “sickness in the spirit.”⁶ In order to better understand what Kierkegaard means by this, we need to understand what he means by the term ‘spirit.’ He says that “man is spirit,” and “spirit is the self.”⁷ By calling despair a “sickness of the spirit,” it seems as though Kierkegaard views the concept of despair in a negative light. In fact, he says that he has mixed feelings about the concept of despair when he

³ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 146.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 22.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 22.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 146.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 146.

asks if “despair [is] an advantage or a drawback,” and answers that when it is “regarded in a purely dialectical way it is both.”⁸ However, it seems to be a contradictory statement to call despair both an advantage and a drawback. In the customary view of despair as a type of immense sadness, we can easily see how despair is a drawback. How, then, can Kierkegaard go on to say that despair is also an advantage? Calling it such is an ironic statement, which anticipates the idea that despair is actually the key to one's freedom. This is what he refers to here in saying that despair is an advantage. The third and final chapter of this article will address the topic of irony found in both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky's works, and will cover in greater detail the idea of despair being an advantage rather than a drawback.

According to Kierkegaard, it is the same thing to be a self-conscious being as it is to be a despairing being. To be self-conscious is to be in despair; in fact, one must recognize that he or she is in despair, and then come to realize that the reason he or she is in despair is because he or she is a self-conscious individual. Kierkegaard's concept of despair relies heavily on his concept of self. In order to understand the relationship between despair and self-consciousness, we must consider Kierkegaard's “dialectical” view of the self. What he means by the self regarded in a dialectical way refers to the self as a synthesis of various opposing “poles” of one's existence. One becomes a “self” when one relates itself to its own self.

When we typically consider the self, it is a subjective entity; that is, the self looks at things, other people, and the world around it. However, once the self becomes self-conscious and looks at its own self, it assumes a different position. In looking at its own self, the self also becomes the objective entity in the relation, because it is the object at which the subjective self is looking. This is where we see that self-consciousness is different from simple consciousness: self-consciousness is when we take consciousness, simple awareness of the world and objects around us, and turn it inward so that we are the objective entity of our consideration.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 147.

Self-consciousness is the relation of these two selves with each other. For Kierkegaard, this relation (this self-consciousness) is the “self.” To try to put it more simply, the self is a relation that comes to be when the subjective self relates itself to the objective self. In this view, the self is not transcendental, but rather it is immanent. That is to say, the self is not something outside of or beyond the realm of human existence, but rather the self is something that is inherent, something already existing in every human being. The “self” is the action of the self relating itself to its own self. In this instance, the two poles of the self as a dialectical entity are the subjective and objective selves. An example of the interaction between these opposing poles of existence will be more thoroughly explained later in this chapter.

It is difficult for Kierkegaard to give a precise definition of despair, as he gives us three ways of being in despair, or three categories into which despair can be grouped. The first category of despair is “the customary view,” that Kierkegaard says “does not go beyond appearances.”⁹ In this category of despair, we must rely on the individual’s ability to know whether or not he or she is in despair. Accordingly, any person who claims to be in despair must be regarded as being in a state of despair. That is to say, if someone is aware that he or she is experiencing an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, or an anxiety, then according to this category we are able to say that this person is in a state of despair. For example, someone is feeling distraught about an upcoming exam. He or she may be worried about not performing as well as he or she could because of not having studied. This is a person who is in despair. Also, someone who finds him or herself distraught as a result of a recent divorce, perhaps after an unfair settlement or losing custody of children, is in despair. Because both of these people realize they are experiencing distressed and distraught feelings that are caused by some particular factor (e.g., the upcoming exam or recent divorce), they are definitely aware of their being in despair. Thus, these people and those of a similar nature can be placed in the first category in which a person can

⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 22.

be in despair, namely those people who are in despair and who are aware of their being in despair.

This first category of despair is a reflection of self-consciousness in that a person in this category of despair recognizes the conflict between his or her subjective and objective selves. People typically see themselves as subjective beings. They interact with the world and perceive the things and people around them (who are not them) as objects. People in this category of despair realize that they are developed self-conscious beings, and in being such, they are also able to look at themselves as an object. Once one recognizes him or herself as an object, they are aware that there is a conflict between seeing themselves both as subject and object. They recognize that they are not only the one doing the observing, but also the one being observed. If they were not developed self-conscious beings, they simply would not know that they were in despair, as they would not be aware of the constant internal struggle between the self as both subject and object at the same time.

The second category of despair is one in which someone is in despair but who is not aware that he or she is in despair. Kierkegaard clearly states that “not being conscious of being in despair, is precisely a form of despair.”¹⁰ This statement makes a lot of sense, especially after considering Kierkegaard’s parallel example about the physician of health, given in *The Sickness Unto Death*.¹¹ Kierkegaard says that people in despair, “a sickness of the spirit,” are similar to people who have a health related sickness of the body. Often times when someone is physically sick, that person is not aware of the sickness until after they are given a diagnosis by the physician. This is a reasonable simile, because the general rule is that a person is considered to be healthy if he or she feels healthy and recognizes no symptoms of sickness. We do not go around assuming every person is in poor health until they can prove that they are actually healthy. On the contrary, we assume that a person is healthy, until we are given reason to believe otherwise.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 23.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 23-24.

