

## **Returning to Eden: Kierkegaard's Religious Path to Selfhood**

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There is only one thing that you are obligated to do. You must establish a self. You, that potential, solitary individual, must get yourself in the correct relation to the paradoxical demands of your fallen human condition. There is only one way to get it right. Everything is at stake, but you have at every moment the ability to do what must be done. The steps that must be taken to fulfill your life project are necessarily complicated due to the importance of the task. In order to be in and of the finite world one must first understand the eternal. Only by obtaining a faithful relationship to the eternal does one get all of the bountiful gifts of temporality and finitude. To aid us in understanding that which cannot be ethically disclosed are two very different, but positionally similar, guides. The first is Johannes Climacus, who provides the most coherent explanation of the movements of becoming a self. The second is Anti-Climacus who, as his name suggests, will present an interpretation of selfhood from a counter-perspective to Climacus. We will also borrow several examples from the writings of Johannes de Silentio, whose silence is the hallmark of the faithful individual. Finally, we will depend on Kierkegaard himself as he is disclosed in the *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that all of these “guides” are pseudonyms. They are all part of the same project: they are different exemplars and/or scholars in Kierkegaard's vast corpus. But we must distinguish between them, and between them and Kierkegaard, for two reasons. First, Kierkegaard asks that each author (pseudonym) be recognized as having an explicit and particular voice. Second, it is advantageous

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for the authors to be understood within their specific contexts. Each pseudonym is representative of a distinct mode, or a different stage, of being. For example, Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard are both Christian believers, while Climacus and several others are non-believers. Despite their different and at times seemingly conflicting perspectives, each of these authors' concerns is existential, about how best to live. None of the authors provides an explicit answer to this problem; rather he each provides a piece, a momentary glimpse of what the realized individual looks like. In order to understand what it means to establish a self, one must first exhaust a variety of flawed approaches; one can break with one's mistaken claims before becoming a faithful individual.

An established self reconciles the opposing demands of the human condition. It is a fact of existence that people are plagued by contradictory desires and demands. The elements of this conflict are termed the *relata*. Humans want to live in such a way that their lives have significance and meaning, and are flexible enough to have both continuity and change. In order for this to occur we must get in the right relation to our existential position:

The human being is a synthesis of infinity and finitude, of temporality and eternity, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis...Looked at in this way a human being is still not a self...if, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self (SUD 43).

The human self is established; it is not given. When you become a self, you abolish despair. Despair is the condition all human beings are in before they make a self. It is not an emotional state like depression, but an inescapable fact of pre-selfhood existence, an existence in which it is not yet clear who we are and what we must do.

For the *relata* to be correctly linked one must commit to something outside of oneself. This is because the individual is the relation which relates itself to itself. The individual is not the relation, the occasion for the temporal and eternal to be unified; rather, it is the relation that in relating relates itself to something else — something in the world. One cannot become a self through extensive cerebral exercises, nor through sensual experiences. Humans do not have the wherewithal in

their own being to reconcile the relata. Therefore, one must depend upon something outside one's self or one's capacities in order to become an individual.

It is paradoxical that in order to get a self one must commit to something else. To place the source of your identity on that which is not under your control seems at its foundation unstable. To place infinite worth in a finite thing presages an inevitable destruction. We will borrow Johannes de Silentio's example of the knight of infinite resignation from *Fear and Trembling* to help illustrate the absurdity of this notion.

A young lad falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life, and yet, the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized, cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality (FT 41).

The knight of infinite resignation is infinitely committed to the maiden. She is the soul and substance of his life, and he desires nothing more than to spend his life loving the girl. However, he is quickly confronted with the realization that something might happen to the girl: she could leave him or in any number of ways abandon him and, inevitably, she will die. If and when this happens the knight would no longer be a self; he would lose his identity with the loss of the maiden. The finite world is unstable; it can and will always let you down. To place infinite worth on something that cannot be depended upon is thus irrational. However, to resolve the irresolvable, to reconcile the distinctions of the relata, one must necessarily use irrational means. Luckily, guides are provided to help us find our way to this absurd conclusion.

Johannes Climacus, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, provides a broad description of the provisional self, the first necessary step in the process of selfhood. This condition he terms Religiousness A. In Religiousness A one becomes aware of the way in which one must relate to the world. He/she commits infinitely to something in the finite. But, because this infinite passion or defining relationship can and will let you down, in order to secure the self within this framework the Religiousness A person must commit to indifference. By detaching one's self from the consequences of

one's passion, one can establish a kind of stability. This is, however, a forced solidity. It is not the stability that the faithful self enjoys; it is stable only because it has removed itself from the world.

