

Self or No-Self?

Edited by
INGOLF U. DALFERTH
and TREVOR W. KIMBALL

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Mohr Siebeck

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Self or No-Self?

The Debate about Selflessness
and the Sense of Self

Claremont Studies
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Conference 2015

edited by
Ingolf U. Dalferth
and
Trevor W. Kimball

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Preface

Each year the Claremont Conference on Philosophy of Religion brings together thinkers from different religions, traditions, and academic disciplines to discuss one particular theme in the fields of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy of Religion. The theme of the 36th conference in 2015 was *Self or No-Self? The Debate about Selflessness and the Sense of Self*. This debate lies at the heart of many controversies in contemporary philosophy and theology, and it has been a top candidate on our list of topics for a long time. The Claremont conferences place a special emphasis on a critical and constructive dialogue between European, American, and Asian religious and philosophical traditions, and between phenomenological, hermeneutic, and analytic approaches in the philosophy of religion. They aim at overstepping traditional boundaries between philosophy and theology, philosophy of religion, and other academic disciplines, and between European, American, and Asian religious and philosophical traditions – boundaries that still widely dominate philosophy of religion in the academy but cannot be upheld in an age of globalization and worldwide communication. In all these respects the conference on *Self or No-Self?* proved to address the right topic at the right time in the right way.

We had the good fortune that the *Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum* (Hamburg) again generously provided ten conference grants to enable doctoral students and post-docs to take part in the conference and present their work on the theme of the conference. An international selection committee chose ten papers from about a hundred and forty applications from all over the world, from Israel to Russia and from South Africa to Korea and Singapore, to say nothing of Europe and the Americas. Five of those papers are published here along with the other contributions to the conference.

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Ingolf U. Dalferth
Trevor Kimball

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Introduction: The Debate about Self and Selflessness

INGOLF U. DALFERTH

I

Religious, philosophical, and theological views on the self vary widely.¹ For some the self is understood as the center of human personhood, the ultimate bearer of personal identity and the core mystery of human existence. As John Locke put it,

Self is that conscious thinking thing, – whatever Substance made up of, (whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) – which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends.²

The classical European tradition from Plotinus through Descartes, Kant and Hegel to Kierkegaard and Husserl has explored and elaborated this view in a great variety of ways.³ It has created a powerful metaphysics of the self that is at work even in its own critical deconstruction. Hume was under its impact when he famously complained that

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception . . . I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.⁴

Hume was unable to find what he was looking for because he was looking for something that isn't a 'something' in any proper sense of the word. Perhaps the metaphysical self is not fact but fiction, a product of our way of talking and thinking, but not a reality to be discovered in the world? Kant alluded to such

¹ Cf. *Models of the Self*, ed. S. GALLAGHER and J. SHEAR (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 1999).

² J. LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1690], ed. A. C. FRASER (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), II, xxvii, 17, pp. 458–9.

³ Cf. R. SOLOMON, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The rise and fall of the self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); *Krisen der Subjektivität: Problemfelder eines strittigen Paradigmas*, ed. I. U. DALFERTH and PH. STOELLGER (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005).

⁴ D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. SELBY-BIGGE and P. NIDDITCH (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

a view when he wrote to Marcus Herz in 1772 that “the thinking or the existence of the thought and the existence of my own self are one and the same.”⁵ Nietzsche also thought so, and he explained it by reference to grammar. The grammar of European languages makes us think and speak in terms of subjects and predicates, things and their qualities, agents and their actions. We construe or search for substances to which we can attribute qualities, relations and activities, even where there is nothing in experience that corresponds to them. If it is raining, then there is not ‘something’ of which raining is truly predicated. If I scratch myself, there are not two entities, one that performs an action and the other to which the action is addressed. And if I talk to myself about my own confusions, then this is not a confused conversation between me, myself, and I. If there is a metaphysical self, then it seems that it must be more than merely a confused product of our grammar.

II

But this is precisely what others think. For these thinkers the self is a grammatical error and the sense of self an existential and epistemic delusion. This criticism is not restricted to important strands in contemporary (analytic) philosophy, neuroscience, and neurobiology.⁶ William James took the self to “consist mainly of motions in the head or between the ears and throat.”⁷ Galen Strawson defines the “sense of the self” as “the sense that people have of themselves as being, specifically, a mental presence; a mental someone; a single mental thing that is a conscious subject of experience.”⁸ And António Damasio holds that “There is indeed a self, but it is a process, not a thing, and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious.”⁹

This view has interesting and important links to traditional Asian conceptions.¹⁰

⁵ I. KANT, Letter to Marcus Herz, February 21, 1772, in Kant: *Philosophical Correspondence 1759–99*, ed. and transl. A. ZWEIG (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁶ Cf. A. KENNY, *The Self* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1988); *The Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); J. PICKERING, ‘The self is a semiotic process’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6 (1999), 31–47.