Using the analogy of despair being a sickness, Kierkegaard contrasts this with a person who has a fever.¹² He says the person who is in despair has been in despair his or her entire life, but has only recently experienced something that triggered this once-dormant despair. This is not the case for a fever, as it would be foolish to think that someone has had a fever his or her whole life but is only now experiencing it. This is simply not how fevers work; where fevers come and go over the course of one's life, every person has entered into life in a state of despair, which remains through the rest of his or her life. It is useful to compare Kierkegaard's concept of this sickness of the soul to a sickness in the realm of the physician of health, in order to better see how they differ.

One might also ask who is this "physician of the soul" and how some beings can be more qualified than others to make the assessment of an individual's despair. I would like to suggest that, at this point, Kierkegaard must consider himself to be the physician of the soul. I suggest this because Kierkegaard's definition of the physician of the soul is someone who "knows what despair is; he recognizes it and therefore is satisfied neither with a person's declaration that he is not in despair nor with his declaration that he is."¹³ He speaks about this as if the general population is barely able to determine whether it is in despair or not, let alone qualified to pass the judgment that other people are actually in a state of despair even when they claim not to be. Kierkegaard, however, must believe that he is qualified to assess whether or not others are in despair, not only because he has composed this text, but also because he gives clear definitions of what despair is and is able to identify despair in its various forms.

This category of despair, in direct contrast to the first category, does not reflect self-consciousness on behalf of the individual experiencing despair. It must also be mentioned that when I refer to those people who are experiencing a state of despair that does not reflect self-consciousness, that is not to say that these people are lacking some self-consciousness

¹² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 23-24.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 23-24.

entirely. Rather, those who are experiencing this category of despair have suppressed their self-consciousness, or have chosen not to recognize that they are self-conscious beings. In this category of despair, the individual in question is not aware that he or she is a self-conscious being. This looks forward to Dostoevsky's distinction between the spontaneous men of action and the men of acute self-consciousness, which will be discussed in Chapter Two. We will see, according to Dostoevsky's description of these two types of men, that the spontaneous men of action fall under this category of despair. Kierkegaard tells us that each individual is constantly experiencing a state of despair, whether or not this individual is aware of his or her experiencing despair. This is because, according to Kierkegaard, despair is experienced when one is aware of being in despair as well as when one is not aware of being in despair. Clearly, there can be no instance when someone does not fall into one of these two descriptions, they are mutually exclusive and must be one or the other. An individual experiencing this second category of despair must possess self-consciousness, as all humans must possess some degree of self-consciousness. This is what differentiates humans from other animals. However, people in this category of despair are not aware of themselves as self-conscious individuals, either because they have suppressed this notion or have chosen not to realize their self-consciousness.

The third and final category of despair is one which, Kierkegaard claims, includes people not (in the customary definition) in despair; that is to say, those people who are not experiencing an unrest, inner strife, disharmony, or anxiety. It is perhaps hardest to convince people that this is a type of despair, that not being in despair is despair, because it sounds contradictory. However, Kierkegaard supplies good arguments supporting that this, in fact, is a way of being in despair. Here, Kierkegaard tells us that being in despair is not like being physically sick. This does indeed contradict what he previously told us for the second category of despair; however, Kierkegaard tries to clarify his point. The difference here is that a physical sickness is a sickness of the body, whereas despair is a sickness of the spirit, or the soul. With regard to physical

sickness, he says that not being sick cannot be the same as being sick, a statement that makes perfect logical sense. However, Kierkegaard says that not being in despair can be the same thing as being in despair, because it is a sickness of the spirit and is not a physical matter.¹⁴ This “spirit” which Kierkegaard talks about that is always in despair, can more simply be seen as being self-consciousness itself. One's spirit is akin to one's awareness of its being in a constant state of despair; therefore, one's spirit is one's self-consciousness.

Because the third category of despair likely contains the most contradictory claim made by Kierkegaard, that the state of not being in despair is actually a state of despair itself, I will summarize Kierkegaard's arguments. Human beings are defined by having spirit, and this is what distinguishes man from animal; despair occurs when a person is unaware that he or she is defined by spirit. People are also driven by immediacy, which is the previously stated need to find balance between various opposing poles of one's existence. To clarify what I mean by the term 'immediacy,' it must be recognized that immediacy has three accepted definitions: 1) a “lack of an intervening or mediating agency,” 2) “immediate intuitive awareness,” and 3) “the quickness of action or occurrence.”¹⁵ The definition Kierkegaard refers to when he speaks of immediacy is the first definition, a “lack of an intervening or mediating agency.” Because immediacy is one's need to find a balance between the opposing poles of one's existence, this implies that there currently is not a balance, and also that there is not a mediator. Using this instance, we see that there is immediacy and there is no mediator. Kierkegaard says that while immediacy might seem to be something secure and tranquil (because it is striving to create a balance between the different poles of the self), nevertheless all immediacy is anxiety. This sense of anxiety comes from one's inability to mediate his or her subjective and objective selves. Kierkegaard also states that all anxiety is despair (while all despair is not

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 24-25.