We return to the knight of infinite resignation. Upon realizing the frailty of his defining relationship, the knight resigns himself to being the one who will always love the girl. He does not get her; he does not spend the rest of his days meaningfully invested in his love-relationship with the maiden. He never goes to the girl, never professes his love. Instead he remains infinitely committed to her (to her in particular, not to women in general) but resigns himself to never getting her. He turns her into an infinite concept:

He keeps this love young, and it grows along with him in years and in beauty. But he needs no finite occasion for its growth. From the moment he has made the movement, the princess is lost. He does not need the erotic titillation of seeing the beloved etc., ...because in the eternal sense he recollects her...  
(FT 44)

The knight maintains his passion but is indifferent to the consequences. He loves her even when he can't see her, even after she dies, or marries another — his love is unconditional, independent of her participation. He has placed infinite worth in the princess, but she has been reduced to concepts. It is the conceptual maiden — not the actual one — in which the source of his identity has been staked. The world has picked the knight out as the lover of the maiden. The knight makes the next rational move: he turns inward. He becomes committed to the idea of her, which is infinite. In this way finite qualifications are removed; he is not dependent upon consequences. He steps away from the world and retreats into resignation. The knight clearly is cheating finitude. He is involved in the finite only so far as he can control it.

Ethically, rationally, this inward movement seems to be the only one that it is possible to make. By reducing the princess to a concept the knight keeps her safe. In so doing he moves from the external world, the finitude of the princess' existence, to the internal world, where one can rationally ascribe infinite worth. The knight's progression

to resignation, his indifference to the finite consequences of his love, is similar to the movements made in Religiousness A. As in the knight's case, the Religiousness A believer recognizes the instability of finitude and reacts by becoming indifferent to the world. The difference between these two is that the knight has secured his existence through the specific concept of the maiden, whereas the Religiousness A individual commits serially to the finite. For the latter, significance can be gleaned from any number of tasks. One can be a barber one day and a baker the next. How one spends one's time is irrelevant because the outcome is of no importance. Whether a head is shaved or a soufflé falls, it does not matter, because no conventional evaluations of success apply. The participant is indifferent. It seems that Religiousness A is cheating/cheated. Religiousness A, while avoiding the pitfalls of finitude, at the same time precludes any of its benefits. Indifference works both ways: there is no heartache, but also no pleasure.

However, before we reject Religiousness A as being flawed from the outset, it may be helpful to walk through an example that illustrates the appeal of indifference. If I decide that my life's goal, my defining relationship, is to write, then I get all of the benefits of selfhood: my time has meaning, my actions are purposeful, and I'm saved from the endless demands of the world around me. I am protected from the aimless flitting about of purposelessness, of triviality. When asked to work at a soup kitchen and help the handicapped and volunteer at the hospital and take in stray cats, I have the capacity to say no, because these are not my vocations. My defining relationship is to be a writer, and that, therefore, is how I will be spending my time. I am not thoughtlessly moving from one good deed to the next, always running behind because there is always another charitable organization in need of my time and help. I am a writer. I eat so that I have the energy to write, I take walks so I have material to write about, I pay my bills so I have light by which to write. My world has contour and meaning. Here is the catch: I am a horrible writer. No one wants to read my works, I cannot get published, I am mocked by my peers, and I am ignored by the world at large. What do I do? How do I justify spending my time doing something that no one respects or cares about? I become indifferent to the results of my labors. Religiousness A, by renouncing

the world, maintains a constant shape to his/her life projects regardless of what happens in finitude. The indifference of Religiousness A is the only rationally or ethically sound way of making sense of self-establishment, the only way to adopt a finite project without inevitably becoming disappointed with the world.

The rational justification for indifference is not, however, the final goal of the project of selfhood. The self of Religiousness A has not really adopted a finite project, because the fate of that project is irrelevant; since it is doomed to fail, the self's real goal is the withdrawal from the world that comes from recognizing the failure of every finite project. One establishes a secure self not in the sphere of Religiousness A but by moving through and breaking from this provisional self to faith, to Religiousness B. Faith is required to affirm that one's finite project is somehow not doomed to failure, despite the fact of its finitude. And this is something one can only affirm for oneself. Our writer, in the above example, looks the same to the outside eye in both Religiousness A and B; she spends her time writing. The difference lies in the individual's involvement in the world. Religiousness A rejects the finite, using worldly experience as an occasion to turn inward. Religiousness B, by contrast, is continually involved in the temporal. In Religiousness B one's relational position to the world changes — the writer continues to write and find meaning in every facet of this action. In Religiousness B one is able to organize the duality of the disjointed human condition such that one's existence is stable and significant, and one's activities are grounded in the finite world.