⁷ W. JAMES, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I [1890] (New York: Dover, 1950), 301.

⁸ G. STRAWSON, ‘The Self’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4 (1997), 407.

⁹ A. DAMASIO, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 6–8.

¹⁰ S. CHAMBERLAIN-NYUDO, *True Buddhism: Buddhist scholarship and the actual teachings of the Buddha* (Shannon, MS, The Threefold Lotus Kwoon Press, 2009), 34; *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, ed. M. SIDERITS, E. THOMPSON, and D. ZAHAVI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

It is said that “there is a self;” but “non-self” too is taught. The buddhas also teach there is nothing which is “neither self nor non-self . . .” Everything is real, not real; both real and not real; neither not real nor real: this is the teaching of the Buddha¹¹

Buddhists contrast the Western understanding of the self as a function of the mind that helps us to organize our experiences to their view of no-self by distinguishing between no-self and not-self or between a solid or ‘metaphysical’ self that is an illusion and an experiential or psychological self that is not. There may be processes of ‘selfing’, but there is no permanent self. In Western psychology, philosophy, and theology, on the other hand, the term ‘self’ is often used as a noun that refers not to the performance of an activity or to a material body *per se*, but rather to a (gendered) organism that represents the presence of something distinct from its materiality called ‘the self’. Is this a defensible insight or a misleading representation of human experience?

III

To ask this question is to point to a methodological problem underlying the whole debate: the fallacy of abstract theoretical re-configurations of everyday life-world experiences. What seems to be taken for granted and goes without noting in everyday life becomes an insoluble problem when formulated philosophically or when being addressed scientifically. This fuels the suspicion that there is no problem of the self in human life, but that the problem is created by the ways in which human self-experience in ordinary life and everyday communications and interactions with others is being re-configured in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, or theology. Is the self a mere creation of philosophical discourse? Consider the list that Galen Strawson offers as philosophical statements of what ‘self’ means in human self-experience:

- [1] a subject of experience, a conscious feeler and thinker
- [2] a thing, in some interestingly robust sense
- [3] a mental thing, in some sense
- [4] a thing that is single at any given time, and during any unified or hiatus – free period of experience
- [5] a persisting thing, a thing that continues to exist across hiatuses in experience
- [6] an agent
- [7] a something that has a certain character or personality.¹²

¹¹ *The Fundamental Wisdom Of The Middle Way: Nagarajuna’s Mulamdhyamakakarika*, ed. and transl. J. L. GARFIELD, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); cf. M. ALBAHARI, *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

¹² G. STRAWSON, “The Self and the SESMET,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, No. 4 (1999), 106.

None of this can be encountered as such in experience, but all seven views are offered as theoretical re-figurations of “ordinary human Self-experience.” What is lacking here is any reference to the discursive practices or contexts in which those figurations, or that which they claim to re-figure, actually occur and function. They present abstract figurations of the self to which we can only say, in a Humean manner, that we rarely, if ever, come across ourselves under those descriptions in our actual experience. We understand what is being said, but we cannot identify with it because it is a context-free way of talking about us. Language seems to have gone on holiday here, as Wittgenstein may have put it. Or as Berkeley preferred to say: We have thrown up a lot of dust, and now we complain that we cannot see. And the phenomenologist assists with her battle cry: Save the phenomena from their theoretical distortions!

IV

What we can say for certain, however, is that all talk about self refers to a basic tension in our experience. On the one hand, we are aware of ourselves in the first-person manner of our *ipse*-identity that cannot fully be spelled out in objectifying terms. On the other hand, we also know ourselves in the third-person manner of our *idem*-identity, the objectified self-reference to a publicly available entity. This irreducible difference is the crux of the matter and has far reaching epistemic and existential, moral and metaphysical consequences. We develop a sense of self in interacting with others in shared situations. We distinguish between our private and public selves by presenting ourselves differently to different audiences. But ‘constructing ourselves’ need not mean ‘constructing selves’, and being a self in the first sense is quite compatible with being a no-self in the second. Does this mean that the view of self which (some) Eastern traditions deny is the same as that which (some) Western traditions affirm? Is the sense of self a delusion or do we address different questions when we contrast self and no-self? Is it a contradiction in terms to say that selves can be selfless and that no-selves can be selfish? Is our sense of self a function of our bodies and brains or does it point to a reality beyond our life as organisms? Do neuroscientific accounts reinforce or help us to deconstruct the (often oversimplifying) contrast between self and no-self? Does the distinction apply beyond the particular discursive practices in which we use it to respond to particular problems? Are there ‘selves’ without cultural technologies of ‘selfing’, and can there be ‘no-selves’ without cultural practices of ‘un-selfing’? Can we meaningfully pose and discuss questions of self and no-self without paying close attention to the modes of signifying and (re)presentation in the symbolic communications, imaginative constructions, social interactions, and religious practices of our different cultures?