¹⁵ immediacy. Answers.com. WordNet 1.7.1, Princeton University, 2001. <http://www.answers.com/topic/immediacy>.

necessarily anxiety). It is this train of thought which leads Kierkegaard to the conclusion that people who do not seem to be in despair end up actually being in despair after all. All immediacy (the drive behind things that seem not to be in despair) is anxiety, and all anxiety is despair, so it must follow that all immediacy is also despair. We see that this is indeed the case, because despair occurs when one is not able to find a balance between these opposing poles of the self, that is, when they are not able to mediate this sense of immediacy.

A self-conscious being is always the relation of the self to its own self. In this self relating to itself, the two poles (the subjective and the objective self) remain irreconcilable. This is true even for those who are not aware these two opposing poles of the self, and we see that a person who does not seem to be in despair is actually experiencing despair. If someone is not aware of this relation between the subjective and objective selves, then there is no mediation between these two selves. This third category of despair relates to self-consciousness, because a person experiencing this category of despair is not able to reconcile the relation between the subjective and objective selves. This is not possible simply because he or she is not aware that the relation exists. Kierkegaard tells us that, “a sense of security and tranquility can signify being in despair; precisely this sense of security and tranquility can be the despair,” but he also says that this same sense of security and tranquility “can signify having conquered despair and having won peace.”¹⁶ Before examining this contradictory claim that Kierkegaard makes, we must first look at the importance of the spirit as it relates to despair, as we have already established that Kierkegaard regards it as a sickness of the spirit.

Immediacy, as previously stated, is one's need to find balance between the various opposing poles of one's existence. It is because of one's immediacy that he or she does not recognize this as despair. Kierkegaard says that all immediacy is anxiety, and as such is despairing in and of itself, because in order for someone to rid themselves from any despair, they must constantly be doing so each and every moment of their

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 24.

lives. This is something that simply is not feasible during one's lifetime, and even if it were, it would involve a constant movement from being in despair to being saved from despair, a movement which is in itself despairing. A point that can be made here is Kierkegaard's implication that one is finally saved from despair after one's physical life has ended. While we have shown that during one's lifetime it is not possible to not be in despair, Kierkegaard in the very title of his work *The Sickness Unto Death* implies that only through death can one fully and permanently rid oneself of the sickness, that is despair.

In addition to the three ways in which one can be in despair, the three categories of despair, Kierkegaard also gives us different forms that despair can take. He identifies several forms of despair which reflect the state of the “synthesis” Kierkegaard previously described. I will focus on one of these forms of despair in this synthesis, namely, that which results from an unbalance of the possibility and necessity in one's existence. The relation between possibility and necessity is the most relevant for this article, as it pertains to Dostoevsky's work.

I previously mentioned that the self is regarded in a dialectical way, referring to the self as a synthesis of opposing “poles” of existence. An example of the interaction between these poles of the self is found when considering necessity and possibility. Kierkegaard tells us that the self is in a state of despair when there is not an equal balance between these two opposing poles. That is, despair occurs when necessity and possibility are unbalanced:

The forms of despair may be arrived at... by reflecting upon the constituents of which the self as a synthesis is composed. ...This synthesis is a relation, and a relation that... relates itself to itself, which is freedom. The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 29.

Both possibility and necessity can be seen as forms of despair when there is an unbalance between the two, and one becomes dominant over the other within the self. Possibility and necessity belong to the self and, when viewed as forms of despair, are important because the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom. The self has great potential, and “in order to become [itself] it reflects itself in the medium of imagination, and with that the infinite possibility comes into view.” With the imagination, the self can see the vast possibility of what it can become.

Despair occurs within the self when “possibility outruns necessity, the self runs away from itself [in possibility], it has no necessity whereto it is bound to return.”¹⁸ In this case, the self becomes lost in possibility and it does not know of its limitations. For example, someone's imagination can run wild with the idea of all of the world's possibilities and forget that he or she is not able to achieve all possibilities because he or she is only human. It is being human and having human limitations that tie each person down to necessity. If someone loses sight of his or her being bound by human limitations, the results can be disastrous. To better illustrate this, consider the example of a person who wishes to fly like a bird. The human body is not built in such a way that it is able to fly without assistance. Now say that there is a person who has lost sight of his or her limitations, or necessity. This person believes anything is possible, even that he or she is able to fly with the birds. However, this person would find out the hard way after taking a running start off the top of a building, that not everything is possible, and we are still bound by necessity. What is missing in this case is the power to give in to one's necessity and to accept one's human limitations in life.