In Religiousness B a person gets in the correct relation to the eternal. The kind of transformation that occurs when one moves from Religiousness A to Religiousness B is not a change that can be ethically explained. In Religiousness A all of the information is there: the world and all its finitude. The difference between Religiousness A's and Religiousness B's relation to the world is analogous to the distinction between *orthē doxa* and *epistēmē* as described by Socrates in the *Meno*. Through a series of questions about geometry to a slave boy Socrates shows that initially the slave boy was not in the correct relation to his knowledge claims. The slave boy had *orthē doxa* or correct opinion. He knew the answers to the questions posed to him,

but he was merely parroting the facts. The slave boy did not have actual knowledge of the concepts he was making use of. During the discourse with Socrates a change takes place. The slave boy moves from correct opinion to knowledge (*episteme*). The facts have not changed. The boy was not given an additional piece of information; his position to his knowledge claims changed. The reorientation is the only change, and it is an internal change, one perceptible only to the individual. The boy could not describe exactly how or in what way his understanding of geometry had changed; he just got it. It is this cathartic moment that Religiousness B promises. One gets in the right relation to the world and thus gets it.<sup>2</sup>

We know why we must relocate ourselves in relation to the world and the duality of our nature, but how does one go about changing one's existential condition? One must suspend all ethical understanding. We must turn away from our ties to the world, abandon our rational claims, and divorce ourselves from those around us. The provisional self (Religiousness A) provides the occasion for this escape from the involvement in the false/sinful/misappropriated reality. Religiousness A moves inward and by rejecting the world can later return through faith to reappropriate it.

The external orientation drives the individual inward to resignation. By moving inward, one disassociates one's self from the finite. The defining relationship is reduced to concepts. This inward movement is so complex that the many pseudonyms disagree on exactly how one gets through it to make the leap to Religiousness B. There are several different Religiousness A personae depicted in the corpus of Kierkegaard's works. The knight of infinite resignation, Johannes Climacus, and even Kierkegaard himself are all oriented within the sphere of Religiousness A. Religiousness A takes on many different forms and is so difficult to appropriate and move through that many never get past it. It is so expansive that Climacus states, "Religiousness A (within the boundaries of which I have my existence) is so strenuous for a human being that there is always a sufficient task in it" (CUP 557). One can easily spend one's entire life in the process of resignation and of understanding the infinite within one's self; it is complex enough to make use of all of one's time on the earth.

How does one escape from the complexities of Religiousness A?

One must commit oneself to the only thing strong enough to sustain and reconcile the relata: the eternal. One must establish a particular and unique relationship with God because only in so doing does one become an individual. Why God? Because God is the perfect paradigm for the paradoxical. He is both within and without, both a part of and encompassing the world.

The paradox is that this apparently aesthetic relationship, that the individual relates himself to something outside himself, nevertheless is to be the absolute relationship with God, because in immanence God is neither a something, but everything, and is infinitely everything, nor outside the individual, because the upbuilding consists in his being within the individual. (CUP 561)

By choosing God as the defining relationship one is able to have a private, personal affiliation with the eternal by way of being in the world. The finite and the infinite are inextricably wed in the personage of God. At this point it is necessary to address the Christian associations of the God so described. The reason for appealing to the Christian deity is that only in the person of Jesus Christ has the eternal taken a temporal form. This God/man is the perfect exemplar of a unified whole. Jesus Christ is both in and of the world. He is the reconciliation of the opposing desires/demands of humanity. Thus, Jesus is our model, by reflecting Him we reflect God: "...worship is what makes the human being resemble God" (UDVS 139). The piece of the eternal that is within the individual must be grasped in order for all of the other paradoxes to be resolved.

Climacus considers himself to be in the realm of Religiousness A. Yet he is not a Christian. Although he realizes that the only way to move from Religiousness A to Religiousness B is to make the leap of faith, he is unable to do so.

My intention is to make it difficult to become a Christian yet not more difficult than it is...because, viewed essentially, it is equally difficult for every human being to relinquish his understanding and his thinking and to concentrate his soul on

the absurd; and it is comparatively most difficult for the person who has much understanding (CUP 557).