V

These were some of the questions discussed at the 36th Philosophy of Religion Conference at Claremont, California, on February 19–21, 2015. We could not address all the problems in the field, but instead focused on central issues in significant European and Asian traditions that should not be ignored when exploring problems of self and no-self. To further the debate we invited respondents to comment on the main papers presented, and we also added the best papers from the Forum Humanum competition that brought ten doctoral and post-doctoral students to Claremont to present their own research on the topic of the conference. We are convinced that progress can only be made if we do not look at the self or no-self in isolation, but place them in the discursive and everyday contexts in which they function, and explore the role they play in formulating, debating and, hopefully, solving philosophical, psychological, moral, legal and theological problems. There are many assumptions about the self in the European traditions that are difficult to uphold in the light of modern scientific findings. There are many questions that arise in dialogue with the Asian traditions which challenge the cross-cultural hermeneutic implicit in the theme of self and selflessness. But there is also a significant overlap between the European and Asian traditions in addressing central issues of human life, even though they are couched in seemingly contradictory conceptualities and terminologies. Only a careful reading and close attention to detail can help to avoid construing hasty and premature incompatibilities between Western metaphysics of the self and Eastern metaphysics of selflessness. There are significant differences, but there are also important similarities, and both must be kept in view if progress is to be made.

VI

The debate is organized in this volume in the following way. In the first section we ask how questions about the self are tied to problems of discourse and the use of language in specific contexts of communication and interaction. What can we learn from grammar about the self? In the second section we explore questions posed by the classical European traditions from Plotinus to Hegel and Kierkegaard. Is there something in the Western metaphysics of the self that deserves to be preserved in the 21st century? In the third section we look at some prime examples of the modern debate about the self in the twentieth century, from William James and Paul Sartre to Simone Weil. How do they re-configure the problems, and what can we learn from their pragmatic and phenomenological approaches? In the fourth section we open the debate up to Buddhist and Confucian views of self and no-self and ask if Western and

Eastern traditions address the same or similar problems in different ways or if they explore different problems altogether. What must we pay attention to in the debate about self and selflessness in order to enable and facilitate communication and meaningful exchange across cultural borders? And finally, we turn to problems that all traditions share whether they want to or not: that selves are finite and that we all shall die. What can we learn about selves if we start not from questions about their constitution and character, but from their extinction and end?

I. The Making of the Self through Language

Situated Selves in “Webs of Interlocution”: What Can We Learn from Grammar?

INGOLF U. DALFERTH

1. The ‘self’ as an operator

Let me begin my reflections with a grammatical observation: In English the term ‘self’ is neither a noun nor a verb nor a pronoun but an operator “that makes an ordinary pronoun into a reflexive one: ‘her’ into ‘herself’, ‘him’ into ‘himself’ and ‘it’ into ‘itself’. The reflexive pronoun is used when the object of an action or attitude is the same as the subject of that action or attitude.”¹ In much the same sense the term ‘self’ “is also used as a prefix for names of activities and attitude, identifying the special case where the object is the same as the agent: self-love, self-hatred, self-abuse, self-promotion, self-knowledge.”² Thus, the grammatical operator ‘self’ identifies a relation of sameness or a reflexive self-relation but it does not name or refer to an entity, or to a particular attitude or activity of an entity: It is neither a noun (that refers) nor a verb (that describes) but an operator (that qualifies), i. e. a linguistic device that allows or facilitates the expression of a pragmatic feature of a communicative situation (it was *me* and not somebody else who returned the book to the library) at the semantic level of what is communicated (‘I returned the book myself’).³

¹ J. PERRY, “The Self” (1995), <https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/453/PerrySelf.pdf>, accessed October 21, 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Grammatically operators are defined as auxiliaries that facilitate, for example, the expression of a negation, interrogative, or emphasis (cf. <http://heather-marie-kosur.suite101.com/verb-functions-in-predicate-verb-phrases-a136667>). But operators are not restricted to this. Thus *negation* can be expressed by an operator ‘not’ because in English a “clause is made negative by adding *not* or suffixed *n’t* after its finite auxiliary verb.” (<http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/aux.htm>).