Despair also occurs within the self when there is a lack of possibility in one's life. This lack of possibility is when the self becomes lost in a sense of necessity, which means either that “everything has become necessary to a man, or that everything has become trivial.”¹⁹ Such a situation would occur

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 169.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 173.

when a person loses sight of the vast world of possibilities, and only focuses narrowly on the ways in which he or she is limited by humanity. In Chapter Two, we will see that Dostoevsky has a name for such a place ruled by necessity, leaving everyone without possibility. He calls this place, the Crystal Palace. While it is important to keep in mind the limitations of human beings, one must not lose sight of the possibility of what it is capable of becoming. If someone does not have a sense of hope or possibility, then there cannot be any positive growth or change in the self, and it is bound down by being occupied by ordinary and trivial matters. A lack of possibility may also result in fatalists or determinists who believe that everything is already planned out in some grand world scheme, and that humans are not able to change or affect the events in that scheme. Kierkegaard says that “the determinist or the fatalist is in despair, and in despair he has lost his self, because for him everything is necessity.”²⁰ For Dostoevsky, the Crystal Palace is home to the determinists and fatalists in this world. Because each person who lives in the Crystal Palace has lost any sense of possibility and consequently lost his or her self, the inhabitants of the Crystal Palace are in despair according to Kierkegaard's definition. In striving for a balance of possibility and necessity, one must not become too held down by the necessity in life so that he or she loses sight of the possibility of the self.

Kierkegaard also identifies another form of despair, one as it relates to consciousness. It must be noted that when Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky both talk about consciousness, what they are actually referring to is self-consciousness, because what they are discussing is the self's consciousness of itself. For the rest of this article, whenever either Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky are quoted saying “consciousness,” it needs to be remembered that they mean “self-consciousness,” so I will add [self-] before “consciousness” to avoid confusion. Kierkegaard says that “with every increase in the degree of [self-] consciousness, and in proportion to that increase, the intensity of despair increases: the more [self-] consciousness,

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 173.

the more intense the despair.”²¹ He first describes a form of despair where one is unconscious of having a self, one who is in despair but who is not aware of his or her being in despair. Kierkegaard makes note that “the fact that the man in despair is unaware that his condition is despair, has nothing to do with the case [that] he is in despair all the same.”²² He says that the man in despair who is unconscious of being in despair is further from the truth and from salvation than a man who is in despair and conscious of his despair. He also adds that “in unconsciousness of being in despair a man is furthest from being [self-] conscious of himself as spirit.”²³ In short, the more one is conscious of having a self, i.e., the more self-conscious one is, the more his or her despair increases.

The relationship between possibility and necessity is important in both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky's works. Now that I have shown how possibility and necessity both relate to despair, and therefore also self-consciousness, I shift my focus to Dostoevsky. In this next chapter, Dostoevsky also addresses possibility and necessity as they relate to self-conscious despair, and develops this idea even further to suggest that one must not only realize possibility, but also turn against necessity. This idea will carry through and will ultimately result in the conclusion in Chapter Three that one can only find true freedom when one realizes the vast possibilities in one's life, and turns against the “Crystal Palace,” a place ruled by necessity.

Chapter Two: Dostoevsky on Self-Consciousness

While Kierkegaard's essay is seen as strictly a philosophical text, Dostoevsky's work is more a work of literature which holds significant philosophical value. *Notes from Underground* is a novella written from the point of an unnamed man who writes his thoughts in a collection of “notes,” in which he displays his very cynical and highly critical nature. This man has chosen to retreat to the

²¹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 175.

²² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 177.

²³ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 179.

“underground,” thus earning him the name of the Underground Man. The concept of the “underground” which this character inhabits may be a little confusing at first, but for the Underground Man, retreating to the “underground” is his way of escaping a blind and meaningless universe. The tragedy of living in the underground, this tragedy of each individual's humiliation in the face of the natural laws of science and reason, “is not only a personal tragedy for [the Underground Man] but the universal tragedy of man's alienation.”²⁴ The Underground Man himself appears in *Notes From Underground* as a prisoner suffering from self-inflicted torture and humiliation in a universe built around a perpetual and pointless motion, a world that is bound by fate of his own creation. The Underground Man is a very critical and spiteful man, and he spends much of the first chapter of *Notes from Underground* criticizing the world he lives in and the people who inhabit it.

Throughout the length of *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man exhibits an almost hostile approach to life and the world around him. The Underground Man classifies each individual as belonging to one of two “types” of men, and perhaps even more interesting is that the Underground Man places himself in the overly self-conscious group. He says that this group is by far the more intelligent of the two groups, so it is possible that the hostility and cynicism of the Underground Man leads him to place himself in this group. One of the most important distinctions the Underground Man makes is between these previously mentioned two “types” of men in this world, one which he refers to as “overly [self-] conscious men” and the other which he calls “spontaneous men of action.” The Underground Man's view of the spontaneous men is that they are “active precisely because they're stupid and limited.”²⁵ He believes that men of self-consciousness are highly intelligent

²⁴ Robert Louis Jackson, “Freedom in *Notes From Underground*,” in *Notes From Underground*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001: 189.

²⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, translated by Michael R. Katz. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001: 13.

yet they find themselves at a state of inertia.²⁶ He places himself in the group of the intelligent men of self-consciousness, frequently criticizing the lesser intelligence of the men belonging to the other type of man.

