Kierkegaard and Narrative Self-Development:

A Contemporary Philosophical and

Neuroscientific Approach

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KIERKEGAARD AND NARRATIVE SELF-DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: The looming question about life's meaning is more salient in our modern era of advanced technological developments and social structures. Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century author and philosopher, perceived this modern dilemma and provided a meaningful answer to the urgent existential struggle by developing an extensive understanding of selfhood and establishing a comprehensive method for self-development. This thesis argues that empirical evidence from contemporary neuroscience and psychology substantiates Kierkegaard's explanation of the self and self-development. I explain in chapter one that, even with the vast amount of knowledge that modernity has brought, we cannot seem to reach the heart of the matter about life's meaning, and deaths from despair are currently at an all-time high. In chapter two, I explain that Kierkegaard works out a detailed concept of selfhood that emphasizes the importance of self-conscious awareness, contemplative inwardness, and the power of transcendence. This requires that people know themselves and their character, which also creates significance in life through embracing the task of freedom. In chapter three, I argue that Kierkegaard's conception of the self is teleological, and to guide self-development properly over time, a person must aim to become a single individual that imitates the intentions of Christ. I argue in chapter four that knowing the self as a single individual and imitating Christ's intentions becomes easier when selfhood is structured in narrative self-identity. I establish the practice of narrative-self-talk as a tool to guide self-development towards the Kierkegaardian telos that focuses on maintaining explicit conscious awareness of the self as a single individual. Chapter five shows that the Kierkegaardian concepts of teleological selfhood and narrative self-development are supported by evidence from psychology and neuroscience. Furthermore, this evidence shows the method to be highly efficient and effective for shaping a person's habits, schemas, and character. In chapter six, I conclude by showing that this empirically backed methodological approach ultimately provides meaning to life by generating belonging, coherence, and significance while also satisfying the human need for transcendence in life.

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Dedication:

To my parents, Jonathan and Kasee.

Without their wisdom and guidance, this thesis would have never happened.

"Listen to your father's instruction

and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

They are a garland to grace your head

and a chain to adorn your neck."

-Proverbs 1:8-9 (NIV)

I.   Introduction

Times are different, and even though the times are often like a human being—he changes completely but nevertheless remains just as foolish, only in a new pattern—it nevertheless is true that the times are different and have different requirements. - Søren Kierkegaard[1]

Human beings are social animals, and, like many social animals, we form groups, packs, and tribes to better our chances of survival. One major characteristic that separates human social groups from other social animal groups is our capacity for language. Language allows humans to form complex social groups by distinguishing the 'us' from 'them,' establishing hierarchies within social groups and creating rules and beliefs for the group. Individuals within the social group gain their identity by conforming to the standards set by the group and fulfilling a role within it. Unifying one's identity with the group was necessary for survival since belonging to and cooperating with the group meant a person received the benefits of the collective working together. To go against the group meant individuals risked their livelihoods. In our modern times, however, our basic survival needs are mostly met, and therefore group conformity is no longer a necessary element for survival. Nonetheless, what was once the small social group necessary for survival has grown into a mass public with the power of opinion that shapes

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[1] S. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination | Judge for Yourself!* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 15. (hereafter cited as *For Self-Examination*).

customs, policies, laws, and religions. Since humans have a natural tendency toward group conformity, the individual is shaped by the public doxa, often without conscious awareness.

The result of this condition in our contemporary age is that the public consumes the individual, and personality is largely lost. Our current society homogenizes, educates, and assimilates individuals through public institutions, social media, entertainment, and a cultural system that shapes the individual. The public becomes an abstract force that establishes values based on popular opinions, an echo chamber effect is established, and dissenting views and opinions get ignored. The force of the public does not even need to be in close physical proximity with the individual to mold them, especially with the invention of the internet, which allows people to receive public opinion constantly right at their fingertips. People often form identities around public matters and act in ways that public opinion will favor. Being just like the others and belonging to a public mass is viewed as a kind of loyalty to the social group, so individuals often embody the public persona.

The more people that conform to a particular public social group, the more power that group gains and the greater the movement seems to be. However, as the public quantity grows, the individual becomes less significant. The public aims for a numerical increase, and the single digits do not matter in relation to the whole. Sociality as an animal instinct finds rest and tranquility in the size of the herd; the larger the herd, the safer the individual member will be. The human herd, the public, is not far from this notion. The animality of humanity finds itself comforted by the group since wanting to be like the others and wanting to be accepted by the group is a part of human nature.

However, distinct from other social animals, humans have the unique feature of autonoetic consciousness. Autonoetic consciousness allows humans to understand our individual

existence and perceive time, experience ourselves as having a personal past, make decisions about a possible imagined future, and even have the existential realization of our eventual non-existence. Unlike most life on earth, humans can also go against their instinctual drives and urges, even to the extent of going against our own survival. As Joseph LeDoux puts it, "the autonoetically conscious human brain is the only entity in the history of life that has ever been able to choose, at will, to terminate its own existence, or even put the organism's physical existence at risk for the thrill of simply doing so."[2] The self-awareness that arises from autonoetic consciousness allows people to gain an understanding of themselves as individuals within the larger group. Humans developing autonoetic consciousness has led to the history of the philosophy of the self, where theories about selfhood and consciousness have prompted all sorts of ideas about life, happiness, and existence. Autonoetic consciousness and self-awareness give rise to the tension between the individual and the social group. Individuals understand that they belong to the social group but can become aware that they are also responsible for their personal actions and can make choices about what they want their lives to look like, even counter to group expectations.

Since humans are self-conscious and can shape themselves if they choose, the public shaping a person can lead them to inauthentic selfhood. Inauthentic selves refuse to accept responsibility for their choices, a refusal which can often happen without conscious awareness. Søren Kierkegaard recognized this problem in his time and foresaw the effects of public doxa on individual action. Kierkegaard argued that anxiety is the price we pay for the freedom to choose how we shape ourselves. The anxiety that comes from having the ability to shape the self can

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[2] Joseph LeDoux, *The Deep History of Ourselves: The Four-Billion Year Story of How We Got Conscious Brains* (New York, NY: Viking Publishing 2019), 373. (hereafter cited as *The Deep History of Ourselves*).

lead to despair, especially when people become aware of having been shaped by the public and not by their own will. Therefore, people must shape themselves authentically in their own conscious awareness since, as Kierkegaard explains, every person "feels a natural need to form a view of life, a conception of life's meaning and aim."[3] Authentic self-development is essential for overcoming despair and living correctly, which requires individuals to self-consciously shape themselves separate from what public opinion seems to instruct.

The other side to this dilemma is the movement of absolute individualism, which even this particularly western idea of individualism itself has been established by public opinion. We hear all kinds of maxims in our culture, such as 'speak your truth,' 'you do you,' 'live your best life,' and 'don't let anyone tell you how to live your life.' We can see this desire for individual expression manifest itself in just about every facet of our lives: the twenty-four-hour news cycle, social media, selfie culture, reactionary politics, virtual reality, consumerism, and any type of media content imaginable at the touch of our fingertips that is always on and available to us. The immediacy of life has brought excessive possibilities and a confusing number of conceptions about what the good life means for each person. The underlying despair results from the cultural features we partake in, which expose us to all the possibilities that are out there while simultaneously closing them off through dreadful narratives. Popular narratives include notions that the world is coming to an end because of climate change, war between nations is inevitable, the world economies are collapsing, and it is too late to do anything about any of it. There is catastrophe seizing our attention everywhere we look, and the current global pandemic has only exacerbated this problem.

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[3] S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alistair Hannay (Great Britain, UK: Penguin Random House UK 1992), 493. (hereafter cited as *Either/Or*).

The constraining force that these cultural features impose on individuals leads to a breakdown of individual responsibility, and the blame is shifted away from individuals towards the public. Conceptions of some mass 'out there' that is to blame allows for people to get swept up into and cast out of public affairs with little commitment or thought. With the breakdown of individual responsibility, whether ethical or legal, the individual is off the hook and can live the life they choose. People can choose among many possible ways to live, and in the end, it can seem that it really does not matter what life choices are made since everything else is collapsing around us. Even simply daydreaming about all the possibilities seems to bring the self some temporary peace of mind. We can vicariously dabble in all sorts of possible lifestyles through social media, reality television, video games, or a quick internet search. However, Kierkegaard also saw the life of possibilities as a danger to the individual, bringing just as much anxiety as the fear of looming catastrophe. On the 'you do you and live your truth' doctrine, Kierkegaard indicates that "this self becomes an abstract possibility; it flounders in possibility until it is exhausted," and this life of abstract possibility leads to a point where "eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self."[4] The self becomes lost in possibility, and the focus on absolute individualism leads to a loss of the self.

This tension between the force of the public and the draw of individualism shows that self-development cannot be entirely one or the other; it must lie somewhere in the middle, properly synthesizing both components. A study recently published titled *Why Deaths of Despair Are Increasing in the US* helps exemplify this problem. The researchers behind the study argue that "deaths of despair combined with metabolic and cardiac deaths exceed by 4-fold the next

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[4] S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1980), 36. (hereafter cited as *Sickness unto Death*).

important cause of death, cancer."[5] They claim that deaths by suicide and spiraling addictive behaviors are caused by and define despair. Deaths from despair are partly a result of our lack of community. They claim that "the small-scale societies of hunters and gatherers depended on strong family bonds and the cooperation of non–family members. To encourage this, the neural circuitry of the human brain delivers dopamine pulses for both giving and receiving,"[6] and go on to say, "as modern life grows more isolating—as we sit alone and stare at screens—daily pulses are lost that were had from cooperative work and from sharing."[7] Being too isolated from others leads to despair; however, we also need to develop our lives independently from others. They explain that "the *Homo sapiens'* hallmark includes noneconomic activities, such as play, art, music, dance, and literature. Given that the human brain commits substantial resources to these circuits, which provide no calories, these circuits presumably have adaptive value."[8] We need the opportunity for individual expression and communal living to truly flourish as individuals. In the absence of these foundational elements of selfhood, the individual is in despair. There is an existential problem here that needs to be solved. Kierkegaard rightly saw this problem and sought to synthesize both factors in a healthy and upbuilding way.

This current problem of despair over the self is worsened by advances in neuroscience that coincide with the neo-Darwinian notion of humans being mere animals. Neuroscience's attempts to reduce the mind and consciousness to neurons simply reacting to various stimuli has relegated the human to a material being in a material world, and the self is no longer viewed as

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[5] Peter Sterling and Michael L. Platt, *Why Deaths of Despair Are Increasing in the US and Not Other Industrial Nations—Insights from Neuroscience and Anthropology* (Epub ahead of print: American Medical Association & JAMA Psychiatry 2022), 1.
[6] Ibid, 2.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid, 5.

exceptional. Owen Flanagan and Gregg Caruso have coined the term 'neuroexistentialism' to refer to this phenomenon and explain it as "a zeitgeist that involves a central preoccupation with human purpose and meaning accompanied by the anxiety that there is none."[9] The anxiety and despair that results from this new wave of existentialism bring into question just about every conception of free will, morality, and religiosity that used to inform the dominant worldview. The synthesis of neo-Darwinism and neuroscience has also led some to embrace hard determinism, made popular by people such as Daniel Wegner, Daniel Dennett, and Tom Clark. This view holds that the human self is purely the result of material processes that are influenced by genetics and the environment, and that consciousness is an epiphenomenon that has no real control over who we become or what we do. Evan Thompson has come up with the term 'neuro-nihilism' to describe this view that no such thing as 'selves' exist in the world.[10] I end this thesis with an attempt to respond to these problems by giving an alternative account of consciousness and self-development, one grounded in the Kierkegaardian conception of the self.

Since selfhood is a necessary goal in life, a person is lost and despairing without it. Therefore, it is crucial that a person develops an authentic self. In his major works concerning the self, Søren Kierkegaard has developed a substantial and thorough view of what it means to be an authentic person and how a person should develop authentic selfhood. Still, his elusiveness and ambiguity about individual selfhood has left much room for interpretation on this topic. Contemporary Kierkegaardian scholars are generally in disagreement on how to understand Kierkegaard's formulation of the self. Much work has been done over the last few decades to

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[9] Gregg Coruso and Owen Flanagan, *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the age of Neuroscience* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2018), 2.
[10] Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2017), 322.

interpret and clarify Kierkegaard's understanding of the self.[11] However, tension arises between the disciplines since theories of selfhood and consciousness are only viable if empirical evidence from neuroscience and psychology can show that the ideal self is attainable. In this thesis, I will argue that contemporary neuroscientific accounts of identity and consciousness align with the conception of the self that Kierkegaard outlines in his work on human psychology and self-identity. Furthermore, I agree with some contemporary scholars that a teleological-centered narrative approach to Kierkegaard's conception of the self allows for a more complete notion of self-development. My strategy for getting there is somewhat distinct.

I begin this thesis by explaining the self as Kierkegaard describes it in his pseudonymous works, looking primarily at *The Sickness unto Death* and *Either/Or*. Next, I argue that understanding the development of the self, as Kierkegaard describes it, requires a teleologically centered approach to self-development. Teleological notions of self-development have seen a revival in contemporary moral philosophy; however, these accounts of the human telos must be adjusted to fit the Kierkegaardian scheme. I then argue that a narrative approach to self-identity is necessary for self-development when there is a clearly defined teleological direction. I propose the idea of narrative-self-talk to facilitate self-development in a practical and applicable way that promotes conscious and explicit self-development. Lastly, I synthesize this teleologically centered narrative view of Kierkegaardian self-development with contemporary neuroscience accounts to show that Kierkegaard is accurate in his conception of how the self operates from a biological and psychological perspective. I conclude by claiming that this account is a

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[11] Examples of recent works include: Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative*; Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self*; Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*; Peter Mehl, *Thinking Through Kierkegaard*; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*; Mark Tietjen, *Kierkegaard, Communication, and Virtue*; and Paul Sponheim offers a great historical sketch of the work that has been done on Kierkegaardian selfhood in part two of his book *Existing Before God*.

compelling understanding of the self and consciousness and can be beneficial when developing the self authentically beyond public doxa and individual anxiety. The overall conception of selfhood and self-development in this thesis is a significant source for making meaning in life and addressing the modern human condition of despair.