2. The 'self' as a noun

These grammatical observations should have made psychologists and philosophers more careful who widely use the term 'self' as a noun that refers to a referent – to somebody, i. e. a material body or (gendered) organism that represents the presence of something distinct from its materiality called 'the self'; or who use the phrase 'the self' "for the set of attributes that a person attaches to himself or herself most firmly, the attributes that the person finds it difficult or impossible to imagine himself or herself without."⁴ Thus, the *self* is contrasted to the *other*, either in the sense of the body or the corporality or materiality of a human organism ('body'), or in the sense of other objects and organisms ('things'), or in the sense of other persons or selves ('the other').

I call this the *agent account of the self*.⁵ The self is seen as the human operator, "the agent, the knower and the ultimate locus of personal identity".⁶

This view raises at least four issues. First, there is the fallacy of mistaking grammar for description. The self, understood in this way, "is a mythical entity ... It is a philosophical muddle to allow the space which differentiates 'my self' from 'myself' to generate the illusion of a mysterious entity distinct from ... the human being."⁷ Grammatical features are not reality-depicting but help to orient speakers in a communicative situation. Still, it may be a bit too rash to conclude, as Kenny does, that a "grammatical error ... is the essence of the theory of the self", or that "'the self' is a piece of philosopher's nonsense consisting in a misunderstanding of the reflexive pronoun."⁸

Second, there is (what Whitehead called) the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: We notice that we are different from that which others, or we ourselves, perceive when we look at or interact with each other; and we turn this *marker of a difference* – which is at best a negative limit term ('self' = *not* a body) – into a description of something (object or substance) that is different from what we perceive by our senses.

Third, there is the gender issue. Simone de Beauvoir famously answered the question 'Who is the self?' and 'Who is the other?' by pointing out that "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other".⁹ 'Self' and 'other' are contrasted here in terms of 'male' and 'female' whereas – at least in an ideal world – the contrast applies to every self and every other, whether male or female. The self is an other, and vice versa.

⁴ PERRY, "The Self".

⁵ Cf. G. STRAWSON, "The Self," *Consciousness Studies* 4 (1997) 405–428; *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ PERRY, "The Self".

⁷ A. KENNY, *The Self* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1988), 3–4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ S. DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1989), Introduction.

Fourth, there is the question: What is meant by ‘personal identity’ here? As Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, we must be careful not to confuse what he called our *ipse-identity* (what we take to be decisive for us from our own perspective) with our *idem-identity* (what is taken to be sufficient for identifying us over time from the perspective of others). The first is what we may express in an autobiographical account of our life, and this view has nothing to say about the beginning and end of our life. The second is what a biographer may present as the biography of our life, and this view has no access to how we experience our life. Things go badly wrong when we confuse these irreducibly different accounts and perspectives. The term ‘the self’ then becomes used interchangeably with ‘person’, and persons are understood as entities which possess certain characteristics, traits or properties such as ‘agency’, ‘self-awareness’, ‘time-consciousness’, ‘rights and duties’ etc. by which they can be marked off from other entities which do not possess those properties.

This is a highly problematic view. As many have pointed out, selves are not physically or empirically detectable entities. This is not due to a failure of our empirical methods, including scanning and brain imaging. *Idem*-characteristics of our personal identity can be directly observed, *ipse*-characteristics, on the other hand, can only be indirectly inferred from a person’s articulation, manifestation, or communication of his or her self-understanding. In the latter sense the term ‘the self’ does not name a natural entity, nor does it refer to a set of biological, psychological or social facts that are descriptively accessible in a third person perspective. The natural world does not include selves but only biological organisms of different complexity, some with brains, and those with the most complex brains we know we call ‘human beings’.

But to restrict the use of the term ‘self’ in the *idem*-sense of identity to human beings seems to be arbitrary, to say the least. If the self is defined by a set of (necessary and/or sufficient) properties, then every entity that shares these properties is a self; and if a human person, for whatever reasons, fails to possess these properties, or fails to possess them to a sufficient degree, then he or she is not (or is no longer) a self, and hence should not be called a person either. The danger of this view of the self is that it drives a wedge between the humanity and the selfhood of human beings so that there can be *non-human beings that are selves* and *human beings who are not selves*. Even if we want to defend something like this, we can no longer explain selfhood in terms of humanity, or humanity in terms of selfhood. Instead, we are in danger of collapsing an *anthropological distinction with respect to human life* – a distinction that allows us to differentiate between human and inhuman ways of living a human life – into the *biological distinction between human and non-human life* and hence miss the point of the reflexive grammatical use of the term ‘self’.