The Underground Man talks about his frequent inability to make decisions and how, even if he does make a decision, he is unable to act with full confidence. However, we see that the spontaneous man of action is able to make these kinds of decisions simply because he lacks a sense of self-consciousness. Because these spontaneous men of action are living in necessity, they do not see the vast possibilities in a given situation. For the men of acute self-consciousness, it is quite the opposite. The Underground Man states that “the direct, legitimate, immediate result of [self-] consciousness is inertia,” and the reason for this inaction of his and other men of self-consciousness is simply that they have this sense of self-consciousness, which prevents them from being able to make any sound, confident decision.²⁷ In fact, he goes as far to say that “I would never have decided to do anything, even if I could.”²⁸ Here he almost speaks as though he does not mind this state of inertia, because he mentions that even if he could decide to do something, he would still choose not to. The reason for this is probably because, unlike the spontaneous man of action, he and other men of self-consciousness are not at ease and are not able to make a sound decision with full confidence. This is understandable when considering men of acute self-consciousness, and it would be reasonable to believe that the Underground Man would adhere to the idea that, rather than making a hasty and poor decision which could lead to an undesirable outcome, it is better to make no decision and perform no action at all. The Underground Man concludes by stating that, “the final point is that all of this was taking place according to normal and fundamental laws of overly acute [self-] consciousness, and of the inertia which results directly from these laws; consequently, not only couldn't one change,

²⁶ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 13.

²⁷ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 12.

²⁸ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 7.

one simply couldn't do anything at all.”²⁹ The “normal and fundamental laws” of which he speaks is precisely the acutely self-conscious man's recognition of the vast possibilities that are presented to him; this leads to inertia, an inability to act, because the acutely self-conscious man cannot resolve the conflict of choosing between so many possibilities.

If we analyze further the Underground Man's distinction between the two types of man, we see it can be related to the general distinction between humans and animals. The way he describes the spontaneous man of action, frequently referring to them as being stupid and limited beings that lack a sense of self-consciousness, is similar to the description of an animal. Animals act out of necessity, they do not consider all possible options for action and how each may produce an outcome that would in turn affect itself. Instead, animals act only because they need something for survival, such as food or shelter. On the other hand, the distinguishing characteristic of human beings is their ability to reason, to think beyond basic primal needs, and to anticipate outcomes to situations and act according to those outcomes.

What separates animals from human beings is that humans possess self-consciousness, a trait that animals do not possess. Humans are aware of their place in the world around them. They see that they are able to have an effect on their environment, other people, and most importantly, themselves. If you consider even the most advanced animals, they may only be able to realize that they have an effect on their environment and other animals. Consider a chimpanzee in the wild. It knows by experience that it can interact with and influence its environment. For example, it can learn that if it shakes a tree branch, then a hard-to-reach piece of fruit will fall to the ground. It also knows that it can affect other chimpanzees. An example of this would be learning that if it howls and jumps up and down, then it can scare off intruding chimpanzees encroaching on its territory. However, what the chimpanzee lacks, something that all humans possess, is an ability to see that they can affect themselves. What I mean here is not merely

²⁹ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 7.

being able to know that “if I cut myself, it will cause pain,” because this is something that the chimpanzee can learn as well. Instead, when I talk of one having an effect on oneself, I am referring to internal, self-conscious mental processes. For example, humans have the ability to reason in their minds about themselves (“if I do *x*, then I will be a moral person”) or the ability to set life goals (“in my lifetime, I would like to accomplish *y* and *z*”), among other similar internal mental processes. These are not qualities that animals possess, and this is because they lack this kind of internal self-consciousness.

Individuals who are acutely self-conscious, who are despairing individuals, are those who are able to recognize the vast number of possibilities life presents. One of the defining characteristics that separates man from animal is man's possibility. This is to say that animals are defined as what they currently are, existing in the now and living moment to moment in order to survive. Man, however, is defined as what he can be, he is free to consider endless possibilities, and recognizing this possibility is one of the things that is more beautiful and most precious about humanity. To further illustrate this, consider children when they are asked what they want to be when they grow up. They will come up with many answers, each varying a great deal from the next. This goal gives them something to aspire to, something they can model their life around in the attempt to achieve this goal, should they choose to. If you were able to ask a dog the same question, however, he would not aspire to be anything. Instead, the dog would be concerned about where he will find his next meal, or where he will seek shelter from harsh weather conditions. In this case, the dog lives for the moment, whereas the child lives for the future, for possibility.

The Underground Man points out that, though the man of self-consciousness is highly intellectual, he is at a disadvantage when compared to the spontaneous man of action. He states that “being overly [self-] conscious is a disease, a genuine, full-fledged disease. Ordinary human consciousness would be more than sufficient for everyday human need.”³⁰

³⁰ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 5.

Here the Underground Man seems to denounce his sense of hyper-self-consciousness, saying that he would probably be better off if he had the lower sense of “ordinary human” consciousness or no consciousness at all as the men of action have: “It would have been entirely sufficient, for example, to have the consciousness with which all so-called spontaneous people and men of action are endowed.”³¹ This statement makes sense because, as described by the Underground Man, the man of self-consciousness spends much of his time and effort considering all possible consequences of all possible corresponding actions he could possibly make. The man of self-consciousness, because he is so aware of these consequences, finds himself constantly standing at the crossroads of decision. He is so overwhelmed by the pressure of making the right decision, and because he can consider so many angles of on decision, he is unable to perform any action with full confidence, thus finding himself unable to act at all.