II.   The Kierkegaardian Self

If self-knowledge does not lead to one knowing oneself before God—well, then there is something to what purely human self-observation says, namely, that this self-knowledge leads to a certain emptiness that produces dizziness. - Søren Kierkegaard[12]

Proper self-development is essential to a human's well-being. To understand why this is the case, we first must understand what constitutes a self and how the self operates. Through all his various works as an author and philosopher, Kierkegaard offers a meticulous and nuanced picture of the ideal self to be achieved. He works out his most straightforward concept of selfhood in *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. His various other works provide structural support for the groundwork presented here. Kierkegaard's concept of the self is dialectical, involving two opposite poles of the self that must be brought together to create selfhood. He uses the term spirit to represent the self-conscious awareness of the dialectical relationship within the self, and the spirit has the capacity to monitor and organize the relationship between the antipoles. The self as spirit relates to the dialectical self to balance and synthesize the relation, which brings about a proper self.

Not only is the self a relation as such, but proper self-development also requires self-accountability that is established through the ethical movement of realizing the self's freedom. Kierkegaard's ethical structure does not neatly fit into a system of ethics from historical

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[12] *For Self-Examination*, 106.

philosophy; rather, he formulates a more comprehensive interpretation of the ethical life that turns ethical understanding away from the social factors toward the self by stressing inwardness, freedom, and conscious willfulness. The ideal self that results from synthesizing the inward polarities and responsibly willing inward development depends on the self relating to God, who is the other that the self must be accountable to. By relating to God, the self gains a full understanding of freedom found in the movement of love. This relation of the self to God is necessary for proper self-actualization since people cannot truly know every last detail about themselves through their own powers of intellect. In this section, I explain this structure of the self that Kierkegaard develops and present his distinct understanding of selfhood, consciousness, existence, freedom, and the existential ethical movement of the self towards God as the absolute other.

2.1 – The Self in Sickness unto Death

Writing under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus,[13] Kierkegaard opens part one of *Sickness unto Death* with his famous explanation for what it means to be a self. Anti-Climacus says:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? 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. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered 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.[14]

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[13] S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments | Volume 1*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992), 627. (hereafter cited as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). Although it is well known that Kierkegaard is the author of the pseudonymous writings, his request in the final pages of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is that "if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author" (627). Throughout this section, I will honor his wish and attribute his works to the pseudonyms.
[14] *The Sickness unto Death*, 13.

We are given two key points about the self from this opening passage. First, the self is a synthesis between the polarities of the infinite, eternal, and free aspects of the self on one side and the finite, temporal, and necessary aspects of the self on the other. We are finite, limited beings operating in temporality, so there are certain aspects of our selfhood that we must accept. These given aspects of selfhood arise from necessity. They include things we did not choose about ourselves, such as the race, gender, family, society, and culture we acquire at birth. However, we are not wholly given beings. We have the freedom to step back from our immediacy to shape ourselves towards specific goals, careers, commitments, and we can develop character traits that we find appealing. As Anthony Rudd explains in his book *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, "one set stands for our limitations…the other stands for our power of transcendence."[15] I will be using Anthony Rudd's terminology of 'immanence' to refer to the necessity of the self and 'transcendence' to refer to the self's freedom, which aligns with the need for self-acceptance and self-shaping, respectively.[16]

The synthesis between the polarities of immanence and transcendence within the self do not make up the self since, "considered [only] in this way, a human being is still not a self."[17] Beyond the relation between our immanence and transcendence, there is a second key component in the self, which is the 'positive third' self relation. As Merold Westphal explains, the self is "a self not by virtue of being such a synthesis [between immanence and transcendence] but by virtue of being aware of being such a synthesis…The self relates itself to itself not only in

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[15] Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press 2012). (hereafter cited as *Self, Value, and Narrative*).
[16] Ibid, 41. These are terms Kierkegaard himself uses throughout his works, however I credit Rudd since he uses the terms specifically to group the polarities together.
[17] *Sickness unto Death*, 13.

its awareness of itself but also in its presiding over it."[18] The self, then, is the conscious awareness of these two polarities and our ability to relate to them and relate them to each other. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis explains that "the human being is a synthesis of the psychical and physical, but a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit."[19] The synthesis between immanence and transcendence would not be possible without the self as a spirit being present to have awareness and unite them. The spirit is self-consciously aware of the polarities. It allows for deliberate reflection to mediate the synthesis actively by viewing it through self-reflection, almost as if it were another person, gaining new knowledge of itself in the relation between the two.

In this sense, the self is a double-ordered relationship; the relation between immanence and transcendence is the first relationship, while the relation between the spirit and the first relationship is the second, higher-order relationship. However, the self is in an imperfect synthesis and is incomplete. We are not born as fully developed selves with our character and personality entirely matured. Therefore, selfhood is something that we must work toward. As Anti-Climacus explains, "generally speaking, consciousness—that is, self-consciousness—is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self."[20] Developing the self through the synthesis requires conscious effort. The more effort people put towards this self-conscious synthesis, the more they will become a self because "a person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has,

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[18] Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Psychology and Unconscious Despair* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1987), 42.
[19] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Alistair Hannay (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation 2014), 53. (hereafter cited as *Concept of Anxiety*).
[20] *Sickness unto Death*, 29.

the more self-consciousness he has also."[21] A well-developed self-consciousness is essential for

actualizing our selfhood and, as Peter Mehl argues, "the individual's ability to conceptualize and

then commit to, or at least sustain a relation to, a specific image of who he or she is"[22] is how we

develop more will and consciousness.

Developing the will and gaining more consciousness begins with choosing to actualize

the self, and the choice to actualize our selfhood is made in freedom. When a person depends

solely on necessity, the self will not develop authentically. Development simply through

evolution or the transition from childhood to adulthood will not lead to an authentic self since the

transition can be mediated by the public's influence on a person and other factors outside that

person's control. A person only becomes an authentic self through a choice in the act of freedom.

David Mercer argues in *Kierkegaard's Living-Room* that "the thesis and the antithesis are

brought together by the spirit: the self is posited by the spirit acting freely. This means that there

now exists the potential for the self to choose itself in the relation that is the synthesis."[23] The

self as spirit exists in the tension between immanence and transcendence, which enables the

possibility for the spirit to choose the self, and this choice is always made in freedom. We

develop more will and consciousness through our conscious decisions, and being aware of our

choices allows for an understanding of ourselves as responsible agents. A stable synthesis

between immanence and transcendence is where a true self will be found. When there is

instability in the synthesis and awareness of the inadequacy of synthesis, a person will not be a

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Peter J. Mehl, *Thinking Through Kierkegaard: Existential Identity in a Pluralistic World* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press 2005), 83.

[23] David E. Mercer, *Kierkegaard's Living-Room: The Relation Between Faith and History in Philosophical Fragments* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press 2001), 33.

consistent self. The dissatisfaction that results from "this state of disequilibrium is what

Kierkegaard calls (psychologically) despair and (theologically) sin."[24]

Since we have the freedom to actualize ourselves, and there is a possibility for the self to

be in disequilibrium, stability within the self is only possible if we are pointing our self-

development in the right direction. If the human self had established itself, then there would be

many correct ways to develop the synthesis of the self. However, the polarities of immanence

and transcendence cannot be "in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself,

by relating itself to that which established the entire relation."[25] Anti-Climacus claims that the

power which established the entire relationship is God, to whom we must also correctly relate. In

his book *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, C. Stephen Evens illustrates this synthesis between

the self and God:

> Humans are both unique[transcendence] and yet part of the natural order[immanence]. The whole
> of the natural order rests on God's free creative power. Within that natural order, God has created
> human beings with the capacity for free, responsible choice. The capacity of the human self to
> define itself…is rooted in God's creative power and intentions.[26]

Since God establishes the self as a relation, we only have the possibility of actualizing our fully

developed selfhood through a relationship with Him. This relationship with God is the self

relating itself to itself, and in doing so, relating itself to God, which is "the highest ethical task, in

the sense that the highest form of selfhood requires a conscious relation to God."[27] Equilibrium

in the synthesis between immanence and transcendence can only result in actualized selfhood

when individuals are also relating themselves to God.

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[24] *Self, Value, and Narrative*, 42.
[25] *Sickness unto Death*, 14.
[26] C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2006), 268. (hereafter cited as *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*).
[27] Ibid, 272.

Having a conscious relationship with God is essential for balancing the synthesis and establishing the self-awareness of the individual as an individual. When a person directly relates to God, they stand as an individual and not as a member of a group or society of people. This is illustrated clearly by the idea of God as a judge. Anti-Climacus says, "it follows from the fact that the concept of 'judgment' corresponds to the single individual; judgment is not made *en masse*. People can be put to death *en masse*, can be sprayed *en masse*, can be flattered *en masse* – in short, in many ways they can be treated as cattle, but they cannot be judged as cattle, for cattle cannot come under judgment. No matter how many are judged, if the judging is to have any earnestness and truth, then each individual is judged."[28] When a person stands in a direct relationship to God, such as standing before Him in judgment, they are at that moment a single individual accounting for their actions: "this is why God is 'the judge,' because for Him there is no crowd, only single individuals."[29] Awareness of the self as an individual and accepting accountability for the conscious, free choices is the first step to becoming an authentic self.

As human beings, we have the existential freedom to make these choices that will develop ourselves. Our responsibility is to develop the self correctly since "to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity's claim upon him."[30] We develop ourselves correctly when God is the basis of the self, and we have self-acceptance for our immanence while shaping ourselves by choices made in freedom through our transcendence. However, our freedom of choice is not entirely unrestrained since our immanence is inherent within the synthesis of the self. Kierkegaard explains the synthesis of freedom and necessity in his *Papers and Journals*:

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[28] *Sickness unto Death*, 123.
[29] Ibid, 123n.
[30] Ibid, 21.

> This idea of an abstract *liberum arbitrium* (free will) is a fantasy, as though a person at every moment of his life had this continual abstract possibility, so that really he never got going, as though freedom were not also a historical state of affairs…The will has a history, a continuous history. It can even come to the point where a person finally loses the ability to choose.[31]

Choices made in freedom are historical and become part of who we are, contributing to our immanence and constraining possible decisions that can be made later. Even the earliest choices in our lives are inhibited by our upbringing, family, culture, society, and the time to which we belong. If we allow ourselves, we can be carried through life being shaped by these external factors without an awareness that they are actively shaping us. This historical necessity of the self leads to impulses and habits that generate our actions without any conscious deliberation. To live solely acting on these impulses is the heart of what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic life, and this person is ground "as smooth as a rolling stone,"[32] going through life rolling along without an active will.

2.2 – The Ethical Self in Either/Or

These impulsive actions eventually shape who we become, which is not a self at all in the Kierkegaardian sense. For this reason, Judge William continually instructs his young friend, the nameless aesthete, to "choose yourself" throughout his second letter in *Either/Or: A Fragmented Life*.[33] The aesthete whom the Judge is writing to is devoid of any moral worth and has no ethical self; at most, he can conform to society's social norms and laws but does not go further. The aesthete is a person that has been shaped by necessity, only focused on the present moment, rejecting the obligation to make choices to form his self-identity. Instead, he acts on impulsivity and makes his choices unconsciously. To help the young man, the Judge first instructs that he

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[31] S. Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Great Britain, UK: Penguin Random House UK 1996), 524. (hereafter cited as *Papers and Journals*).
[32] *Sickness unto Death*, 34.
[33] *Either/Or.* The phrase 'choose yourself' is repeated throughout the chapter titled "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality."

must "choose despair" since it is the first step in gaining an awareness that there is a disequilibrium in the synthesis of the self.[34] The Judge then explains to him that the self is "the most abstract thing of all which yet, at the same time, is the most concrete thing of all – it is freedom."[35] The aesthete must choose himself in freedom in an absolute sense to form the self.

Choosing the self in the absolute sense means establishing an ethical character for yourself since "the only absolute either/or there is is the choice between good and evil, but it is also absolutely ethical."[36] By choosing himself in the absolute sense, the aesthete will come to find that the self "is not the consciousness of freedom in general, since that is a determination of thought; rather it is the product of a choice and is the consciousness of this determinate free being which is himself and no other."[37] The Judge is positing the formulation of producing the spirit given by Anti-Climacus. The spirit is self-conscious awareness of both our freedom and necessity, and the first step towards developing the will and consciousness is choosing the self as an ethical task to reflect on and develop.

If a person does not consciously choose the self in this way, the self will be shaped by the external factors around them, which is not how an authentic self is developed. It is also not possible to avoid choices in general as an attempt to abstain from ethical decision-making, "for it is a delusion to think one can keep one's personality blank, or that one can in any real sense arrest and interrupt personal life. The personality already has interest in the choice before one chooses, and if one postpones the choice the personality makes the choice unconsciously."[38] Here, the Judge refers to decisions made on impulses. If there is no conscious will or deliberation

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[34] *Either/Or*, 513.
[35] Ibid, 516.
[36] Ibid, 485.
[37] Ibid, 523.
[38] Ibid, 483.

on the choice at hand, then the choice is made implicitly. Without conscious awareness of the decision, there is a significant chance that an error will occur. Even though there is also the possibility for error in decisions made consciously with deliberation, unconscious decisions that lead to error go unrecognized by the chooser as something that involves personal responsibility. If the choice is not recognized beforehand, meaning is given after the fact since deliberation did not precede it, and the choice is not authentic. People must choose themselves ethically to gain a conscious awareness of their character, how their choices affect themselves and others, and how the choices they make will shape their future.

In this sense, choosing the self brings the self as spirit into existence. As the Judge explains, "the self did not exist previously, for it came into existence through the choice."[39] However, the self exists immanently in the world through birth, so he goes on to say, "and yet it has been in existence, for it was indeed 'he himself' [who made the choice]"[40] The choice to choose yourself makes two movements at the same time:

> What is chosen does not exist and comes into existence through the choice, and what is chosen exists, otherwise it would not be a choice. For if the thing I chose did not exist but became absolute through the choice itself, I would not have chosen, I would have created. But I do not create myself, I choose myself. Therefore while nature has been created out of nothing, while I myself *qua* my immediate personal existence have been created out of nothing, as free spirit I am born of the principle of contradiction, or born by the fact that I chose myself.[41]

This seemingly paradoxical notion of choosing the self is understood not as the chooser creating the self but as the chooser establishing the spirit of self-conscious awareness through the choice. Choosing oneself brings a conscious awareness of the self as a synthesis and a realization that the spirit presides over it. Once the self has been established, we can self-consciously reflect on ourselves and apply proper standards to our lives to begin actively synthesizing and self-shaping.

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[39] Ibid, 517.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

Hence, the synthesis of the self is incomplete unless the self is also in a relationship with God, who establishes the self and offers us the necessary conditions to guide our self-development. Through this movement, people have the freedom to choose themselves, and once the choice is made, they establish an individual history.