3. The 'self' as a verb and an adverb

A different understanding of the term 'self' arises when it is used philosophically not as a noun but as a *verb* – as a sign not for an entity but for the *happening* of an event or the *performance* of an activity. As Antonio Damasio put it in *The Self Comes to Mind* (2010): “There is indeed a self, but it is a process, not a thing, and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious.”¹⁰ This process he construes from a neurobiological perspective as a “witness” to that which goes on in the mind that is produced by the brain: “The witness is the something extra that reveals the presence of implicit *brain* events we call mental.”¹¹ Yet by identifying “that something extra” in the brain with what we “call self, or me, or I”¹² in communicative contexts, he understands the self within the narrow confines of a neurobiological perspective that construes the self as a mental observer of mental events. Moreover, by construing the difference between “observer” and “knower” perspectives on the self as “two stages of the evolutionary development of the self”¹³, he downplays the difference between being an observer and observing an observer and reduces his knower’s insight into the process character of the self to an observer’s account of the evolutionary process of the self.

3.1 *The self as Dasein, Sosein and Wahrsein*

Kierkegaard was more radical and more consistent than this as is shown by his well-known account of the self in *Sickness Unto Death* (1849). He took seriously that the term 'self' signifies a reflexive relation. Human beings, as he put it, are “a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.”¹⁴ This synthesis is not a given but a goal, not, however, in the sense of an external end of a human life but as the internal point of its very living – at least if humans want to live their lives in a human way. Thus, the key distinction that orients his account is not the *biological difference* between human beings and other animals made with respect to *life* (human beings/ animals) but the *anthropological difference* between human and inhuman ways of living a *human life* (human/ inhuman human life).

¹⁰ A. DAMASIO, *The Self Comes to Mind. Constructing the Conscious Mind* (New York: Random House, 2010), 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (1849), transl. H. V. HONG and E. H. HONG (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

This presupposes a view of human beings as selves or, in short, of *human selves* whose central idea is that humans are not merely free to live in either a human or an inhuman way but that they are not free not to do either: Humans *can* live in a human or an inhuman way, and they *must* (i. e. *will always*) do the one or the other. This is the fundamental predicament of created freedom: You cannot be free without practicing it. Humans *can* choose their mode of existing (in so far as they *exist* as human beings)¹⁵ but, at the same time, they cannot *not* choose (in so far as they exist as *human beings*); and hence they will always in fact live in a human or an inhuman way. Thus, Kierkegaard highlights three basic insights about the human self. First, it owes its *Dasein* not to itself but to a creative reality beyond itself: it is a finite reality not of its own making. Second, it owes its *Sosein* to its own making by living in a human or an inhuman way: it is a finite reality that is made to make itself, i. e. that can will to live as the human self it is, or not will it. Third, it becomes a *true self*, i. e. achieves its *Wahrsein*, by willing to live in the human way for which it was made: it is a finite reality that has the duty to become a true self, and since it ought to do so, it can do so.

For Kierkegaard, therefore, the human self has to be analyzed as a two-tier contingent reality: As a contingent *Dasein* it owes its existence and potential to some other reality (the infinite that relates to us by distinguishing itself from us as finite beings). As a contingent *Sosein* it owes the way in which it lives and actualizes its potential as a finite being to itself. And since it can determine its *Sosein* in a true or a false way, depending on how it relates to the truth about its *Dasein* in its self-determination, it has the duty to become a true self and thus achieve its *Wahrsein*. That is to say, the human self is contingent in more than one respect. On the one hand it is a reality not of its own making but posited and made by something different from it: It is a finite being that exists through something else. As such it is a contingent *Dasein* and a *potential self*. On the other hand, it cannot merely be a *Dasein* without at the same time being a *Sosein*. As an actual self it lives in one way or other and exists in either an inhuman or a human way. It actualizes its potential as a self by living either as an egocentric or sinful self (inhuman life) or as a theocentric or true self (human life). Just as the *Dasein* of a self is the change from a merely possible to an actual existence, so the *Sosein* of a self is the result of actualizing one's potential as an actual self in actual situations in one way or another. The distinction between the *Dasein* and *Sosein* is not real but merely analytic since an actual self cannot be the one without at the same time being the other: No human self just exists but it always exists in one way or other (*Dasein* allows for different modes), and no human self exists without living in one way or another (*Sosein* also occurs in different modes). However, there is an important difference not only

¹⁵ That is to say, they are free and able to exist otherwise than they in fact do.

between existing (*Dasein*) and living as a human self (*Sosein*) but also between *Dasein* (the fact that we exist) and the mode of *Dasein* (the way in which we exist). Whereas our existence is not a result of our own decision, the way we exist is: We always could have existed otherwise, and therefore we are responsible for the way in which we actually exist.