He pushes this idea even further when he says that “not only is being overly [self-] conscious a disease, but so is being [self-] conscious at all,” because a self-conscious man is so aware of everything happening around him that he cannot help but become consumed by all aspects of the world.³² This can be seen as a personal weight that cannot be lifted from the self-conscious man, and the Underground Man mentions about himself, “the more [self-] conscious I was of what was good, of everything that was 'beautiful and sublime,' the more deeply I sank into the morass, and the more capable I was of becoming entirely bogged down in it.”³³ In saying this, the Underground Man is talking about how his sense of self-consciousness grows as he becomes more and more aware of those things he describes as being “beautiful and sublime,” that is, a better understanding of the world around him. He also says that the higher his sense of self-consciousness became, the more this sense of awareness weighed down on him. That is to say, as his self-consciousness increases, he becomes more aware of the

³¹ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 5.

³² Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 6.

³³ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 6.

infinite possibilities when it comes to making a decision and acting on that decision. This sense of feeling bogged down as a result of an increase in self-consciousness is the Underground Man's first reference to despair. Here, as was also seen with Kierkegaard in Chapter One, it is pointed out that as self-consciousness increases, so does despair increase. One needs to first recognize that he or she is in a state of despair, and then one must realize that the reason he or she is in despair is because he or she is a self-conscious being; this person is in a state of self-conscious despair. In a sense, self-consciousness is despair. It is also at this point which the Underground Man equates despair with pleasure, a seemingly contradictory and ironic statement:

I used to gnaw and gnaw at myself inwardly, secretly, nagging away, consuming myself until finally the bitterness turned into some kind of shameful, accursed sweetness and at last into genuine, earnest pleasure.³⁴

When facing a decision, the Underground Man realizes and carefully considers each of these options, analyzing every possible outcome and trying desperately to find out which would be the best decision to make. However, as the Underground Man becomes more aware of the dilemma of choosing the best option, he comes to realize the great responsibility that accompanies such action. The realization that each action we perform will affect our situation in a slightly different way, and the realization that we are responsible for not only performing that action but also the outcome it produces, are realizations that only those men of acute self-consciousness can possess. Men of lesser self-consciousness, the men of spontaneous action, are only able to see the situation and its outcome. They lack the reflexive property of knowing that they were the determining factor of how the situation played out, and that the decision they made was crucial in which outcome they would experience.

³⁴ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 6.

According to the Underground Man, the spontaneous men of action do not experience this personal weight, because they suppress their self-consciousness and do not see that they are responsible for their interactions in the world. However, he believes that their lack of self-consciousness is precisely what allows them to be men of action, or men who easily make decisions and act upon them: “They're convinced more quickly and easily than other people that they've located an indisputable basis for action, and this puts them at ease... for in order to begin to act, one must first be absolutely at ease, with no lingering doubts whatsoever.”³⁵ Here the Underground Man says that because the spontaneous man lacks self-consciousness, he does not experience the previously mentioned feeling of responsibility for his actions, and as a result he does not feel burdened by choosing which decision to make. Like an animal, this spontaneous man merely performs an action based on some basic drive which they feel propels them toward making the decision at hand, and for these men there is no feeling of doubt about whether the action they have decided to perform is the right action.

In order to perform an action, the Underground Man states that one must first be completely at ease, with no lingering doubts as to whether the decision he is making is the right one. Here he means to point out that the spontaneous men of action do not even have the same kind of internal debate over which decision to make as do the men of self-consciousness. Instead, the men of action believe they have found a reason to act in some specific way, without having to endure the kind of intense internal debate that the men of self-consciousness endure as they stand at the crossroads of deciding which act to perform. Since they believe they have found a simple reason to perform some specific action, it is as if the dilemma (which cannot really be called a dilemma because the Underground Man describes the actions of the spontaneous man as being somewhat more like intuitions rather than a carefully reasoned choice) ceases to be a relevant issue in their minds. This makes sense as to why they are able to

³⁵ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 13.

quickly and easily make decisions and act upon them, because they do not feel the burden of responsibility for their own actions as do the men of self-consciousness, and therefore the decision of the spontaneous man of action is of a lesser importance than it is to the man of self-consciousness. This allows the man of action to continue to make decisions rather easily, because he has in his mind a simple reason justifying his doing so. The Underground Man, however, lives life in a state of devastation because he is self-conscious of his own state of devastation. This causes the Underground Man to live in conflict with himself.

Chapter Three: Irony

In order to understand how Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky use irony in their writings, it is important to establish what exactly we mean when we talk about irony. The meaning of the word 'irony' has evolved throughout history. The English word 'irony' today comes from Latin *īrōnīa*. This in turn came from Greek *eirōneia*: meaning “feigned ignorance,” *eirōn*: meaning “dissembler,” as well as *eirein*: meaning “to say.”³⁶ We see that the etymology of irony still bears similarities with its present-day definition:

1. the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning: the irony of her reply, “How nice!” when I said I had to work all weekend.
2. Literature.
 - a. a technique of indicating, as through character or plot development, an intention or attitude opposite to that which is actually or ostensibly stated.
 - b. (esp. in contemporary writing) a manner of organizing a work so as to give full expression to contradictory or complementary impulses, attitudes, etc., esp. as a means of indicating detachment from a subject, theme, or emotion.