Within the arrangement of the person's physical existence and the spirit of the self brought into existence through a choice made in freedom, each person already has a sense of self-identity that imparts the capacity for deciding to choose the self. Anti-Climacus says this basic sense of self-identity is the lowest form of self-awareness and compares it with the analogy of the house: "every human being is a physical-psychical synthesis intended to be spirit; this is the building, but he prefers to live in the basement, that is, in sensate categories."[42] The chooser and the self brought about by the choice are both the same person; however, the choice makes a person deeply aware of their selfhood. The Judge explains the choice by saying, "only when one has taken possession of oneself in the choice, has penetrated oneself so totally that every movement is attended by the consciousness of a responsibility for oneself, only then has one chosen oneself ethically."[43] By choosing the self ethically, the person begins making conscious decisions regarding actions that shape the character. It takes considerable conscious willpower to shape the self and requires significant mental effort and discipline. This movement starts with a deep consciousness of the self and the ethical responsibility needed to have a self. However, it must go beyond just simply having an awareness of the self since "the ethical individual knows himself, but this knowledge is not mere contemplation, for then the individual would be specified

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[42] *Sickness unto Death*, 43. The quote goes on to say "Moreover, he not only prefers to live in the basement – no, he loves it so much that he is indignant if anyone suggests that he move to the superb upper floor that stands vacant at his disposal, for he is, after all, living in his own house."
[43] *Either/Or*, 540.

in respect of his necessity; it is a reflection on himself, which is itself an action, and that is why I have been careful to use the expression 'to choose oneself' instead of 'to know oneself.'"[44] So then, choosing the self is being consciously aware of and accepting immanence while taking responsibility for the choices made in freedom while remaining consciously aware of this synthesis during future deliberation and action.

Choosing the self in this way is a two-part process. First, people must know themselves deeply in the sense that they become aware of their current personality and reflect on their past to understand how their experiences have shaped them and in what ways their actions have been consequential to their self-development. The second step is accepting full responsibility for their past and, for Judge William, this acceptance is expressed through repentance since "repentance puts the individual into the most heartfelt connection, and the most intimate cohesion, with the surrounding world."[45] In a lengthy section, the Judge clearly explains the two-part process of choosing the self, which I believe is worth quoting in full:

> A person who chooses himself ethically chooses himself concretely as this definite individual, and he achieves this concretion by the choice being identical with the repentance which sanctions the choice. The individual is then aware of himself as this definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world. He does not pause to consider whether to include some particular trait or not, for he knows there is something far higher that he stands to lose if he does not. At the instant of choice, then, he is in the most complete isolation for he withdraws from the surroundings, and yet is at the same instant in absolute continuity for he chooses himself as product; and this choice is freedom's choice, so that in choosing himself as product he can just as well be said to produce himself. At the instant of choice, then, he is at the conclusion, for his personhood forms a closure; and yet in the same instant he is precisely at the beginning for he chooses himself in respect of his freedom.[46]

Choosing the self involves assuming responsibility for past actions and the instincts and impulses that inform decision-making. By becoming consciously aware of these instincts and impulses,

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[44] Ibid, 549.
[45] Ibid, 535.
[46] Ibid, 542-43.

people can begin shaping themselves ethically towards their desired character and personal identity by denying these impulses. This choice is choosing the self as a product to be formed and molded over time, which is how a person properly works towards authentic selfhood.

2.3 – The Self of Freedom and Necessity in History

The choice to produce the self is the individual's free choice. However, according to the judge, the freedom to shape the self is only actualized by some choices and not others. When people set a life that exists outside themselves as the goal, such as wanting to be rich and famous like their favorite celebrity, despair sets in since that particular life will never be attainable for another individual. As the judge explains, "any life-view with a condition outside it is despair"[47] since, as Anti-Climacus argues, "to despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself – this is the formula of despair…[T]he self that he despairingly wants to be is a self that he is not."[48] The ideal self that a person wills to be in freedom cannot be an external aim; it must be a possibility that exists for the individual and is discovered through the conscious awareness of the self. "Only within himself does the individual have the goal he must strive for,"[49] and it is only from within the self that a person can obtain consciousness of the self, so the self that a person must strive for is found internally. "If one does not insist that it is within himself that the individual has the ideal self, one's thoughts and aspirations will be abstract,"[50] so the freedom to shape the self is inward freedom to shape the personality and character of the self.

Individuals' choices that are made freely enter into history since "the individual acts, but this action enters into the order of things that sustains the whole of existence. What its outcome

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[47] Ibid, 531.
[48] *Sickness Unto Death*, 20.
[49] *Either/Or*, 550.
[50] Ibid.

will be the agent does not really know. But this higher order of things, which, so to speak, digests the free actions and kneads them together in its eternal laws, is necessity, and this necessity is the movement in world-history."[51] Choices made in freedom are historical and become part of who we are, which contributes to our immanence, and our history will constrain possible choices regarding future decisions. If we allow ourselves, we can be carried through life being shaped by this external history that forms our necessity. Without an awareness that they are actively shaping us, history leads to impulses that we act on without conscious awareness and understanding. For this reason, Judge William argues that "inward work is the true life of freedom."[52] The freedom we have is the freedom to shape our inward self, even though we are also part of the necessity of the world history that has already been established. Therefore, each person has a history, but this history is not solely based on free actions. Nevertheless, "the inward work belongs to himself and will belong to him in all eternity; this neither history nor world-history can take from him."[53] The inward work of developing the self ethically is freedom's task, and part of that task is taking responsibility for the history of the self.

Johannes Climacus develops the relationship between freedom and history in the interlude of *Philosophical Fragments*. Things that come into existence move from possibility to actuality, and this transition happens in freedom through a cause. Everything that comes into existence through cause is thereby "historical, for even if no further historical predicate can be applied to it, the crucial predicate of the historical can still be predicated – namely, that it has come into existence."[54] The immanence of the self has a history because it has come into

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[51] Ibid, 489.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1987), 75.

existence. In contrast, the transcendence of the self has no history since "it is the perfection of the eternal to have no history, and of all that is, only the eternal has absolutely no history."[55] The ontological foundation of the spirit is being drawn here. It is explained further in the idea that historical existence is a reduplication of a "coming into existence within a coming into existence."[56] C. Stephen Evans explains this human history as a double contingency. "[Human history] shares the contingency of all of nature, since it is part of the natural order that has been actualized by the freely effecting cause," and the second level of contingency "is found in human actions, which also involve the exercise of free causality."[57] Human history, just like the history of the world, has come into existence. However, human actions made in freedom hold consequences for the future that exists in possibility. Once a decision rooted in necessity is made through a free choice, the result of the action becomes actualized and is added to the self's history. This double contingency explains how choosing the self in freedom does not bring the self into existence since it exists in necessity and not from a choice made freely to be born. But choosing the self does make the self aware of itself since the free causality of human action brings about the existence of spirit within the existence of the self.

2.4 – Developing Kierkegaard's Ethical Self

However, it can be argued that the concept of self-development outlined by Judge William does not do a sufficient job contending for the ethical life since there are numerous competing and often contradictory ethical principles a person can potentially adopt. One way to formulate this concern is by situating the Judge's argument into a Kantian picture of morality, where objective principles are identified through reason. A reasonable person will come to the

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[55] Ibid, 76.
[56] Ibid.
[57] *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 268.

same ethical conclusions as other rational beings. This reading of the Judge's ethics can be applied to his argument about the universal man; universal principles can be found within the self and are expressed through ethical actions in particular circumstances that call for an application of the universal principles. In a long section on the connection between universal ethical principles and a person's duty, the Judge argues:

> The task the ethical individual sets himself is to transform himself into the universal individual[…]But to transform oneself into the universal man is only possible if I have this within me *kata dunamin* (in potentiality)[…]Those who take the task of human life to be the fulfillment of duty have often been reminded of the skeptical view that duty itself vacillates, that the laws can be changed…[T]his skepticism does not apply to negative morals, for they remained unchanged[…]Duty is the universal, what is required of me is the universal, but all I can do is the particular…it will always be possible for him to say what *his* duty is, and that would not be the case unless the universal and the particular were posited[…]If I am to be able to perform the universal, I must be the universal at the same time as I am the particular, but in that case the dialectic of duty is within me[…]Precisely when one's personal being is perceived to be absolute, to be its own aim, the unity of the universal and the particular, precisely then will every skepticism which takes the historical as its point of departure be overcome[…]As soon as one's personal being finds itself in despair, chooses itself absolutely, repents itself, one has found oneself as one's task under an eternal responsibility, and thus duty is posited in its absoluteness. Since, however, one's personal being has not created itself but chosen itself, duty is the expression of the identity of this absolute dependency and absolute freedom.[58]

The judge is arguing for a moral self-conception where the universal morals exist within an individual as a potential to be realized. Universal morals are identified through reason, and the ability to reason belongs to the individual. Individuals act in accordance with those morals in particular situations since they are brought about through their own power of reason. According to the Judge, this is possible because individuals choose themselves, making the self absolute, and realize their freedom when a decision must be made regarding two contradictory options for action. With this freedom comes ethical responsibility, so there is a correct and responsible choice to make that will shape the self they have chosen as a task. The correct universal ethics are drawn out through reason and posited as a duty that is fulfilled by a choice in freedom.

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[58] *Either/Or*, 552-58.

However, moral principles understood in this way have no actual or absolute authority over an individual since they were chosen for a particular external reason. This makes the Judge's understanding of the ethical irrational since, for there to be any actual moral duty, the moral laws must have authority over the individual. In this case, the authority of the moral law leads to a paradox in the Judge's conception of morality: for free individuals to impose moral law on themselves, then presumably they have a specific reason for doing so; however, if there is a prior reason for imposing the moral law on themselves, then that prior reason itself would be the justification, and it would not be self-imposed; yet for the moral law to have authority, the moral law must be self-imposed. From this paradox in the Judge's argument for choosing the ethical self, there seems to be a shift in focus toward choosing the self to circumvent the problems that arise in the rational aspect of morality.

One major factor that gives rise to this issue is the emphasis on the individual's capacity to know moral principles. In modernity, ideas about morality stem from a post-Cartesian philosophy of individuals beginning with doubt and attempting to 'know' for themselves through their immediate ideas and senses. The Judge is aware of this doubt, which is why he argues that people can avoid the doubt of historical skepticism by making themselves the task by submitting to universal ethical principles through personal choice. The Judge claims that universal moral principles exist from within the self. Each individual must identify the principles through reason and apply them to the self through the choice to give these principles authority over actions. The attempt to generalize and universalize moral principles is easily objected to because, historically, people have rarely agreed on what constitutes a correct view of rational morality, and reasonable people have had severe doubts about morality in this regard.

This objection to the Judge's universal morality is valid. However, it misses the nuance of what is actually being shown through the Judge's letters.[59] What is shown by the end of the letter is that, although he does not realize it, the Judge is also in despair just as much as the young aesthete is in despair. Towards the end of his letter, the Judge tells the young man, "I perform my services as judge, I am glad to have such a vocation, I believe it is in keeping with my abilities and my whole personal being, I know it makes demands on my powers. I try to mould myself more and more to it, and in doing so I feel that I am developing myself more and more,"[60] and goes on to claim, "the truly extraordinary man is the truly ordinary man…the less of the universal he is able to assume, the less perfect he is."[61] The Judge is in despair since the self that he wants to be is the self that he is not. Becoming the universal man, and being just like the others in the universal, is the Judge's goal, and he is constantly trying to mold himself into that universal man, which is outside himself. As Terry Pinkard describes it, "despair is the condition of realizing the impossibility of achieving what matters most to an agent while at the same time being unable to give up striving for it; it is the condition, that is, of realizing that one's life is necessarily a failure."[62] The Judge wants to be in absolute control of his life through

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[59] Kierkegaard explains his intention of *Either/Or* in his posthumously published *On My Work as an Author*. On what he was trying to communicate through the totality of his works, he says "It began maieutically with esthetic production, and all the pseudonymous writings are maieutic in nature…and the movement was, *maieutically*, to shake off 'the crowd' in order to get hold of 'the single individual.'…What was needed, among other things, was a godly satire. This I have represented, especially with the help of the pseudonymous writers…Now, on the assumption that someone is under delusion and consequently the first step, properly, is to remove the delusion—if I do not begin by deceiving, I begin with direct communication. But direct communication presupposes that the recipient's ability to receive is entirely in order, but here that is simply not the case—indeed, here a delusion is an obstacle. That means a corrosive must first be used, but this corrosive is the negative, but negative in connection with communicating is precisely to deceive." Kierkegaard uses the Aesthete and Judge in *Either/Or* to remove the delusion in modern understandings of the religious and ethical in a nuanced way to allow his readers to understand that point for themselves.
[60] *Either/Or*, 583.
[61] Ibid, 586.
[62] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press 2002), 351.

transcendence. However, he is limited by his immanence, and his project of becoming the universal man is futile since it is not possible for individual immanence to be universal.

Kierkegaard himself is critiquing the Kantian notion of moral objectivity through the Judge to show that reason alone is not sufficient in producing a fully actualized self. This is demonstrated through the sermon given by the 'priest from Jutland' who is friends with the Judge and sent him the sermon. In his final letter to the young man, the Judge alludes to his own despair by saying, "I haven't wanted to show [the sermon] to you personally, so as not to provoke your criticism."[63] The Judge realizes that the argument from the sermon uncovers his despair and does not want to be criticized by the aesthete in person. So, instead, he forwards the sermon to the young aesthete, telling him, "take it, then, read it; I have nothing to add, except that I have read it and thought of myself, and thought of you."[64] The Judge thinks of both himself and the young man when he reads the sermon since, through this sermon, he realizes that it is just as applicable to the ethical as it is to the aesthetic. Although still written pseudonymously under the authorship of the priest from Jutland, I believe it can be more closely attributed to Kierkegaard's actual position since it is very similar in style and content to what he writes in his *Upbuilding Discourses*, for which he takes authorial credit.

The priest titles the sermon *The Edifying in the Thought That Against God We Are All in the Wrong* and begins by saying that you should not wish to prove that you are in the right against God. The priest explains that humans have a unique existence on earth since "only man is in the wrong, only for him is reserved what to everything else was denied, to be in the wrong against God."[65] We are in the wrong against God in a way that all other living things within His

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[63] *Either/Or*, 594.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, 600.

system cannot be because we have freedom. However, this freedom posits a different either/or: "we then only have the choice between [either] being nothing before God [or] the eternal torment of constantly beginning over again yet without being able to begin. For if we decide definitely whether we are in the right [against God] at the present instant, this question must be decided definitely concerning the present instant, and so on, further and further back."[66] Wanting to be in the right against God holds people in a stasis of reflection, moving backward in time, requiring recollection of all their moments in life where the question of right or wrong is applicable. This is the primary concern facing the Judge's conception of universal ethical principles that are subject to doubt. The self is temporally moving forward, and the desire to be in the right against God halts the motion of becoming and limits an individual's freedom.