For Kierkegaard, this is a moral truth about the self. But there is also a religious one. Just as we cannot be a potential self without having been created as such by the one whom Christians call ‘God’, so we cannot become true selves without being changed from a sinful self-centeredness to a liberated God-centeredness by the same God. God is the one to whom we owe our existence (as our creator) and to whom we also owe that we exist, if we do, in a true rather than a false way (as our savior). As finite selves we have the task and duty to become true selves. With respect to our *Dasein* (that we are) we do *not* make ourselves, but with respect to our *Sosein* (how we are what we are) we do.

In short, the fact that we exist is a *gift* of being posited passively (*Dasein*); the way that we live our life is a *task* which we actively carry out in one way or other as long as we live (*Sosein*); and the way we ought to exist if we want to live in a way that is true to the basic passivity (or gift-character) of our existence (*Wahrsein*) is a *duty* which faces each of us throughout our life. We know about the contingency of our *Dasein* by knowing that our life has begun and will end. We know about the responsibility for our *Sosein* by realizing the changing possibilities of our life from which we choose what we actually become. And we become aware of the responsibility for the mode in which we exist by discovering the real possibility of existing in another way. We discover that we do not achieve what we could when we see how we fail to become the true selves that we can and ought to become. And we begin striving for this when we move – imaginatively and practically – from the negativity of the experience of failure to the positive contrary of it: human life as it ought to be and therefore can be.

3.2 *The self as the relating of a relation*

For Kierkegaard, therefore, the impossible synthesis of the infinite and the finite, which we enact and have to enact in living our life in a human way, is the paradoxical existential task of human beings to become true selves. For human beings *are* selves only by *becoming* selves, and they become selves only by continuously *transforming themselves* from egocentric sinful selves to God-centered true selves. They may achieve or fail to achieve this but no human being can live a human life without striving to become a self-transforming true self. As Kierkegaard put it: “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but

is the relation’s relating itself to itself;” it is the very activity of relating itself to itself.¹⁶

However, this activity is not to be attributed to an entity called ‘self’ as the agent-account of the self would construe it. In more than one respect the self is not the agent but the mode and result of different kinds of activities that take place in a human life: the becoming of a potential self (*Dasein*); the becoming of an actual self by actualizing the potential in one way or another (*Sosein*); and the becoming of a true self by changing from an inadequate to a full actualization of that potential (*Wahrsein*). Thus, before any activity can be ascribed to a self, there must be a prior activity that constitutes that which is called a ‘self’ (*Dasein*) and enables human beings to become actually what they can be potentially: a self. This prior activity cannot be attributed to the human self as agent, but rather constitutes the self as an agent. Now an agent is someone who does something. This requires us to distinguish between two activities with respect to actual selves, their existing (enacting their *Dasein*: ‘I am’) and their acting (performing specific acts: ‘I go for a walk’). Existing is not a state or an action of a self but an activity, namely his or her (as we may say) *activity of ‘self-ing’* (or ‘*selving*’). It occurs in that a human being cannot exist without actually enacting the synthesis he or she has to realize as a human being: We are a synthesis only by becoming it, we become it only by enacting it, and we cannot enact it without doing it in a certain way (modes of living). What an individual human being does or can do, on the other hand, are his or her *acts of living* (*Sosein*), and these acts can be attributed to the individual as their agent. But nobody can act in this way without existing, and nobody can exist without doing it in a certain way (modes of existing). However, whereas we can choose, within the parameters of a given life, the way we want to live and the mode in which we exist, the *activity of existing* is not something we do or choose but that without which we couldn’t be agents (*Dasein*) who can choose and act.¹⁷

But why distinguish in this way between acts of living and the activity of existing? It was Kant’s insight that ‘to exist’ is not a determinative predicate but a localizing or positing one: The meaning of the proposition ‘Sarah is the mother of four girls’ does not change if we add ‘and she exists,’ for this phrase only indicates that there is indeed a Sarah who is the mother of four girls. Whereas ‘to be the mother of four girls’ is a predicate that can truly or falsely be predicated of somebody, the term ‘to exist’ is not a predicate but a localizing

¹⁶ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness unto Death*, 13.

¹⁷ This is what Husserl may have had in mind when he stated: “The ego continuously constitutes itself as existing.” (E. HUSSERL, *Cartesian Meditations*, transl. D. CAIRNS (The Hague: Neijhoff, 1973), 66.) But he puts it in a misleading way by making the ego or self the agent of its own making – a view that is at best paradoxical.

operator ‘There is an x such as ...’ that localizes the x in question (in Kant’s view) in the actual world of experience. The first answers the question ‘Who or what is she?’, the second the different question ‘Does she exist?’ Both questions may be answered in terms of activities. But the *activity of existing* (to *be*) is different from the *acts of being* (or *living*) (to be or to do *something*). And whereas both the *activity of existing* and the *acts of living* can be performed in more than one way, the *modes of living* (cautiously, courageously, bored etc.) do not coincide with the *modes of existing* (as a true self or not as a true self).