³⁶ irony. Dictionary.com. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, *Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony>.

3. Socratic irony.
4. dramatic irony.
5. an outcome of events contrary to what was, or might have been, expected.
6. the incongruity of this.
7. an objectively sardonic style of speech or writing.
8. an objectively or humorously sardonic utterance, disposition, quality, etc.³⁷

In this definition, the most relevant points in this article are points 1, 2, 5, 7, and 8. From these points, we see that the essential definition of 'irony' is when one says one thing and means another. Furthermore, the use of irony indicates a tone of mockery of something. Irony hinges around an indirect presentation of an action or a verbal expression contradicting the context in which it appears.³⁸ Both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky display irony through the structure and organization of the language they use in their works.

Recall, for example, when Dostoevsky, through his character the Underground Man, refers to self-consciousness as "a disease."³⁹ The Underground Man is a highly cynical character, who frequently criticizes the world he lives in. He makes it seem as if he is plagued by being a man of acute self-consciousness. Because he is acutely aware of the possibilities life presents each individual, he finds himself unable to perform any actions. When he is faced with a decision, simply because he is so self-conscious, he is forever thinking up more and more possible outcomes that could result from different actions he could take, and thus he is faced with inertia. At first, it seems that the Underground Man is a prisoner of indecision and inertia, but we find this to be quite the contrary. In fact, the irony of the matter is that the Underground Man, as opposed to those spontaneous men of action, is free. He asserts his

³⁷ irony. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1).

Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony>.

³⁸ irony. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1).

Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony>.

³⁹ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 5.

freedom through the realization of life's infinite possibilities, and furthermore, by turning his back to the Crystal Palace. The spontaneous men of action, these men of lesser self-consciousness, lack this kind of freedom, as they are not aware of the different possibilities that lie before them.

The idea of possibility is also involved in Dostoevsky's account of ironic freedom. He most strongly expresses irony in his discussion of the "Crystal Palace." This Crystal Palace of which the Underground Man speaks is a system of structuring the world according to rules and tables. It is a place that is indestructible because it is built upon the natural laws of science and mathematics, and based around tables and reason; this is why the Underground Man fears the Crystal Palace, because of its indestructibility and man's seeming inability to go against its strict rules. The Crystal Palace eliminates any need for freedom, since everything is laid out before you, set in rigid formulas and tables. It is ironic that the Underground Man should find freedom in turning his back against the Crystal Palace, and going against everything that abides by the natural laws of science and reason.

Kierkegaard is also uses irony when he tells us that despair is a "sickness of the spirit."⁴⁰ This statement is an ironic one, as we find out that Kierkegaard actually views despair as a positive quality. Kierkegaard tells us that a man who is unconscious of being in despair is further from the truth and from freedom than is a man in despair who is conscious of his being in despair. Here he is saying that a man who possesses greater self-consciousness (a man who is conscious of his own being in despair) is nearer to the truth and freedom, than is a man who is not conscious of his being in despair.

Here one preserves one's individuality, unquestionably a characteristic for which to strive, through being in despair. For Kierkegaard, it is beneficial to be in a state of despair because only through being in despair can one realize that he or she is a 'self,' or an individual being, different from others. This is important because only those who are despairing individuals, who acknowledge that they are such simply because they are

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 22.

self-conscious beings, are able to make the distinction between possibility and necessity in life. Because they possess this higher sense of self-consciousness, they can realize their responsibility in a given situation as well as their ability to affect its outcome. These self-conscious despairing individuals recognize that there is more to life than mere necessity. Instead, their freedom comes from their ability to see the possibilities in life, and being aware that they are able to be much more than mere animals acting out of necessity. They realize that a whole world of possibility lies before them, and that they are the masters of their own destiny.

Throughout Part I of *Notes From Underground*, the Underground Man portrays himself in a very self-contradictory manner. It is not until the end of section eight that he explains to his readers why he is acting contradictory. He gives the example that man is contradictory simply because he can be, to show that he is different from some object which does not possess free choice, like a piano key.⁴¹ Even if it were possible to prove that man was no more than a piano key using pure mathematics and the natural laws of science, the Underground Man says that man would still not act in a reasonable way. Instead, “he’ll intentionally do something to the contrary, simply out of ingratitude, merely to have his own way.”⁴² The Underground Man recognizes that in “certain circumstances” an individual might insist on the “right to desire even the very stupid.”⁴³ An individual might desire to do or want something that is either harmful or stupid, and it is this desire, this whim, that the Underground Man would say is that individual’s way of acting in a contrary way simply to show that he has the freedom to do what he pleases. The Underground Man acts in a contrary way, even if he knows that the laws and rules of the Crystal Palace prove him wrong. He does this simply because he can, because he realizes that he is free to assert the negative. He is free to go against the rules of reason, which the Crystal Palace deems as truth.