Being in the wrong against God is also not like being in the wrong against another human where "it is indeed possible to be partly in the wrong, partly in the right, to some extent in the wrong, to some extent in the right, because he himself, like every human being, is finite, and his relation is a finite relation which consists in a more-or-less."[67] We can be both in the right and wrong with other humans because our finitude allows for doubt and skepticism in human interaction. God, however, is eternal and absolute, so there cannot be this movement of sometimes right and sometimes wrong in our relation to Him. According to the priest, understanding that God is absolute, and therefore we are always in the wrong, is actually edifying. It is edifying "in a twofold way, partly by staying doubt and alleviating its anxieties, and partly by inciting it to action."[68] It is only in an infinite relation to God that people can alleviate the anxieties of doubt since, in relation to Him, they realize that they are always in the

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[66] Ibid, 601.
[67] Ibid, 607.
[68] Ibid, 606.

wrong against God, which changes human reason as the source of knowledge to knowledge from faith as the true source knowledge.

Faith keeps away the doubt of historical skepticism, and the release from doubt is where true freedom lies. This infinite relation that prevents doubt incites action since "when he doubts, he has no strength to act."[69] When we realize that we can be both sometimes right and sometimes wrong, doubt sets in, and we question our reasoning before acting. Doubting in this way will eventually bring a person to sorrow, and when it does, "he lifts himself above the finite into the infinite, for this thought that he is always in the wrong is the wing on which he soars over finitude, it is the longing with which he seeks God, it is the love in which he finds God."[70] The priest concludes the sermon by saying, "Ask yourself, and keep on asking until you find the answer, for one can recognize a thing many times and attempt it, yet only the deep inner movement, only the indescribable motions of the heart, only these convince you that what you have recognized 'belongs unto you,' that no power can take it from you; for only the truth that edifies is truth for you."[71] It is not the external actions that a person can be certain about; it is the inward motions and movements of the self in consciousness where freedom truly expresses itself as edifying truth for the individual.

By adding this sermon at the end, Kierkegaard adds the final key element to self-development that keeps him from falling into the Kantian paradox and defends his conception of selfhood. The priest points out that human knowledge and reason can lead to self-doubt, as reason in the Kantian system inevitably does. When people doubt, they cannot make decisions in freedom since they have no strength to act. However, when people directly relate to God, they

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[69] Ibid, 607.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid, 608-09.

realize that God is absolutely different and always right, and they become inwardly free in this

relationship and are glad to act. As Clare Carlisle explains it, "in the case of the relationship

between man and God, difference is absolute: the pastor emphasizes that God is *essentially*,

qualitatively greater than anything finite. In this case, there is no need for calculation and its

attended doubts, because God is always in the right."[72] Faith in God provides inward freedom

that opposes necessity and edifies the faithful person. This turns knowledge concerning necessity

and reason, which leads to doubt about our knowledge, into subjective knowledge resting

entirely on our relationship to God, which provides the transcendence that is required for the

process of becoming.

Kierkegaard makes this movement of subjectivity in response to the Fichtean and

Hegelian conceptions of selfhood that claim individuals establish their own self through

thinking. The thinking 'I' posits the self through the other 'Not-I' when a person realizes that the

other is their own 'I,' becoming aware of 'I' as a distinct individual, producing the self through

this thinking in relation to another.[73] By arguing that God establishes the self, the only other

'Not-I' that can posit the self is the individual's relation to God. This relation to God also

provides the authority necessary to submit the self to the loving freedom that guides and shapes

the self. In a journal entry from 1850, Kierkegaard anticipates the objection to morality, making

the objection against modern morality himself by saying:

> Genuinely to bring one back to oneself without a third party standing outside as a constraint is an
> impossibility and turns all such existing into illusion or experiment. Kant thought that man was
> his own legislator (autonomy); that is, subjecting himself to the law that he gives to himself.
> Properly understood, that is to postulate lawlessness or experimentation…Not only is there no
> law that I give to myself as a maxim, it is the case that there is a law given to me by a higher
> authority. And not just that: the legislator makes so free as to take part in the capacity of educator,

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[72] Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2005), 65. (hereafter cited as *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*).

[73] *Sickness unto* Death, 31 and 175n28. Fichte says that imagination is the source of the concept of our external world – the Not-I.

and exerts the compulsion. If someone never acts so decisively that this educator can get a hold of him; yes, then he gets to live on in this comfortable illusion, fantasy, and experimentation. But that also implies he is in the very highest disfavor.[74]

The relation of the self to God is necessary to bring the spirit into existence, explained in the journal entry as bringing one back to oneself. Without the spirit being posited, people can believe themselves to be the legislature of themselves, which leads to paradox and doubt, and is insufficient for self-actualization. The understanding of the actualized self drawn out in this section is summarized in the formula Anti-Climacus gives: "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."[75] The transparent rest that the self acquires in God's power is made possible by love. Love as the authentic movement of freedom is situated into the formulation of the self in the final letter of *Either/Or*, and as Carlisle explains, "love and freedom are brought together as constitutive of the inwardness that produces a religious movement[…] Love is an expression of freedom because it originates from within, from inwardness—as opposed to logical reasoning, which remains outside one's subjectivity."[76] Love for God provides freedom against necessity and allows the self to rest transparently in the power that established it, delivering the self from despair and acquiring a release from doubt to work inwardly on the self in freedom.

Johannes Climacus explains how a relationship with God provides the necessary condition for inward freedom to develop the self. He says that the person who relates to God "is turned inward and is aware that he, existing, is in the process of becoming but still relates himself to an eternal happiness."[77] He also reiterates the distinction between knowledge and

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[74] *Papers and Journals*, 467.
[75] *Sickness unto Death*, 14.
[76] *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, 63-64.
[77] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 453-54.

doubt, arguing that "In our day, it is thought that knowledge determines the issue and that if one just comes to know the truth, the more concisely and quickly the better, one is helped." However, "existing is something quite different from knowing,"[78] so knowledge in the sense of rational universal ethics cannot truly help us in our existence. Instead, existence in relation to God produces the religious movement that brings knowledge of the truth into actuality through subjectivity: "The true is not superior to the good and the beautiful, but the true and the good and the beautiful belong essentially to every human existence and are united for an existing person not in thinking them but in existing."[79] Existence as an individual self that stands in relation to God with knowledge and faith to develop the self is how individual inwardness becomes the focus of Kierkegaard's ethics. The responsibility to ethically develop the self inwardly happens in the passion of the absolute relation to God. As Climacus explains, "the existential pathos immerses itself in existing, pierces all illusions with the consciousness of existing, and becomes more and more concrete by acting to transform existence."[80] From this explanation, the Judge's concept of the ethical self, which chooses itself and makes itself the task of freedom, can be understood under the qualification of relating to God so that doubt does not set in and the inward freedom of self-development can be recognized. As I continue this thesis, the terms 'ethically' and 'ethical self-development' are understood in this way, and the Judge's quotes that are used from this point forward promote this final formulation.[81]

   With this conception of the self now formulated, the question arises: is this formulation of the self possible to achieve, and if so, how does a person correctly develop the self to achieve

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[78] Ibid, 297.
[79] Ibid, 348.
[80] Ibid, 432.
[81] I am separating the ethical stage of life from the religious stage. So, references hereafter to ethics are meant to be situated in the religious stage.

this type of selfhood? I will now move into the next section to begin answering the latter question on how to develop the self in a Kierkegaardian way, specifically looking at a teleological approach to selfhood.

III.   The Teleological Approach to Kierkegaardian Selfhood

Imitation, which corresponds to Christ as prototype, must be advanced, be affirmed, be called to our attention. The Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, did not come into the world to bring a doctrine; he never lectured…His teaching was really his life, his existence. – Søren Kierkegaard[82]

What has been shown so far is that the self consists of physical immanence in the world, which is shaped by necessity, and psychical transcendence, which is the ability to make free choices. Transcendence, however, is somewhat restrained by necessity but can still shape immanence through deliberation and action. The self exists as spirit, which is the self-conscious awareness of this polarity between immanence and transcendence. The spirit enables reflection on the personality to accept what cannot be changed and transform what can change. The task set before the spirit is to take responsibility for the history of the self, which has been shaped both by external factors and free choices, by choosing the self. Choosing the self as a task requires deep reflection and consciousness of our being, and once we develop this consciousness, we can begin strengthening the will by developing our character.

Furthermore, the development of the self requires a conscious awareness of our relationship to God since He establishes the self as spirit. When the self relates to God, people understand their individuality through that relation to Him and assume the responsibility to live properly, regardless of what others are doing. In this section, I will examine the relationship

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[82] *For Self-Examination*, 191.

between Kierkegaardian self-development and the process of becoming a self, precisely when becoming is directed toward the ultimate human goal, known as the human telos. I also give an example from psychology for the effectiveness of goal setting in habit and character formation that assists an individual in developing the self towards a goal.

3.1 – The History of Teleological Selfhood

Since selfhood is not entirely given and must be worked for, Kierkegaard's notion of the fully actualized self must be understood as a human being's telos. The telos is the final goal of the self and is something that a person can aim for; however, recognition of the telos is not always immediately recognizable to everyone. In the explanation of the self as drawn out in section one, the human telos for Kierkegaard would be reconciling the polarities of immanence and transcendence while working out the relation to God as the foundation of the self. Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly say that balancing the synthesis of immanence and transcendence is the human being's end, he does use teleological language. He claims that an ethically sound life is our telos and that the ethical is defined by the self's existence before God.[83] Therefore, a teleological conception of Kierkegaardian selfhood is required for understanding his ontology.

The contemporary discourse surrounding teleological conceptions of selfhood largely stems from Aristotle's work. In Aristotle's view, living things are born with the potential to flourish, and they flourish when that potential is realized. Understanding what an organism ought to do is a matter of discerning the relatively fixed natural function of that organism's species. As human beings, we have the potential to know the good through reason and deliberation, and we flourish by attaining it. Aristotle opens his *Nicomachean Ethics* by claiming "every action and

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[83] *Sickness unto Death*, 79-80 and *Fear and Trembling*, 54;59. I will return to these passages later in the section

choice is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."[84] The function of a human *qua* human determines how we should correctly develop the self, and this function exists as a natural potentiality that is realized when aimed towards the good. Since the faculty that separates humans from animals is the capacity to reason, Aristotle explains that the function of a human is to live a virtuous life in accordance with reason. Our human telos, then, is to develop character and habits that are virtuous. To develop ourselves viciously would be going against our nature, and we would not become our true selves. Pursuing and eventually attaining our telos is essential for human flourishing and happiness, which is termed eudaimonism.

Aristotle's understanding of human teleology has seen a revival in contemporary philosophy, especially in the development of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics that aims to be consistent with modern naturalism. One leading proponent of the neo-Aristotelian view of human teleology is Phillipa Foot. In her book *Natural Goodness*, Foot argues that Aristotle's conception of the human good, or eudaimonism, as our telos can be understood through natural-historical judgments of the human species. Natural-historical judgments are assessments that allow us to determine what is good or defective for a particular species, and individual members can be evaluated with these judgments. Actions and behaviors that conform to the species' standards to promote flourishing are characterized as the natural goodness telos of the species, and their telos is to develop in this direction. Foot argues that these judgments can be applied to humans in the same way as to other organisms:

> The structure of derivation is the same, whether we derive an evaluation of the roots of a particular tree or the actions of a human being. The meaning of the words 'good' and 'bad' is not different when used of the features of plants on the one hand and humans on the other, but is

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[84] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press 2009), 1.1 1094a1.

rather the same, as applied, in judgments of natural goodness and defect, in the case of all living things.[85]

Evaluative judgments can be applied to human beings to determine if a person is living a correctly ordered life in accordance with their natural telos, just as they are applied to other organisms. For example, a tall tree must have strong roots to stay standing in the wind. If the tree's roots were weak or shallow and the tree blew over, we would say that it was a bad tree since the natural-historical judgment of trees include the fact that good trees need strong roots to stay standing. Therefore, the tree could not reach its telos since it is defective. Analogously, we can look at the natural history of human beings and make normative judgments about the actions of a particular person as being good or bad depending on whether or not they promote the good as it relates to a historical conception of human eudaimonism.

Foot also argues with Aristotle that human beings are *sui generis*[86] since we have a rational will. Natural-historical judgments are extended to the rational will of human beings to evaluate whether people are reasoning correctly and determine if they are developing themselves toward the human telos. Normative judgments can be applied to rational decisions in a straightforward way: "the actions of anyone who does not X, when X-ing is the only rational thing to do, are *ipso facto defective*. It does not matter whether we say that he acts irrationally, or rather say 'acts in a way that is contrary to practical rationality.' In either case, it is implied that he does not act well."[87] Practical rationality is linked with acting well, and the person who reasons well will function correctly. Acting correctly through good practical reason leads to the

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[85] Phillipa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press 2010), 47. (hereafter cited as *Natural Goodness*).
[86] Ibid, 51. Although human beings are unique, Foot maintains that "a common conceptual structure remains. For there is a 'natural-history story' about how human beings achieve this good as there is about how plants and animals achieve theirs."
[87] Ibid, 59.

human good, which is eudaimonism. Foot outlines a rather complex definition of eudaimonism, claiming:

> *Happiness* is a protean concept, appearing now in one way and now in anther…I agree with John McDowell that we have an understanding of the word 'happiness' that is close to Aristotle's *eudaimonia* in that operation in conformity with the virtues belongs to its meaning. In my own terminology 'happiness' is here understood as *the enjoyment of good things*, meaning enjoyment in attaining, and pursuing, right ends…There is indeed a kind of happiness that only goodness can achieve.[88]

This conception of the human good is viewed as the human being's telos, which requires pursuing the right ends identified using practical reason, and these ends can be judged by normative standards derived from the natural history of the human species. The good of the species will lead to eudaimonia, though the idea of happiness will fluctuate and look different to different people due to individual life circumstances. The aim of Foot's account of neo-Aristotelian naturalism—creating normative judgments for human reason and goodness—is to resist radical individualism, specifically that posited by Nietzsche. We follow the norms and patterns of the species to attain the human telos, following the precedents that have been set before us to pursue correct ends.