When Kierkegaard speaks of ‘synthesis’ and ‘relation’, he addresses the mode of existing and not the mode of living of a human being:

A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. – In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self. – Such a relation that relates itself to itself [cannot] have established itself [but must] have been established by another. – If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation. – The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.¹⁸

That is to say, Kierkegaard uses the term ‘self’ not so much as a noun but as a *verb* (‘self-ing’) for the self-reflexive activity of the finite relating to the infinite (which is impossible¹⁹) by relating to its own attempts at relating to it (which is possible). This is done in the aporetic, inadequate, or self-centered way of a *selfish self* if the finite self relates only to her own relating and doesn’t transcend her own horizon. Or it is done in the true, adequate, or selfless way of a *selfless self* if the finite self, in relating to her own relating, thereby relates to the prior self-relating of the infinite to the finite to which she owes her own being. Thus, just as Kierkegaard uses the term ‘self’ as a *verb* for the self-reflexive activity of relating to one’s own relating (‘self-ing’), so he uses the term ‘true self’ as an *adverb* for the true and adequate mode of doing this by relating not to the infinite (which is impossible) nor merely to one’s own attempts at relating to it (which is aporetic) but, in relating to one’s own relating, to the way(s) in which the infinite relates to the finite in creation (by positing of the finite) and salvation (by enabling the finite to relate adequately to the relating of the infinite to the finite to which it owes its being).

¹⁸ Ibid., 13–14.

¹⁹ There cannot be an external relation between the finite and the infinite but only an internal one; and the internal one is always internal to the infinite and not to the finite.

3.3 Relations, distinctions and the actual infinite

Now relations between a and b are often represented as ‘ aRb ’. But this formula cannot be analyzed as a three-term proposition (a, R, b) representing a three-term state of affairs because this will result in an infinite regress. If we say ‘ a and b are related by R ’, then we can always meaningfully ask how a is related to R and how R is related to b . And if we answer something like ‘ aSR ’ and ‘ RTb ’, where S and T are the relations that relate a to R and R to b respectively, then it is obvious that we can continue to ask the same question *ad infinitum*. This is why Russell and Whitehead in the *Principia Mathematica* analyzed relational propositions not in this way but as quantified functions of one or many place predicates (‘For all x and y : Rx,y ’).

The problem becomes even more pressing in Kierkegaard’s case, and this for at least two reasons. The first is his realist understanding of actual infinity taken over from Hegel. Whereas “in the Middle Ages”, according to Cantor, “all scholastic philosophers advocate Aristotle’s ‘*infinitum actu non datur*’ as an irrefutable principle,”²⁰ we find Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophers like Galilei²¹ or Leibniz confessing to be “in favour of actual infinity.”²² And even though C. F. Gauss protested “against the use of infinite magnitude as something completed, which is never permissible in mathematics. Infinity is merely a way of speaking, the true meaning being a limit which certain ratios approach indefinitely close, while others are permitted to increase without restriction,”²³ the idea of infinite completed sets as actual infinities became widely accepted in classical set theory. Both traditions were combined by Hegel who distinguished between a ‘bad infinite’ that signifies an endless progress whose impossible completion is an unattainable beyond, and a ‘true infinite’ that is not abstract and unattainable but concrete, actual and effective, the actual life of the absolute.²⁴ This ‘true infinite’ is “the self-overcoming of all finitude and one-sidedness. It is not opposed to the finite, but is the self-mediation and interpenetration of the finite and infinite. It contains the finite within itself and is itself contained within the finite. It is truly infinite

²⁰ G. CANTOR, in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen mathematischen und philosophischen Inhalts*, ed. E. ZERMELO (Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), 3.174.

²¹ “The continuum actually consists of infinitely many indivisibles,” G. GALILEI, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences*, transl. H. CREW and A. DE SALVIO (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 34.

²² G. W. LEIBNIZ, “Leibniz’s Reply to the Extract from the Letter of M. Fourcher, Canon of Dijon, March 16, 1693,” in *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, ed. G. M. DUNCAN (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1908), 71.

²³ C. F. GAUSS, in a letter to Schumacher, July 12, 1831, *Werke* VIII, 216. Cited by S. C. KLEENE, *Introduction to Metamathematics* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1952 (1971)), 48.

²⁴ Cf. D. E. ROSE and S. SKEMPTON, *Alienation After Derrida* (London/New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 82.

and unlimited, because it is not opposed to anything other than itself, but is beyond all opposition, containing the whole process of opposition and limitation within itself.”²⁵ Thus, if the infinite is understood in this realist sense, then there cannot be a relation between finite and infinite but only an internal distinction in the infinite. And if Kierkegaard speaks of a relation between them, he cannot consistently understand the infinite in the sense he does.