Climacus claims that his goal is to describe what is required for one to be a Christian. He sits at a curious vantage point in which he is able to see what must be done and is able to concisely describe the task, but he cannot make the move of faith himself. Why he finds this difficult is important. One might think him the least likely person to be dragging his heels, since he knows the futility of any life lived outside the faithful realm. Climacus has the correct opinion, but he is not in the necessary relation to move to Religiousness B. The leap to faith is inexplicably difficult not simply because its justification lies outside the ethical sphere, but also because of the requirements for its success.

The self must be established in Religiousness A before one can have a meaningful relationship with the eternal (God) because without it one is not in the correct position for a discourse: the eternal cannot disclose itself to anything less than a self. However, the self in Religiousness A is a provisional one. It is provisional in the sense that it is relationally misdirected. One's knowledge claims are correct; it is just one's relation to them that leads to the necessary desertion of the provisional self. "...[T]he object of all faith's work is to get rid of egotism and selfishness in order that God can actually come in and in order to let him rule everything" (UDVS 256). When this self is abandoned, the eternal is given the occasion to turn one's head, to reorient the individual correctly to the world through which one moves. The finite self is abandoned in order to give absolute consideration to that which is eternally present and inexplicable. "The upbuilding element in the sphere of Religiousness A is "...the annihilation in which the individual sets himself aside in order to find God, since it is the individual himself who is the hindrance" (CUP 560). Finitude cannot be brought to bear on this moment because the definitive eternal (God) must be given an undivided opportunity for disclosure.

To perceive the eternal one must renounce the world. The hallmark of this movement is suffering. It is necessary to suffer because it deepens your inwardness; it removes you from the events of the world around you and puts you on the path to faith, to God. In this way suffering comes to be seen as a good thing. By renouncing the

importance of the world one places infinite importance on the eternal relationship with God. This is a difficult move to make because it is illogical. It is not a rationally justifiable move because suffering by definition is not a good thing. Thus, “to find joy in the bitterness of suffering, find it not only in the hope that the suffering will sometime cease, but find it in the suffering as we ordinarily speak of it” (UDVS 233) is ludicrous. . . . But when we suffer, we suffer alone, apart from the world, and the rejection of the world is part of the process of selfhood. Suffering provides the necessary distance so that one can become resituated in the world through which they move. Suffering is beneficial in the sense that it moves one forward, not as an end in and of itself but as part of an upbuilding. Where is the upbuilding in an existence bound to inarticulation and flagellation? Why must one suffer and renounce the world in order to get it back again? What was wrong with the world before? Sin.

Everything that is not faith is sin. At every moment that you are not committed to faith you are committed to sin. One sins whenever one fails at his/her appointed task. That appointed task is to be a self. Faith is required to establish a self. How does one make the move to faith? It is a leap, a letting go of everything. This is why it is described in *Fear and Trembling* as absurd. It eludes reason. It cannot be verbalized, but we can say how one prepares oneself for this move. As long as an individual is invested in the world he/she is never in a position to give it up. One must change the way he/she rationally views the world. One must be completely removed from the confines of one’s previous claims. When reaching for the unknown we would like to maintain our balance. The leap to faith does not allow us this grounding. One must abandon everything previously held. Therefore, one must change the way one sees the world. This is the upbuilding nature of Religiousness A. This does not mean that all previous knowledge and accounts of the world are incorrect. A faithful individual does not have a different or more complete understanding of what makes-up the café mocha that is being imbibed; the difference is in the way that it is thought about. The individual’s position to the object is changed; its facticity is not.

Only in a world without sin would it be relevant to equate suffering with wickedness. We do not exist in such a state. Before selfhood we

are not in a position to make any moral, ethical or even definitive judgments about the world. There are no applicable knowledge claims without the establishment of the self. Human beings are essentially sinful. "Directly before God a human being is not a sinner in this or in that, but is essentially a sinner, is not guilty of this or that, but is essentially and unconditionally guilty" (UDVS 285). By holding onto the world we maintain our sinful state. We must reject our previous ties to the world and to our previous situation because they are all relationally incorrect. This is why we must suffer. We suffer by rejecting the world, and the suffering comes from the incorrect belief that we know what is good. We do not want to sacrifice the last piece of chocolate cake, or the pleasure of beautiful music. It seems that God would not have made all of these wonderfully decadent things if he did not want us to enjoy them. But it is not God's worldly gifts that are bad, it is our relational position to them. That is the nature of our sin: we are initially misdirected. We are in the wrong existential state to get the world; therefore, we must give up our hold on what we mistake as goodness. This is why suffering is good: because our conceptual existence is tied into our fallen condition and it all must be reoriented for one to get in the right relation to the good. We relate to the good, to God, by giving up all other notions of good. Included in this is one's self.