In his book *After Virtue*, Alistair MacIntyre offers a different contemporary account of the neo-Aristotelian model of teleology. MacIntyre shifts the Aristotelian telos away from an exclusively naturalistic view towards our social roles and our place within the social structure. Along with Foot, he argues that the loss of teleological thinking in modernity results from our over-emphasis on individuality. "We are involved in a world in which we are simultaneously trying to render the rest of society predictable and ourselves unpredictable, to devise generalizations which will capture the behavior of others and to cast our own behavior into forms

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[88] Ibid, 97.

which will elude the generalizations which others frame."[89] To avoid this problem, we must have

a conception of the human telos that considers both our human nature and our roles as social

beings. MacIntyre explains the importance of our social relations:

> In much of the ancient and medieval worlds, as in many other premodern societies, the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically human goods are to be attained; I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom. There is no 'I' apart from these.[90]

Virtuous self-development is impossible unless it is situated within the context of our

relationships and our role in society. The contemplation of action requires us to consider our

social roles and the effects we will have on others. MacIntyre's teleological schema is made

intelligible by the formulation of "a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and

man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature."[91] The transition from the first stage to

the second requires ethics since ethics "presupposes some account of potentiality and act, some

account of the essence of man as a rational animal and above all some account of the human

telos."[92]

3.2 – Kierkegaard as a Teleological Thinker

The understanding that human goals are essential to proper self-development, specifically

a final goal to strive for that develops virtuous, ethical character, is made clear from the views of

the neo-Aristotelian notion of telos given by MacIntyre and Foot. However, in attempting to

make each person's telos like everyone else's, they have hinged the human telos on normative

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[89] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2007), 104. (hereafter cited as *After Virtue*).
[90] Ibid, 172.
[91] Ibid, 52.
[92] Ibid.

standards that are derived from observations of humanity as a whole. For Kierkegaard, this is a

dangerous notion. Anti-Climacus notes the following in *The Sickness unto Death*:

> [W]hereas one kind of despair plunges wildly into the infinite and loses itself, another kind of
> despair seems to permit itself to be tricked out of itself by 'the others.' Surrounded by hordes of
> men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world
> – such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in
> himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to
> become a copy, a number, a mass man.[93]

Neither transcendence nor immanence alone can totally define the self. Disequilibrium within the

synthesis of the self results from placing too much emphasis on one or the other, and the neo-

Aristotelian notion seems to locate self-identity almost entirely in immanence by way of history.

Therefore, to avoid this problem, Anthony Rudd argues that we must shift away from the

Aristotelian accounts of teleology and move toward a Platonic account since "the Platonic view

is rather different [from the Aristotelian] and is less biological…[T]here is a good that anyone

can see as desirable – harmony within the soul. This is our *telos*, in the sense of being a goal

anyone will naturally want to achieve."[94] Rudd goes on to claim that not much teleological work

has been done with a Platonic conception of teleology, so it is worth developing even "if only as

a philosophical experiment."[95] He also worries that the neo-Aristotelian view depends too much

on the analogy between human flourishing and the flourishing of plants and animals. In response

to this neo-Aristotelian claim, he argues that "our personhood doesn't just make us more

complicated than other animals – it introduces a radical, qualitative difference, on which the

analogy really breaks down."[96]

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[93] *Sickness unto Death*, 33-34.
[94] *Self, Value, and Narrative*, 35.
[95] Ibid, 38.
[96] Ibid.

I agree with Rudd that the human telos in neo-Aristotelian naturalism can lead to a much more fixed idea of human nature and human flourishing than Kierkegaard would be ready to accept. However, I do not want to abandon the Aristotelian account of teleology so quickly. In the process of becoming, Aristotle's conception of teleology, eudaimonism, potentiality and actuality, action, habituation, and ethical self-development are all helpful in formulating parallels to the Kierkegaardian telos. Taking an Aristotelian approach to understanding Kierkegaard's notion of the self is also a reasonable course of action since Kierkegaard himself was significantly influenced by Aristotle's work.[97] Kierkegaard's potential self and actualized self mirrors the notion of potentiality and actuality in Aristotle's understanding of action and teleology. The latter provides a framework for developing the self towards its telos. As Climacus explains in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the process of becoming is a movement since "the transition from possibility to actuality is, as Aristotle rightly teaches, kinesis, a movement."[98] Kierkegaard also relies heavily on this Aristotelian framework in section 'C' of *The Sickness unto Death*, the *Interlude* of *Philosophical Fragments*, and the entirety of *Repetition*. In section 'C' of *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti Climacus argues that "every moment that a self exists, it is a process of becoming, for the self in potentiality does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence. Insofar, then, as the self does not become itself, it is not a self; but not to be itself is precisely despair."[99] Comparing this to Aristotle's teleological view of animals in *Parts of Animals*, as Frank A. Lewis explains it, "Aristotle argues for his teleological view in PA II.1, as often, 'being is before becoming,' even if the process of coming-to-be is temporally prior. An animal 'makes its coming-to-be' from one principle to

[97] *Sickness unto Death*, 178n21.
[98] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 342.
[99] *Sickness unto Death*, 30.

another – from a first mover, with its own definite nature, to a form or some such [telos]."[100] For

both Kierkegaard and Aristotle, the being of the self exists prior to the becoming or potentiality

of the self. If the becoming of the self is not aimed toward the human telos, then the self will not

become itself. However, one significant difference between the two is that Kierkegaard says

perfect knowledge of being is not accessible to the individual but only to the divine. He

emphasizes this by saying that becoming is itself the goal for the existing individual.

The neo-Aristotelian views of teleological self-development posited by Foot and

MacIntyre are also helpful for understanding Kierkegaard's teleological argument of selfhood.

However, as I noted, these views must be adjusted to fit the Kierkegaardian scheme. As

MacIntyre explained, our relationship with others and our role within the social structure are

essential for the self's teleological development. MacIntyre's teleological scheme is that man-as-

he-happens-to-be transitions to man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature through

ethics as the middle term. Similarly, Kierkegaard argues in *Works of Love* that "love is a

relationship between: man-God-man, that is, that God is the middle term."[101] God is the ethical

middle term for the transition from individuals as they are in potentiality towards their telos. As

Anti-Climacus explains the relation between the self, God, and the ethical:

> What an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion! The criterion for the self
> is always: that directly before which it is a self…Everything is qualitatively that by which it is
> measured, and that which is its qualitative criterion is ethically its goal; the criterion and goal are
> what define something, what it is, with the exception of the condition in the world of freedom,
> where by not qualitatively being that which is his goal a person must himself have merited this
> disqualification.[102]

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[100] Frank A. Lewis, *A Companion to Aristotle: Form and Matter* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing 2009), 170.
[101] S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York, NY: Harper-Collins Publishers 2009), 112-13.
[102] *Sickness unto Death*, 79-80.

Here, Anti-Climacus is drawing a distinction between nonhuman telos and human telos that is similar to the claim made by the priest at the end of *Either/*Or. Humans have freedom which places them in a unique position within the world's system. The self is defined teleologically as having the ethical as its goal through a relationship with God, and since the self exists in the sphere of freedom, not reaching this goal is a failure on the self's part. When the self fails to relate to God and realize its goal in this way, Anti-Climacus implies the self is then no longer defined by this telos but rather by its sin. Conversely, when plants or animals do not attain their telos, they are not held individually accountable. For this reason, having God as the criterion of the self mediates the relation of the self to others, which is expressed through love, and this is the qualification that transitions the self towards the telos.

Foot's understanding of human naturalism is helpful in working towards understanding the Kierkegaardian conception of the human telos, however it also needs qualification. In attempting to reach the Aristotelian understanding of eudaimonism as the human telos, Foot wants us to look at the natural history of the human species. Contrarily, Kierkegaard would rather us look to one person to make our normative judgments on human actions. That person is Christ, and, as Kierkegaard notes in his journal, Christ is the exemplar teleological self in which we should direct our self-development: "Christ comes to the world as the prototype, constantly insisting: Follow my example."[103] However, I am not sure that Foot would agree with Kierkegaard's transition here since, as she says:

> It may be suggested that such [religious] usages [of eudaimonia] are merely pious, depending on a religious faith that defines true happiness in religious terms, as perhaps the contemplation of a Deity, or a happiness to be thought in terms of a Muslim afterlife. I think, however, that this would be a mistake, and there is something here to be recognized by all faiths or none.[104]

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[103] *Papers and Journals*, 585.
[104] *Natural Goodness*, 92.

For Foot, conceptions of human eudaimonism must be recognized by all people regardless of religious belief. She holds this view to keep the normative judgments as broadly applicable as possible. On the other hand, Aristotle viewed the unmoved mover as the foundational principle of existence. And although Aristotle's god is not the same God that Kierkegaard is referring to, the stretch from Aristotelian teleology to Kierkegaardian teleology is not that far in this regard. I believe Kierkegaard would claim that rather than the prototype being the whole human species understood through natural-historical judgments, human eudaimonism instead belongs to the spirit and is only achievable through living a life in the process of becoming through a relation to God with Christ as the prototype of the human telos.

3.3 – Prototype, Imitation, and Kierkegaard's Human Telos

However, Christ as the teleological prototype is complicated in Kierkegaard's writing, and his understanding of Christ as the ideal self is nuanced. On the one hand, as he states in *Armed Neutrality*, "Jesus Christ, it is true, is himself the prototype, and will continue to be that, unchanged, until the end." On the other hand, he goes on to say, "but Christ is also much more than the prototype; he is the object of faith. In Holy Scriptures he is presented chiefly as such, and this explains why he is presented more in being than becoming, or actually is presented only in being, or why the middle terms are lacking – something that everyone has indeed ascertained who, even though humbly and adoringly, has earnestly sought to order his life according to his example."[105] This understanding of Christ as the prototype aligns with Kierkegaard's Aristotelian conception of the human being as always in the process of becoming. The scriptures present Christ as complete being, and He has no need for becoming since He does not need to become

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[105] S. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1999), 131. (hereafter cited as *The Point of View*).

something other than what He already is. The middle terms that Kierkegaard argues are lacking in the description of Christ are the terms that are essential for being a Christian, namely those needed for a human being in the process of becoming. So, for Kierkegaard, it seems that becoming a Christian requires more than relying solely on imitating the model of Christ.

For this reason, we can look to other models for guiding and shaping our teleological movement of becoming. Kierkegaard lists several examples throughout his authored and pseudonymous works, such as Abraham, Socrates, Job, and 'the woman who was a sinner.' Surprisingly, none of these examples are Christians themselves. By using these individuals as models for imitation, we can have external guidance for self-development that we relate to along the way. As Wojciech Kaftanski explains, "no one is in the same 'place' as another human being is, but we are all scattered on the spectrum of development of being that never really reaches the ideal. This is why, especially in the religious existence, while we are meant to be in an intimate relationship with the Absolute, we are yet deprived of particular models that are in a one-to-one relation to us, and that could help us achieve authentic religious existence."[106] Since Christ is pure being and the Christian is always in the process of becoming, there are many different stages of life that a person passes through on the way towards the ideal. Johannes Climacus explains that "the ethical and religious prototype is to turn the observer's gaze inward into himself and thrust hum away by placing between the observer and prototype the possibility common to them."[107] Within these spheres of existence and all the human emotions and circumstances that come with them, we can look to those moral exemplars who have moved through similar situations to help turn our gaze inward to guide us towards our telos.

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[106] Wojciech Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Effect* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge 2022), 139. (hereafter cited as *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity*).
[107] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 359.

However, Christ remains the perfect prototype for the human telos. Since He is pure being and we are in the process of becoming, the way we imitate Him is different from the imitation of those who have a one-to-one relation to us. Kierkegaard describes the imitation of Christ as following in His footsteps since He "once walked the earth and left footprints that we should follow."[108] Kaftanski refers to this type of imitation as indirect, intention-driven imitation and explains that it "is not about copying the means, or even the results in some cases; rather, it is about grasping the intentions behind the imitated objects or actions, and representing them through (often) completely different means. The real object of imitation in the imitation of Christ is then the intention that motivates his actions."[109] This idea of imitation of Christ as following the indirect prototype of His intentions is made clear by Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity*, where he says:

> Christ came into the world with the intention [*Hensight*] of saving the world, also with the intention [*Hensight*] – this in turn is implicit in this first purpose [*Hensight*] – of being the *prototype*, of leaving footprints for the person who wanted to join him, who then might become an imitator, this indeed corresponds to "footprints."[110]

The indirect imitation of Christ's intentions is how we foster and develop ourselves towards the telos of being while we are in the process of becoming. Following in the footsteps of Christ by mimicking his intentions is how we can understand our ends and shape the means we use to get there. Using both direct, one-to-one, prototypes and the indirect imitation of Christ as *the* prototype, a person is able to discern their telos.

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[108] S. Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1993), 217. (hereafter cited as *Upbuilding Discourses*).
[109] *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity*, 227.
[110] Ibid. The passage is translated by Kaftanski himself from Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*.

3.4 – Synthesizing Aristotelian and Kierkegaardian Teleology

In contrast to Foot's goal of setting normative teleological goals based on the human species, Kierkegaard uses exemplar humans to create a teleological understanding of the self that ultimately aims to imitate Christ. By imitating Christ's intentions, we make choices informed by these intentions that aim us toward our telos. Aristotle saw the importance of intention and choice in directing the self towards the telos: "choice [is directed] at the means which are conducive to a given end (telos)…For our character is determined by our choosing good or evil, not by the opinions we hold."[111] Our character, which ultimately should be shaped to fit our telos, is determined by our choices, so it is essential that our choices are made with the correct intentions. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle also saw the importance of imitating moral exemplars: "imitation is natural to men from childhood onward, one of the advantages of men over the other animals consisting precisely in this, that men are the most imitative and learn by imitation."[112] Aristotle claims that we learn through imitation, and the choices we make that form our character can be influenced by those we choose to imitate. As Deborah Achtenberg explains, "for Aristotle, I am enriched by that which I look up to. The concept of *telos*, from which Aristotelian enriching relatedness and wholeness derives, is a hierarchical one. *Telos* enriches that which is under it."[113] It is essential for the human telos to relate to an exemplar we can imitate, which enriches our development. Thus, the Aristotelian teleological view of self-development holds. For Kierkegaard, the exemplar prototype for teleological self-development is Christ. This is an important contrast to Foot's view since looking at the human species does not give a clear structure for teleological development or apparent notions of intentions to help shape our choices

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[111] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Oswald (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc. 1999), 59.
[112] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. D.W. Lucas (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press 1968) 4, 1448b 6-9.
[113] Deborah Achtenberg, *Cognition of Value in Aristotle's Ethics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2002), 190.

and character. In a bridge between Kierkegaard and Foot, Marie Thulstup argues that the demand to imitate Christ pertains to all people; even non-Christians can still use Christ as a pattern for life.[114]

Having a telos for the self to develop towards is crucial for deliberate self-shaping. A prior teleological conception of what the self is supposed to be while it is in the process of becoming helps guide actions and prevent behaviors that are antithetical to the goal. Much research has been done in neuroscience and psychology on the beneficial effects of goal setting for self-development and self-regulation. One example that demonstrates the significance of goal setting for self-development shows that implementation intentions enhance goal striving. Implementation intentions, also called if-then plans, are predetermined strategies for attaining a goal. For example, the structure of setting a goal would look something like 'I intend to reach X,' whereas implementation intentions are structured as 'if situation Y is encountered, then I will perform the X-directed response Z.' Using implementation intentions "strategically automates goal striving; people intentionally make if-then plans that delegate control of goal-directed behavior to preselected situational cues, with the explicit purpose of reaching their goals."[115] Having an implementation intention in goal striving leads to automation of a goal-directed response in situations that have been planned for prior to encountering them. This automatization is possible, as the authors of the study were able to show through fMRI scans, since:

> Acting on the basis of goal intentions was associated with brain activity in the lateral rostral prefrontal cortex, whereas acting on the basis of implementation intentions was associated with brain activity in the medial rostral prefrontal cortex. Brain activity in the latter area is known to be associated with bottom-up (stimulus) control of action, whereas brain activity in the former is known to be related to top-down control of action.[116]

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[114] Mary Mikulova Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Imitation* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers 1962). This is just to note a view that can reconcile Foot's objection to religious eudaimonism, however I do not want to dive into all the implications this view holds, which would potentially derail the current discussion.
[115] P.M. Gollwitzer and G. Oettingen, *Planning Promotes Goal Striving* (New York, NY: Guilford Press 2011), 165.
[116] Ibid, 166.