However, Kierkegaard’s realist understanding of actual infinity is not the only problem here. The other is his view of the relation between the infinite and the finite. As a long tradition held, the contrast between finite and infinite marks a difference but not a (real) relation. There is no relation between the infinite and the finite that can be represented by a third term: The formula ‘infinite – R–finite’ is not a possible representation of the relationship between the infinite and the finite because there is no third position that does not fall under the infinite or the finite. Everything that is is either finite or infinite, and there is nothing actual or possible that is not either the one or the other. Any possible relation must be an instantiation of either the finite or the infinite and hence cannot be a third term relating the finite and the infinite. Rather, the relationship is either impossible or merely imaginary (a self-negation of the finite that construes the infinite as its negation: negative infinity); or it must be understood as an active relating of the infinite to the finite, i. e. a way of opening up the finite towards the infinite or of differentiating the infinite from the infinite by incorporating or encompassing it (positive infinity). In any case, on the basis of an actual infinite and actual finite there can only be two terms, the infinite and the finite, and the infinite is the active part whereas the finite is that on which the infinite operates.

3.4 *The self as activity and mode of relating*

Against this backdrop, Kierkegaard describes human beings as a synthesis of the infinite and the finite – understood as different actualities and not merely as an orientational distinction. That is to say, he understands human life as the place or locus of a twofold process: On the one hand, the life of human beings is the place where the finite distinguishes itself from the infinite by negating itself (negative infinity). On the other hand, it is also here where it becomes (or can become) manifest that the infinite (as a positive infinity) distinguishes itself from the finite in such a way that the finite is disclosed *as* finite in contrast to the infinite into which it is incorporated, or by which it is encompassed, without being destroyed, mixed up, or confused with it. In the first case, all activity resides in the finite while the infinite is its negative construction: it is that which is not finite. In the second case, the finite can in no way be active but

²⁵ Ibid., 83.

is purely passive (i. e. that on which the infinite operates), whereas the infinite is the sole center of activity: it is that which distinguishes itself from the finite.

However, to be is to be active (*esse est operari*), and this is true of finite and infinite being. Hence even though the finite is passive in that the infinite operates on it (i. e. constitutes the *Dasein* of the finite), it cannot be merely passive but is also active albeit in a dependent and relative sense (in its *Sosein*) – dependent on and relative to the prior activity of the infinite. What is this activity of the finite in the synthesis of the infinite and the finite?

Kierkegaard’s answer is twofold. On the one hand, the finite can only relate to the finite, to itself, and to its own activities, including its abortive attempt to relate to the infinite. On the other hand and because of that, the finite cannot actively relate to the infinite but only to the relating activity of the infinite that constitutes the finite; it does so by relating to itself as a finite reality constituted by the infinite; and in doing so it relates to the way in which the infinite relates to it by constituting or creating it through distinguishing itself from it.

Thus, the human being is a *potential self* by being created as a human being, and it becomes an *actual self* by finitely relating in its relating to itself to the prior relating of the infinite to which it owes its existence. That is to say, there is, first, infinity’s self-distinction from, and self-relating to, the finite. This creates the human being as a *potential self*, i. e. as a finite being that differs from all other finite beings by its potential of relating to infinity’s self-relating, that is, by its potential to become a self. Second, this *potential self* becomes an *actual self* by being unable, in relating to itself, not to relate in its own relating to the self-relating of infinity, whether it is aware of this or not. Finally, an actual self becomes a *true self* when a human being actively relates to that which constitutes it, i. e. to the relating of the infinite to the finite; and this it can do only by relating not to the infinite, nor to its relating as such, but rather to the result of its relating – that is to say, by relating to the finite being that comes into existence by the infinite distinguishing itself from it. Only in consciously and willingly relating to itself as a finite reality constituted by the infinite can the finite relate to the infinite and its activities: There is no direct way of relating to the infinite but only this indirect way. Only in this secondary sense can finite human beings contribute to constituting themselves by becoming a self. But they cannot constitute their potential for becoming a self, for in this they are completely and exclusively dependent on the prior activity of the infinite. And they cannot relate to the infinite and its activities without doing it in and through relating to themselves. They have the potential to do so, and they necessarily do it. As a finite reality constituted in this way humans cannot *not* relate to the relating activity of the infinite. They do this necessarily because they cannot be without relating to it. But they can do this in a way that acknowledges their being constituted by the activity of the infinite (true or selfless self) or by ignoring or denying this (self-centered, selfish or sinful