The most difficult part of the suffering necessary to remove oneself from participation in the misrelated world is that the provisional self must also be abandoned. This is the ultimate negation, the abnegation of the self. One can convince him/herself that the world is bad, that all desires lead one astray... but all of these claims are justified under the careful scrutiny of one's identity. I reject the temptations of materialism, I reject the desires of the flesh, I choose something else. But the path to God, to faith will not let go of you here; the eternal demands you too.<sup>3</sup> It is natural to want to hold onto a little piece of your old identity. But by hanging on to this you maintain your previous relation to the world. You can't have even the tiniest inch; you are not allowed any hold, any claim to what you previously held as truth. In order for you to be relocated in the world you must abandon all that held you beforehand. If you insist on having a toe attached to the earth, a space for your unique Religiousness A self, then you can never

be fully flipped; your relation to the world cannot change. This letting go is the leap of faith.

Christian doctrine insists on washing away the sins of the earth; hence baptism in its numerous forms. What is the nature of sin in this context? It is the sin of the people of the earth. All exist in a fallen state. The original sin of the population is our conditional relation to the world, the essential despair of humankind. When Adam and Eve ate of the apple and they came to realize that they were naked, the change was not in the shape of their flesh but in their shame. The transformation was in relation, in the way in which they saw themselves and each other.

This is the final goal of the project. Through faith a new relational position is established, Religiousness B. By getting in the correct position to the eternal one is given the world. The world can be seen in this way as new. Faith changes one's perceptions, the way one views the world. Through the filter of faith the world is re-presented to the individual. One finally gets all of the rewards, all of the pleasures of finitude. The world is no longer a dangerous, threatening place because one now relates to it correctly. The world is infinitely good and bountiful. No pleasure is denied.

This does not mean that you get to have everything. I cannot be both a beach bum and a workaholic, a runner and a paraplegic. What the faithful individual receives is his/her world. One stands in the correct position to one's actual desires so that nothing is denied them. The faithful one is so established that whatever he/she does not receive does not show up to him/her as a lack. If one's vocation is to be a nun then one cannot also be a mother. But the impossibility of parenthood does not manifest itself as a loss. One is not connected to everything, does not desire everything. One does not need to rationalize because they are never without anything. We turn to our faithful tax collector in *Fear and Trembling*. He is completely invested in the world. Though he desires lambs-head stew when he returns home to a dinner of bread and water he is "curiously just the same" (FT 40). His enthusiasm for bread and water is due to the fact that he is correctly related to the world. He understands finitude in a way that the ethical (which operates in the fallen domain) cannot explain.

To get the world you must reorient yourself to it. This is the

promise of faith: you, that single solitary individual, get the world in an absolute temporal sense. The world does not change. It does not become perfect — you do. You change your position so that the sinful place, the relational failure, is corrected.

It is within your power to take up the world and existence, and the prize is everything. But, in order to get to this point you must break completely with all that came before you and you can only do this faithfully, “by virtue of the absurd” (FT 46). One must leap. Knowing what is at stake, one must risk everything — suffer, reject the self and the world — in order to land in the fullness of creation. In Religiousness B one sees through the lens of faith. The established self enters a domain in which everything is possible because one has moved from one's fallen condition through sinful attachment to faith. In the end one gets it all: not just the eternal, but the perfect present.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All parenthetical references are to Søren Kierkegaard. Works are abbreviated as follows:

(CUP) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, Vol. 1*, ed./trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992).

(FT) *Fear and Trembling*, ed./trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983).

(SUD) *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Penguin Classics, 1989).

(UDVS) *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed./trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Sheridan Hough, “‘Halting is Movement’: The Paradoxical Pause of Confession in ‘An Occasional Discourse,’” *International Kierkegaard Commentary* (Mercer University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to a letter from Travis Kline, a fellow student of Kierkegaard, for this point: “C.G. Jung shared in his writings that he once had a dream, in which he stood before the majesty of God. In the dream he fell to his knees and, in humicubation, began to lower the rest of himself to the floor. Just before his nose touched he stopped; this space he had to keep for himself” (Kline, 6 December 2004).