This study demonstrates the importance of not only setting goals to regulate self-development, but also in planning how to attain the goal. Self-consciously recognized teleological views of selfhood allow for quicker results when developing towards a goal and works with the brain to facilitate teleological development. Furthermore, these studies illuminate the significance of imitating Christ's intentions when working towards the telos of the self that Kierkegaard promotes. By imitating His intentions, a person can more readily make choices in certain situations that align with the teleological conception they are working towards.

Since imitating Christ's intentions is universally applicable instruction for self-development, Kierkegaard's teleological conception of individual selfhood can be made more concrete by combining imitation of Christ with his idea of the single individual that was explained in the previous section. In a journal entry, Kierkegaard notes that "the New Testament standard for being a human being is to be a single individual."[117] Anti-Climacus states the importance of being a single individual by saying, "being a human being is not like being an animal, for which the specimen is always less than the species. Man is distinguished from other animal species not only by the superiorities that are generally mentioned but is also qualitatively distinguished by the fact that the individual, the single individual, is more than the species."[118] In his book *Purity of Heart*, which he dedicates to the single individual, Kierkegaard says that consciousness "asks you about only the ultimate thing: whether you yourself are conscious of that most intimate relation to yourself as an individual,"[119] and ends by saying "there is only one end [telos]: the genuine Good…to will only one thing, genuinely to will the Good, as an

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[117] *Journals and Papers*, 577.
[118] *Sickness unto Death*, 121n.
[119] S. Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart: Is to Will One Thing*, trans. by Douglas V. Steere (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 187. (hereafter cited as *Purity of Heart*).

individual, to will to hold fast to God, which things each person without exception is capable of doing, this is what unites [all humans]."[120] The single individual gains consciousness of the self as the single individual by positing the spirit. When a person is conscious of the self as a single individual, the telos is the Good, and it is attained through imitating Christ's intentions. As Kierkegaard remarks in his journal, "man was structured and intended to be the single individual"[121] indicating that the telos of humankind is to become the single individual. Having this awareness of the self as the single individual also strengthens the understanding of the ethical requirement for the self in relation to the teleological process of becoming:

> The ethical wants to prevent every attempt at confusion, such as, for example, wanting *to observe* the world and human beings ethically. That is, to observe ethically cannot be done, because there is only one ethical observing—it is self-observation. The ethical immediately embraces the single individual with its requirement that he shall exist ethically; it does not bluster about millions and generations; it does not take humankind at random, anymore than the police arrest humankind in general. The ethical deals with individual human beings and with each individual.[122]

Johannes Climacus argues here, in contrast to Foot's broadly applicable ethical view of natural-historical judgments that extend to the entire human species, that ethics is an inward and subjective process. Like the priest from Jutland argues, each person must develop inwardly towards the telos as a single individual by relating to God which frees the self from the doubt of historical comparison.

Being in a direct relationship with God as a single individual guided by Christ's intentions is the telos for the Kierkegaardian self and is how the self ultimately leaves despair. The self is no longer in despair when the spirit synthesizes the relation between immanence and transcendence, wills to be its own self by choosing itself, and rests transparently in the power

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[120] *Purity of Heart*, 206.
[121] S. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers Volume 2*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1970), 196. (hereafter cited as *Journals and Papers*).
[122] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 320.

that established it, which results in an ethical life where God is the middle term. To not be in despair, which the Kierkegaardian telos ultimately leads to, can be equated with Aristotle's eudaimonia. However, this notion of Aristotle's eudaimonia needs to be qualified since Kierkegaard notes in his journal that, "'choosing oneself' is no eudaimonism…as in pleasure and happiness,"[123] and writes in a later journal entry, "[only thanking God for worldly goods] makes Christianity just a heightened enjoyment of life (eudaimonism)…One craves and strains after earthly goods, and then, to free oneself of that anxiety, thanks God!"[124] The eudaimonism that results from attaining the Kierkegaardian telos is more closely related to the definition of eudaimonism given by Foot.[125] A person can reach eudaimonism by attaining their telos which leads to a virtuous moral character and enjoyment in attaining, and pursuing, the correct ends. However, existing people are always in the process of becoming, so the telos is not something attainable concretely in time.

For this reason, Climacus gives the example of a person who has the task of entertaining their self for the day and then by noon they claim to have completed the task.[126] The human telos is the task for the single individual in the process of becoming is to relate the self to God while imitating Christ's intentions to guide the process. Therefore, for a person to say they have attained the telos before the task is complete is like saying a person had finished entertaining their self for the entire day by noon.

Since a person must always work for their telos, this process happens over the extended period of an entire lifetime. Even when a telos is clearly identified, and a person has established

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[123] *Journals and Papers*, 165.
[124] *Papers and Journals*, 273.
[125] *Natural Goodness*, 97. Quoted earlier in this chapter.
[126] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 164.

if-then intentions that are telos-directed to make the processes more efficient in goal striving, the process of becoming is never complete. Since we are temporal beings with past and future oriented consciousness, there needs to be a structure to guide self-development through time that brings together the past with the present and moves towards a future directed at the telos. In the next section, I argue that a narrative structure of self-development is an effective way of synthesizing our polarities of immanence and transcendence, that it can be an efficient means of self-development when strengthened using narrative-self-talk, and claim that narrative is a pure expression of our transcendence.

IV. Narrative Appeal for Teleological Self-Development

He who does not know himself cannot recognize himself, either; one is continually able to recognize oneself only to the extent that one knows oneself. A certain kind of preparation, therefore, is required…[T]o see oneself is to die, to die to all illusion and hypocrisy…One must want the truth. – Søren Kierkegaard[127]

Becoming a self is the highest privilege for a human being, and we can apprehend the infinite value of authentic selfhood through natural human consciousness. However, a person cannot become an infinite, authentic self on their own since the human will is finite. The human will, as it stands, is finite since it is conditioned by external factors outside of our control, which restrict freedom. Since the impression of the infinite ideal is impossible to achieve or get rid of, the self is in despair. This problem arises from the relation of the eternal and temporal within a person, so these two polarities must be synthesized to get out of despair. The only way for a synthesis to be possible is if the spirit unites the two polarities. The spirit brings the two polarities together to balance them through a self-conscious awareness of the self as both eternal and temporal. The spirit is brought about through a choice made in freedom—what Kierkegaard calls choosing the self. Choosing the self in freedom is only possible when a person relates to God since God establishes the self as spirit. When people choose themselves in relation to God, the spirit is produced, and they can begin the inward work of balancing the synthesis. By

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[127] *For Self-Examination*, 234.

becoming aware of the self in this way, a person becomes a single individual and can begin shaping the self towards authentic selfhood.

The authentic self that a person aims for is their telos. The telos of all human beings is to be a single individual with Christ as the prototype, imitating His intentions and directing the self towards the Absolute. A person has the telos outside the self, and they will a finite telos, until the spirit is produced, and they gain a self-conscious awareness of the eternal within the self. Once the eternal is recognized, they can will their absolute telos in relation to the Absolute. As Johannes Climacus explains, "All relative willing is distinguished by willing something for something else, but the highest telos must be willed for its own sake. And the highest telos is not a something, because then it relatively corresponds to something else and is finite. But it is a contradiction absolutely to will something finite, since the finite [*endelig*] must indeed come to an end [*Ende*]. But to will absolutely is to will the infinite, and to will an eternal happiness absolutely."[128] The telos of the self is found within the self by synthesizing the polarities of immanence and transcendence, and an eternal happiness is acquired when the telos is actualized, which is human eudaimonia. Since the absolute telos is eternal, it is not 'some thing' in space and time but is rather a relation that relates the self absolutely "to the absolute telos, but *eo ipso* also to God."[129]

4.1 – Synthesis of the Temporal and Eternal

However, the self does not acquire its telos simply by the spirit being produced. The telos must be worked for since selfhood is not entirely given. Working towards the telos happens over time through the process of self-development that is centered around synthesizing the eternal and

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[128] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 394.
[129] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 413.

temporal while maintaining a relationship to God, who is the foundation for the self. Since

developing the self towards our telos happens over time, the individual is continuously in the

process of becoming. The process of becoming relates to the eternal in the self since a person

already exists in the temporal as a temporal being: "As an existing person he need not form his

existence out of the finite and the infinite, he, existing, is supposed to *become* one of the parts,

and one does not *become* both parts simultaneously, because one *is* that by *being* an existing

person, for this is exactly the difference between being and becoming."[130] The self is in the

process of becoming because the work of self-development is inward work since the temporal,

material self already exists from birth. The inward work of the eternal must happen over time

since the physical self exists temporally.

Vigilius Haufniensis works out the relation between the temporal and eternal in *The*

Concept of Anxiety. Haufniensis argues that the present as we are aware of it does not exist in the

temporal present since the moment the temporal present is posited, it vanishes and then is posited

again and will be posited, so the temporal present always and only exists in the categories of past

and future. The eternal, on the other hand, is "the present. In thought, the eternal is present in

terms of an annulled succession (time was the succession that passes by) … In the eternal there is

no division to be found in past and future, because the present is posited as the annulled

succession."[131] Since the temporal present is infinitely divided into the past and future, the true

present is the eternal since it cannot be divided as such. The only temporal present that has no

past and future is what he calls the abstract instant; however, this is simply a metaphor since it is

an abstract exclusion of the past and future: "the abstract instant is not the present, since the

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[130] Ibid, 420.
[131] *Concept of Anxiety*, 105-06.

intermediary between the past and the future, conceived purely abstractly, is not at all." In this case, the abstract instant is not an aspect of temporal time "because what characterizes time is that it 'passes by': for which reason time, if it is to be defined by any of the attributes revealed in time itself, is time past. If, on the contrary, time and eternity touch each other, then it must be in time, and now we are in the instant."[132] The instant is a metaphor to signify the convergence of time and eternity, and as an example, Haufniensis says that the spirit is posited in the 'instant.'

The instant as the touching of time and eternity posits the present "whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly permeates time."[133] With this understanding of time, the division of past, present, and future can now be fully comprehended as a three-part synthesis. The past is not comprehended by itself but rather through its continuity with the future, and in a similar way the future is comprehended through its continuity with the present. Since the spirit is eternal, the synthesis between immanence and transcendence can only become a synthesis once the "spirit posits the first synthesis…of the temporal and the eternal."[134] By recognizing the self as both temporal and eternal, the spirit gains a sense of freedom's possibility, and possibilities always correspond to the future. This is where anxiety sets in since a person can only be anxious about future possibilities. If a person is anxious about something that happened in the past, they are only anxious insofar as it can be repeated, which means they are anxious it can possibly become part of the future. However, anxiety is not a category of freedom or necessity. Anxiety is angst over the infinite possibility of choices that can be made when a person looks into the future. Therefore, anxiety is nothing but remains in relation to the individual until the spirit is posited and teleological self-development is initiated.

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[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid, 109.
[134] Ibid, 111.

4.2 – Narrative Approach to the Self in Time

Once the spirit is posited, and the individual gains a conscious awareness of the self as a synthesis between the temporal and eternal, self-development can begin, which happens over time. The spirit is eternal and gives the person the concept of the continuous present in the self and takes responsibility for the past while moving into a future of possibility. Since the self understands the past, present, and future in this way, there must be some way for the spirit to hold the self together over time for authentic development to happen. Keeping the self together in time is essential for authentic self-development since "for an existing person, the goal of motion is decision and repetition. The eternal is continuity of motion, but an abstract eternity is outside motion, and a concrete eternity in the existing person is the maximum of passion…Passion's anticipation of the eternal is still not an absolute continuity but the possibility of an approximation to the only true continuity there can be for an existing person."[135] To properly develop the synthesis between the eternal and temporal, the self needs to establish continuity in its identity that holds the self together.

One way to hold the polarities of the eternal and temporal together in continuity through time is by using narrative. Although varying in scope and understanding, narrative conceptions of the self have been popularized in the last several decades in both philosophy and psychology as an explanation for continuity of self-identity. Narrative self-identity is found in both Plato and Aristotle, and again the Aristotelian narrative is more appropriate for understanding the self developing over time that has been worked out so far. In the *Republic*, Plato claims that imitation in narrative compromises the ideal of being oneself and says, "to make oneself like someone else

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[135] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 312-13.

in voice or appearance is to imitate the person one makes oneself like."[136] By imitating someone else in our narrative we lose our self. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle's understanding of narrative is the art of imitation through language and, "imitation [for Aristotle] is a special kind of representation: it is a matter of representing *a* so-and-so rather than of representing *the* so-and-so."[137] The Aristotelian understanding of imitation in narrative is important for understanding self-development qua narrative when working towards the telos of imitating Christ's intentions.

Narrative identity is also not something that a person has to learn or come to understand on their own. Rather, narrative is part of who we are as beings with language and consciousness. Dan McAdams et al. explain that narrative is our personalized story, integrating the past and imagined future, to provide unity in our self-identity which comes to us naturally. "Early parent-child conversations provide the foundations for children to learn how to make meaning out of personal events, and meaning making is a process central to the development of narrative identity."[138] Through several studies and a study of their own, they were able to show that people in early adolescence have a better psychological well-being when they can properly understand actions and experiences through narrative meaning making. Humans are natural story tellers and personal narrative is the self-story that provides meaning to a person's life, especially when they use narrative to direct their self-development. As Jefferson Singer et al. explain, "individuals will be effective at goal-pursuits and navigating life challenges when they can generate informative self-event connections when they employ memories, scripts, and the life story to explain, reveal,

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[136] Plato, *Republic*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013), 393c.