⁴¹ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 22.

⁴² Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 22.

⁴³ Jackson, 188.

The Underground Man believes that doing this may be “more advantageous than any advantage, even in a case where it clearly is harmful to us and contradicts the most healthy conclusions of our reasoning about advantages, because in any case it preserves for us what is most important and dear, that is, our personality and our individuality.”⁴⁴ He goes on to say that some people hold onto the belief that this is more precious to mankind than anything else. The Underground Man is certain that mankind will never renounce the destruction and chaos that is real suffering. In fact, he names suffering as mankind's defining trait. When all is said and done, the Underground Man tells his reader that he does not stand “either for suffering or well-being.” He stands for his own caprice and for its being granted to him whenever he wants it.⁴⁵

It can be seen at this point that the Underground Man acts in a deliberately contradictory way, just to prove he is a being with free choice, that he can choose to go against all those things which the rest of the world might view as being reasonable. He mentions that if someone is to say that everything can be calculated and determined according to a table or some natural law, then in this case “man would go insane deliberately in order not to have reason, but to have his own way.”⁴⁶ Here we see that the Underground Man affirms his despair in order to be free. That is, he knows that he is going against something universally accepted as truth, thus creating a source of despair. However, by doing this, he is breaking away from the universal, and affirming his freedom as an individual.

Thus, the Underground Man finds that true freedom is self-conscious despair. Only when one goes against the universality of the Crystal Palace is one truly free. To do this, the Underground Man says we must break down the Crystal Palace and reject its logic and mathematical formulas. We must say “two times two makes five,” and only then can we be free

⁴⁴ Jackson, 188.

⁴⁵ Jackson, 189.

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 22.

individuals.⁴⁷ By claiming that “two times two makes five,” something that is clearly regarded as false within the walls of the Crystal Palace, the Underground Man is asserting his freedom. He is free because he goes against the universal laws of logic and reason, and in doing this, he preserves his uniqueness and individuality. Here we see that Dostoevsky uses irony in *Notes From Underground* to show that the way in which one finds freedom is through the despair caused by going against the universal.

In *Notes From Underground*, we see that when the acutely self-conscious men are faced with the same decisions as the spontaneous men of action, it is significantly more difficult to come to a decision to perform some action. It is more difficult because they are burdened with the despair of being a self-conscious individual. However, the Underground Man reminds us that “the most intense pleasures occur in despair, especially when you're very acutely aware of the hopelessness of your own predicament.”⁴⁸ This “internal weight,” this burden of responsibility for one's own actions that accompanies the self-conscious man's deciding which action to perform, creates one more distinction between the spontaneous man of action and the self-conscious man. This distinction is freedom. The spontaneous man of action lacks freedom as well as self-consciousness, because his actions are performed out of natural necessity and he does not face the burdensome obstacle of indecision. The man of self-consciousness is free because he constantly faces this indecision, this state of inertia; the fact that he faces such indecision goes to show that he has the power to weigh out all possible choices, and he has responsibility for the outcome of his action. For the Underground Man, to be a self-conscious individual is to be an individual who has possibility. For the Underground Man, to be free, that is to live in self-conscious despair, is to live as a prisoner of this constant state of inertia.

The Underground Man also seems to be a prisoner of a universe bound by fate, a kind of “metaphysical underground,”

⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 24.

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 7.

in his efforts to escape the rigid structure of the Crystal Palace.⁴⁹ However, we see that ironically, his doing this is what establishes his freedom. We see that the ultimate paradox of *Notes From Underground* is that “Dostoevsky assigns to his malevolent antihero the essentially heroic task of signaling to... the reader the basic and irreconcilable conflicts between human nature and all social or philosophical constructs that deny free will.”⁵⁰ These basic and irreconcilable conflicts between human nature and all social and philosophical constructs in the world are easy to identify: where human nature fundamentally strives for freedom, all of the social and philosophical constructs in every day society provide us with various sets of rules, restricting this freedom. These rules include rules of social conduct, rules of religious practice, and even the rules of logic and scientific and mathematical reason, which the Underground Man abhors. When Dostoevsky refers to the Crystal Palace, he is referring precisely to those previously mentioned social and philosophical constructs.

In Chapter One, Kierkegaard tells us that each human being is a synthesis, and even goes so far as to say we are a synthesis of “freedom and necessity.”⁵¹ We also recall that Kierkegaard lists possibility and necessity among the various forms despair can take. It is clear to see that for Kierkegaard, possibility is freedom. Necessity is what chains us to the Crystal Palace, what makes us follow the natural laws of science, mathematics, and reason. In order to truly experience individual freedom, we must break the chains of necessity. In Chapter Two, Dostoevsky shows us that man asserts his freedom by realizing the vast possibilities that life presents us, and then rejecting the laws and reason of the Crystal Palace. It is only through self-conscious despair that we are able to turn our backs on the Crystal Palace, and in turn, preserve our individuality and assert our freedom.

⁴⁹ Jackson, 187.

⁵⁰ Jackson, 187.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 146.

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