[137] Jonathan Barnes, *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1995), 275.

[138] Dan P. McAdams et al., *'First we invented stories, then they changed us:' The Evolution of Narrative Identity* (Chicago, IL: Association for Psychological Science 2013), 236.

or cause change in the self."[139] Personal narrative is highly effective for personal meaning making and goal-directed self-development since humans live out life over time.

In contemporary philosophy, Alastair MacIntyre's work has also been influential in developing a narrative understanding of the self and its relation to time. For MacIntyre, choices and actions resulting from these choices are linked together as episodes over time and understood using narrative. Narrative, however, is not just a chronological ordering of events in our minds. The narrative is how we can comprehend the events and make intelligible choices moving forward into the future. Although the future is unpredictable and full of possibility, "there is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a telos towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present."[140] Even though we cannot make decisions that will without-a-doubt come true exactly as we plan them, we can be guided by our teleology and narrative. Therefore, "Unpredictability and teleology coexist as part of our lives; like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless, our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. Thus, the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and a partially teleological character."[141] The eternal self uses narrative to move through the finite and temporal world to sustain a measure of self-continuity while directed towards the telos in the process of becoming.

Narrative also is not told retrospectively; it is told continually as people live out their lives. The significance of human actions is that rational, free agents perform them, and they do

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[139] Jefferson Singer et al., *Self-Defining Memories, Scripts, and the Life Story: Narrative Identity in Personality and Psychotherapy* (Fairfax, VA: Journal of Personality 81:6 December 2013), 575.
[140] *After Virtue*, 215.
[141] Ibid, 216.

not just happen simply as other natural events occur in the world, although they are still restricted by nature. The actions a person performs are understood using narrative because, as Anthony Rudd explains, "insofar as I am not in a zombie-like state of automatism, I am aware of myself as acting in a certain way in order to bring about certain results, which I want because they fit in with certain plans or ambitions which I have, which themselves make sense to me through the history in which I came to form them."[142] The use of narrative makes people aware of their relation to the temporal, which conditions what is understood in the present moment. As a self that uses narrative, there must be a "sense of the past as establishing the meaning of my current situation, and of the future as what, in my current actions, I am trying to shape."[143] This must be done with our telos in mind because "without an overriding conception of the telos of a whole human life, conceived as a unity, our conception of certain individual virtues has to remain partial or incomplete."[144] Narrative used in this way is how people create and shape their selfhood and how they come to understand it through self-reflection.

Owen Flanagan argues for a narrative account of self-identity by claiming that identity and personhood operate on a scale that allows for degrees of development that bring about the transformation of the self over time. To have psychological continuity as we transform and develop ourselves, we need "narrative connectedness from the first-person point of view"[145] to form a coherent story about our lives. This narrative connectedness of the self requires authorial work on our part to synthesize the narrative into an intelligible story. Flanagan gives five key points on why the narrative structure is important for self-identity:

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[142] *Self, Value, and Narrative*, 178.
[143] Ibid.
[144] *After Virtue*, 202.
[145] Owen Flanagan, *Self Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1996), 65.

First, human life in fact has the property of being lived in time. Second, our memories are powerful. We possess the capacity to appropriate our distant past and draw it into the present. Life and consciousness can be as stream like as you want…Third, as beings in time, we are navigators. We care how our lives go…Fourth, we are social beings. We live in society and in predictable and unpredictable interactions with other people. Characters abound to fill out the complex story of our lives. Fifth, because the story of any individual life is constituted by and embedded in some larger meaning-giving structure and because it is only in terms of this larger structure that a life gains whatever rationale it has for unfolding in the way it does, a life is illuminated, both for the person who lives it and for others, by seeing it against the background of this larger [narrative] structure."[146]

The narrative structure of self-development provides an understanding of the self as a complex story that is held together by linking the self of the past with the present and forming a coherent understanding of how you have developed and how the people in your life have shaped that development. This narrative approach is possible since we have an eternal spirit that is transcendent, allowing us to reflect on our immanence in time to consciously understand ourselves and form a sense of continuity in personal identity.

Self-continuity is essential for proper Kierkegaardian self-development. As the Judge explains in *Either/Or*, "the eternal dignity of man lies in the fact that he can acquire a history, and the divine element in him lies in the fact that he himself can impart to this history a continuity if he will; for it acquires that not by being the sum of all that has happened or befallen me, but by being my own work, so that even what has befallen me is transformed in me and translated from necessity to freedom."[147] The inward work of the self establishes continuity in temporality through an awareness of the present. The Judge is responding to the young aesthete here who, in his letter titled *Crop Rotations*, tells the Judge that "a person's resilience can really be measured by the power to forget. A person unable to forget will never amount to much…Forgetting is the shears with which one clips away what one cannot use…Forgetting will

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146 Ibid, 67-68.
147 *Either/Or*, 542.

then also prevent one's sticking fast in some particular circumstance in life."[148] Since holding the

self together in continuity is essential for development, and forgetting is an irresponsible

approach to selfhood, narrative self-identity is the methodological approach to self-continuity.

Narrative brings together time, memory, meaning, and the telos into one coherent whole that

allows people to know themselves in the deep sense of inner work.

4.3 – Narrative Hermeneutic Interpretation

Narrative as an inner work turns the narrative self into an active and interactive process

of self-interpretation, understanding, and meaning making. Michael Glowasky calls this dynamic

process of self-interpretation 'narrative hermeneutics' and explains that this process "sees every

event in human life as an encounter in which the human subject creates or recreates meaning

based on particular psychological, sociocultural, and historical circumstances, and it makes use

of the elements of storytelling in order to do so."[149] Narrative hermeneutics is how a person

comes to understand their self in the way the Judge described as being "aware of the self as this

definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions,

influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world…At

the instant of choice…he withdraws from the surroundings, and yet is at the same instant in

absolute continuity for he chooses himself as product; and this choice is freedom's choice."[150]

By choosing the self in this way, a person's past is transformed from necessity to freedom and

the history of the self becomes an active process of freedom in a personal narrative. Narrative

hermeneutics allows the individual to take responsibility and understand their life being shaped

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[148] Ibid, 235.
[149] Michael Glowasky, *The Author is the Meaning: Narrative in Augustine's Hermeneutics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2018), 161.
[150] *Either/Or*, 542-43.

by necessity. Freedom allows us to do this in a way where we understand some of the ways we are determined by the past but not defined by it.

Hermeneutical narrative self-identity is most popularly recognized in Augustine's *Confessions*. In his *Confessions*, Augustine establishes an autobiographical narrative of his life that provides an exemplary framework for a narrative account of the self. By reflecting on his life in a narrative fashion, Augustine is able to relate himself to himself in a profound way. This relation is like looking at the self in a mirror, which is how Anti-Climacus explains we understand ourselves: "in seeing one*self* in a mirror it is necessary to recognize oneself, for if one does not, one does not see one*self* but only a human being."[151] Augustine expresses his understanding of his own narrative in familiarly Kierkegaardian ways, even saying that the confession is his way of seeing himself in a mirror to understand himself.[152] Augustine begins the narrative by saying, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests[153] in you."[154] The narrative he gives is an honest account of his life journey as he works towards his authentic selfhood. He can understand his past as a continuous inward working towards the Absolute and works out self-interpretation through self-reflection. He ends the narrative by saying, "my God, my confession before you is made both in silence and not in silence. It is silent in that it is no audible sound; but in love it cries aloud[155]… To hear you speaking about oneself is to know oneself,"[156] and refers to God as the "physician[157] of my most intimate self."[158]

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[151] *Sickness unto Death*, 37.
[152] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press 1991), 182. (herafter cited as *Confessions*).
[153] Cf. *Sickness unto Death*, 14. The self leaves despair when it rests transparently in that which established it.
[154] *Confessions*, 3.
[155] Cf. *Fear and Trembling*, 80 and 115. Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith.
[156] Cf. *Either/Or*, 549. The Judge says to know oneself is a reflection on oneself, which is itself an action.
[157] Cf. *Sickness unto Death*, 141. God is the physician of the soul.
[158] *Confessions*, 179-80.

Augustine's conception of himself in narrative form exemplifies the importance of hermeneutical narrative self-identity through time.

However, the ability to actively self-interpret a personal narrative hermeneutically does not mean that a person can purposefully create a false narrative and still be an authentic self. The self is directed towards the telos, and the telos of the self places a person under an ethical responsibility. This ethical responsibility requires that a person "who chooses himself ethically chooses himself concretely as this definite individual, and he achieves this concretion by the choice being identical with repentance."[159] Using the term faithful self as a self that has been ethically actualized, Ronald L. Hall points out that "the faithful self accepts the fact that the past is over and done, that is, the past is present to the faithful self *as past.*"[160] When a person is working towards their telos, there is no need to create a false narrative since the past has become, and remains, already actualized in the past. For proper self-development to occur, people must genuinely try to understand their past to become aware of their inclinations, impulses, habits, and how their character has been shaped over time. By deceiving themselves about their narrative, they would not have taken the first step towards selfhood. Narrative hermeneutics allows people to understand their past by continuously re-interpreting it based on new experiences that supply new information to view themselves in a deeper and more reflective way.

Kierkegaard himself was actively involved in this sort of life narrative. In his posthumously published work *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, he explains that his understanding of his authorial works became most clear and coherent after he had finished them:

> It has been inexplicable to me (what has so often happened to me) that when I did something and could not possibly say why or it did not occur to me to ask why, when I as a very specific person

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[159] *Either/Or*, 542.
[160] Ronald L. Hall, *Language and Freedom: Kierkegaard's analysis of the Demonic* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1985), 164.

followed the prompting of my natural impulses, that is, which for me had a purely personal meaning bordering on the accidental, that this then turned out to have a totally different, a purely ideal meaning when seen later within my own work as an author; that much of what I had done purely personally was strangely enough precisely what I should do *qua* author.[161]

Here Kierkegaard is explaining his own hermeneutical narrative development as an author. What once seemed meaningless in his actions and experiences is now viewed from a new perspective where he can gather up all the details and view the narrative in a new light. All the compositions, upbuilding discourses, novels, pseudonymous works, and philosophical treatises, when reflected upon at the end of his life, became a coherent whole for him. He explains this narrative hermeneutic clearly by saying, "I myself have a more detailed purely personal interpretation of my own person [which] is naturally quite as it should be."[162] Kierkegaard was able to construct the meaning of his life and work through self-reflection and understanding in narrative fashion.

Narrative hermeneutics is also essential for making sense of the self in the process of becoming. According to Kierkegaard, people cannot honestly know whether they acted out of freedom or necessity or truly know the reasons, motives, or desires behind a particular action. This is made clear in the final passage of the sermon given by the priest from Jutland at the end of *Either/Or*. The priest tells us that "one can recognize a thing many times and acknowledge it, one can want a thing many times and attempt it, yet only the deep inner movement, only the indescribable motions of the heart, only these convince you that what you have recognized 'belong unto you,' that no power can take away from you; the truth that edifies is the truth for you."[163] A person cannot have absolute knowledge regarding these circumstances since external factors that we are not consciously aware of can initiate actions and behaviors, so narrative

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[161] *The Point of View*, 76.
[162] Ibid, 94.
[163] *Either/Or*, 608-09.

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hermeneutics aims not to acquire undoubtable self-knowledge;[164] rather, it is the deep inner

movement within the self that establishes the kind of truth that is meaningful to the person.

Narrative hermeneutics enables this inward movement of edifying truth, especially when the self

is relating to God and acquires true inward freedom from His love.

4.4 – Narrative Oriented Towards the Future

Narrative is a useful, and arguably essential, method for understanding our personal past

being in self-continuity with the present to provide a meaningful perception of our eternal self in

time and history. In addition to reflecting on the past, narrative also works forward as a person

moves into the future of possibilities, regulating self-development towards the telos. The furthest

point that a personal narrative can extend is our eventual death and non-being, where the

narrative eventually concludes. Each person must be aware of their death to comprehend the

finitude of the self and form an authentic narrative. Roman Altshuler explains that bringing the

past and future death together is understanding the narrative self as an anticipatory whole. The

whole self is anticipatory because "the site of selfhood – the site where the self *does* something,

rather than simply *being* something – is always ahead of it. The past provides the matter of the

self, but it cannot be the *essence* of selfhood, because that matter has significance, or practical

consequence, only insofar as it involves a continual pressing forth into possibilities."[165] The telos

guides our movement into these possibilities to make choices informed by our past but not

entirely determined by it. Therefore, our telos can give life a definite, or concrete, shape and is

also "why death, as the limit on future events in a life, may seem to give life a fixed meaning,

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[164] I elaborate this point in chapter five when talking about how the brain processes information and initiates behaviors and actions.

[165] Roman Altshuler, *Teleology, Narrative and Death* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press 2015), 35.

reducing the elements of the narrative to an accretion."[166] Death is the fixed set-point where the

narrative ends and self-development is no longer possible.

As we approach our selfhood from a teleological perspective, it is important to

understand death as the temporal end of the narrative unity, which brings the narrative into a

whole. However, the eternal cannot die. As Haufniensis explains, "in the moment of death the

human being finds itself at the extreme point of the synthesis; it is as though spirit cannot be

present for it cannot die, and yet it must wait because the body has to die."[167] Our extended

conscious awareness of the self gives us a sense of the eternal within us and is precisely why

continuity of the self through time is important. Unawareness of the eternal self is despair, which

is why Anti-Climacus calls despair the sickness unto death. However, it is a sickness in the

eternal of the person; as Anti-Climacus says, "If a person were to die from despair as one dies

from a sickness, then the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the

body dies of sickness. But this is impossible."[168] The eternal in the self, which Anti-Climacus

claims *is* the self, cannot die, and therefore, when there is no self-continuity, the self wants to rid

itself of existence, but it cannot. Self-continuity moving into the future is essential, "but how rare

is the person who has continuity with regard to his consciousness of himself! As a rule, men are

conscious only momentarily, conscious in the midst of big decisions, but they do not take the

daily everyday into account at all…But eternity is the essential continuity and demands this of a

person that he be conscious as spirit."[169] Conscious awareness of the self is a task that must be

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[166] Ibid, 41-2.
[167] *Concept of Anxiety*, 113n.
[168] *Sickness unto Death*, 18.
[169] Ibid, 105.

worked on constantly. We cannot be carried through life performing actions through instinct and

habits that cause discontinuity of the self.

Narrative self-identity is a necessary means for gaining conscious awareness of the past

and present self, especially regarding the eternal in the self, and assists a person in developing a

consistent character. An inconsistent self is not a self in the Kierkegaardian sense, and Anti-

Climacus makes this evident:

> Most men probably live with all too little consciousness of themselves to have any idea of what
> consistency is; that is, they do not exist *qua* spirit. Their lives—either in a certain endearing
> childish naivete or in shallow triviality—are made up of some action of sorts, some incidents, of
> this and that: now they do something good, and then something stupid, and then they begin all
> over again; now they are in despair for an afternoon, perhaps for three weeks, but then they are
> jolly fellows again, and then once again in despair for a day. They play along in life, so to speak,
> but they never experience putting everything together on one thing, never achieve the idea of an
> infinite self-consistency.[170]

The consistent self keeps a person grounded in their selfhood, allowing them to remain steady as

they develop their character and work towards their telos. The person who is consistent in their

selfhood is within the qualification of spirit and "has an essential interior consistency and a

consistency in something higher, at least in an idea."[171] The consistency in the higher is the telos,

and people who aim for their telos are actively developing a consistent self. Narrative self-

development moving into the future is how consistency is established for a person as they weave

their teleology into their life story to stay the course in building an ethical character, putting

everything together in one thing, that is, together in narrative.

Kierkegaard reinforces the importance of self-consistency throughout his authorship,

using the term repetition to explain the existential development of the self over time. The work

titled *Repetition* is the most straightforward work on the concept of repetition, and even the

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[170] Ibid, 107.
[171] Ibid.

pseudonymous author's name, Constantin Constantius, is itself a repetition. Constantius explains

that repetition avoids two extreme idealities of selfhood:

> Indeed, what would life be if there were no repetition? Who could want to be a tablet on which time writes something new every instant or to be a memorial volume of the past? Who could want to be susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly diverts the soul anew? If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is repetition. Repetition—that is actuality and the earnestness of existence."[172]

Repetition is the tension between the extremes of the self being 'a tablet on which time writes

something new every instant' and 'a memorial volume of the past.' If we experienced novel and

new events every moment, then the world and ourselves would be unrecognizable with nothing

to ground the self. On the other hand, if selfhood were an unchanging perfection only grasped

through the re-creation of memories, we would not be able to live a meaningful life in a temporal

world. Repetition in the self takes both idealities into account without entirely losing the self in

either. Constantius explains this tension in the relation between the two, saying, "the dialectic of

repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but

the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new."[173] Repetition, then, is the

synthesizing of our immanence, the temporality of what has been, and our transcendence, the

freedom to repeat in the future, to live authentically.

However, repetition is only possible in a specific way. *Repetition* begins with a

distinction being made between recollection and repetition, which "are the same movement,

except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas

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[172] S. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1983), 133. (hereafter cited as *Repetition*).
[173] Ibid, 149.

genuine repetition is recollected forwards."[174] Constantius attempts repetition by retaking a trip

to Berlin that he had enjoyed in the past. He finds that the trip did not live up to his memories or

how he imagined the trip would be, and he despairs over his inability to repeat the trip. However,

in part two, he explains that he had mistaken repetition for recollection in the Berlin trip. In a

paper written shortly after the publication of *Repetition*, Constantius returns to explain that "the

confusion [about the Berlin trip] consists in this: the most interior problem of the possibility of

repetition is expressed externally, as if repetition, if it were possible, were to be found outside the

individual when in fact it must be found within the individual."[175] Repetition is an inward

movement of self development, and Constantius misattributed repetition by attempting an

exterior repeating of an aesthetic journey, which confused recollection and repetition. The

movement of repetition is inward, which is why he begins by explaining the difference between

recollection and repetition, namely that they are both inward movements in opposite directions.

This is where modern philosophy runs into trouble since "modern philosophy makes no

movement; as a rule it makes only a commotion, and if it makes any movement at all, it is

always within immanence, whereas repetition is and remains a transcendence."[176] Recollection

remains in the memory and stays in the past, existing only in the imagination and cannot be

actualized. On the other hand, Repetition is an inward work that is future oriented. Although it is

also initially recognized in imagination, it can be brought into actual existence.

      Repetition is brought into existence through freedom. When applied to individual

freedom, repetition gains a history in the stages that freedom moves through as a person develops

their self. In that same letter mentioned above, Constantius explains that there are three levels of

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[174] Ibid, 131.
[175] Ibid, 304.
[176] Ibid, 186.

freedom that a person works through. The first level is freedom qualified by desire, and this freedom fears repetition since repetition seems to restrict it. Repetition, however, is impossible to keep away since it belongs to human nature and temporality. This brings the person to the second level of freedom where the person views repetition as a way of gaining wisdom, however at this point the person is not standing in relation to their telos or a higher ideal, and therefore the wisdom is qualified by the finite. The third level of freedom is the highest form of freedom and is qualified by its relation to itself. "Now freedom's supreme interest is precisely to bring about repetition, and its only fear is that variation would have the power to disturb eternal nature. Here emerges the issue: *is repetition possible?* Freedom itself is now the repetition."[177] Through this final level of freedom, we see the importance of self-consistency and the ability to freely will repetition to have continuity in the self. Wojciech Kaftanski explains Kierkegaard's category of repetition as a way to think "critically and constructively about the temporal and *repeatable* dimensions of human existence. More specifically, Kierkegaard zeros in on the breadth of human life that is time-oriented and concrete, but also mundane, ordinary, and recurrent. Doing so, he grapples with the meaning behind the human experience of living a life that is structured *by, in,* and *around* time."[178] Repetition is a way for the eternal self to find continuity in the present as it permeates time. This allows for proper self-development and the actualizing of the telos, which requires self-consistency and continuity while repeating ethical actions and behaviors. Narrative enables a person to will inward repetition as they recollect forward.

In this sense, narrative repetition as an inward work moving towards a telos can be compared with reading a novel. If we look at human lives as a novel, then each sentence of the

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[177] Ibid, 302.
[178] *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity*, 44.

novel is a moment in time or a singular event. Removing a sentence from the novel and examining it by itself to see if it is complete does not make sense. A single sentence alone also does not tell you the entire story of the novel. The sentence is just a moment in the book that allows the building towards a completed novel. The novel would also not make sense if, in future chapters, characters within the novel acted completely discontinuously with their character throughout the story. Inward repetition of ethical actions and behaviors provides coherence and meaning in the novel. Reading a novel is a process, but there are very few circumstances where a novel is read for the sake of completing the activity. The enjoyment and fulfillment from reading a novel does not come once you finish the book but is present throughout the process. Similarly, people can reach eudaimonism by working out their narrative into the future, leading to a virtuous moral character and the enjoyment of pursuing correct ends. Eudaimonism is present throughout the narrative life development when a person has correctly oriented the self towards the telos, has hermeneutically interpreted the past, and begins the repetition of developing a character that is consistent with the teleological concept while engaged in the life-long process of becoming.

4.5 – Narrative-Self-Talk

With this Kierkegaardian understanding of narrative self-development holding the self together in continuity by interpreting the past, understanding the present, and moving forward towards the future that is directed at the telos, and ultimately experiencing eudaimonism, there is a key element to the narrative theory that can be added to make the whole process more precise: what I call *narrative-self-talk*. Most people have an inner monologue that they experience when thinking, daydreaming, problem-solving, or internally singing a song stuck in their head. Inner speech is also how a person forms their life narrative in a comprehensible way, weaving the story

together with the monologue to create a narrative of their whole life. Without the help of language forming thoughts in a person's mind, it would not be possible to be conscious of a personal narrative. However, simply creating a narrative story does not change the mind and brain the way self-talk does. Psychologists have used the term 'self-talk' to refer to the *intentional* inner dialogue that is distinct from general inner speech or inner monologue. Self-talk is said either mentally or aloud regarding a specific stimulus that signals the brain to redirect attention or respond with action. Self-talk is used for a variety of behavior reinforcing cues, with a wide range of applications such as in sports, therapy, self-regulation techniques, and self-motivation.

Self-talk cues are short prompts, no more than one or two words, which can be instructional or motivational and help the brain understand what is important in a particular situation. Self-talk cues streamline the brain's ability to categorize information and help stop unwanted impulses from turning into actions. Self-talk also allows for a person to learn a skill faster when the cue words are accompanied by an action. For example, if a person learning to shoot a free-throw in basketball was having significant trouble keeping the elbow in, which makes a shot much less accurate, a self-talk cue of 'elbow' during the action of shooting would be sufficient in telling the brain that the elbow being held in is important for shooting, and the automatization of the action would be formed much quicker. What I call narrative-self-talk operates in a similar way. For narrative-self-talk to be efficient, people first need to posit the spirit and become aware of their inner self, acknowledge their character traits and impulses, and form an autobiographical life narrative. They would then have to have an overriding goal that they want to aim for, specifically an understanding of the telos that they want to be directed

towards. Narrative-self-talk can be implemented when they are at this point in their self-development.

Narrative-self-talk is the dialogue that enters the day-to-day affairs that cues goal-directed ethical behavior. Even if a person has an exhaustive and comprehensive narrative that has given meaning to their life, it is still easy to get caught up in life's daily movements and lose focus of the goal. Narrative-self-talk enables a person to train their brain to act and respond to every interaction and situation in a way that directs ethical repetition in self-development towards their telos. For example, the if-then plans that direct goal-oriented behaviors would be anchored in a cue word that reminds the person to remain steady in their character. If, through self-reflection and narrative building, I know that I am a gossiper that finds enjoyment in speaking poorly about others, then an if-then plan I can implement would be 'if a person begins talking about someone else, even if it is not necessarily in a poor fashion, then I will refrain from joining the conversation or change the subject.' If my telos is to become an ethical self, a narrative-self-talk cue word such as 'respect' that is internally repeated throughout the day, especially when conversing with others, will help remind myself of my if-then plan and ethical goal to be a more loving person. By using a narrative-self-talk word such as 'respect,' I can become consciously aware of my telos in the moment, and I can reinforce my if-then strategy, not getting swept up in the moment of gossip that I know I am susceptible to. Narrative-self-talk is a way to alter behavior actively and consciously to streamline ethical and teleological character development, ultimately creating new habits that align with the telos.

Using narrative-self-talk in day-to-day life, a person can do the inward work of repetition. Knowing my telos and the person I am working on becoming helps develop effective if-then plans that can be consolidated in a simple word or two to keep the goal conscious and self-

awareness will be consistent. It is imperative that people remain consciously aware of themselves and establish consistency in their self-development to reach self-actualization. Narrative-self-talk is an effective way to implement Christ's intentions into our everyday interactions consciously and is also an inward work that focuses the person on becoming the single individual. Through narrative-self-talk, the spirit guides the synthesis of the temporal and eternal, using code words and behavior cues to actualize the Kierkegaardian self.

4.6 – Strong Objection to Kierkegaardian Narrative

What has been argued in this section is that we can understand the Kierkegaardian notion of teleological self-development using narrative. However, John Lippitt argues that narrative self-identity is unapplicable to Kierkegaard's selfhood, and that narrative is also not able to distinguish the aesthetic life from the ethical life, particularly looking at Kierkegaard's conception of the aesthetic and ethical lives outlined in *Either/Or*. [179] The article in which he makes the objection is very lengthy and contains a considerable number of legitimate objections that I will work through in the remainder of this section.

Lippitt begins by describing the narrative self-identity he will be objecting against by explaining it as, "to understand your actions and intentions, I must locate them in a temporal and social context, rather than viewing them as unconnected, isolated events. An apparently unintelligible action can become intelligible by 'finding its place in a narrative.'"[180] This is close

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[179] John Lippitt, *Getting the Story Straight: Kierkegaard, MacIntyre and Some Problems with Narrative* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group 2007 Inquiry 50:1). (hereafter cited as *Getting the Story Straight*). Lippitt is responding specifically to Anthony Rudd and John Davenport's conceptions of Kierkegaardian narrative that is styled after MacIntyre's construction of the narrative self. I have developed an account of narrative self-identity that, although still Kierkegaardian, deviates from these conceptions quite a bit. However, some of the objections Lippitt raises are applicable to what I have argued for so far, so I will address those specifically, even though they are directed towards a slightly different construction of narrative self-identity. I am responding to his objections since it is one of the most prominent arguments against Kierkegaard as a narrative thinker.
[180] *Getting the Story Straight*, 38.

to the narrative understanding I have laid out so far. However, he argues narrative is not necessary for selfhood since "rather few of us cannot tell ourselves an intelligible story about who we are and what we are doing."[181] Lippitt claims that we all naturally make ourselves intelligible to ourselves, and intelligibility about the self can be equally applied to just about any lifestyle without the use of narrative. Intelligibility, however, is only part of what is needed for Kierkegaard's understanding of selfhood. Not only do we need to make our past intelligible, but we also need to understand the reason behind acting the way we did to become aware of ourselves "as this definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product."[182] Lippitt reduces narrative self-identity down to simple intelligibility and therefore misses several crucial components of narrative that are also essential for narrative self-identity.

Lippitt goes on to argue that "the point that matters in the Kierkegaardian context is that the concept of intelligibility will certainly not enable us to distinguish aesthetes from ethicists."[183] The narrative conception of the self under-describes the complexity of the ethical life, and the Judge's conception of the ethical is a coherent system of beliefs that cannot appeal to those outside of his cultural tradition. This, as he explains, is evident in the Judge's "justification of the conventional values that underlie his own life [which] are hardly going to satisfy A," and goes on to say, "perhaps A is hindered not by a resistance to actuality as such, but by doubts about the values of a particular civilization."[184] Section five of chapter two worked out my response to this objection. Still, to summarize, Kierkegaard clearly shows in the final letter

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[181] Ibid.
[182] *Either/Or*, 543.
[183] *Getting the Story Straight*, 38.
[184] Ibid, 40.

that the universal ideal of the ethical exists outside the Judge. Therefore, he is also in despair since he cannot attain it. The ethical standard that the Judge describes is not the telos of human narrative.

Regardless, Lippitt argues that the Judge's insight about life does not satisfactorily surpass A's and the Judge has just as much of a false consciousness as A: "the Judge's confidence in the degree of autonomy we can enjoy is a large part of the problem: the degree of control that he implies we can have over our lives is largely illusory."[185] Since the Judge wants to will self-continuity, he has a false sense of control in his life. Narrative intelligibility of the self is unnecessary for selfhood since actions performed implicitly or through instinct and habit can either be explained in narrative terms or not, and it really does not matter for self-identity either way. For this reason, a fragmented life of an aesthete or a continuity centered life of an ethicist can be understood as intelligible and coherent and do not need the help of narrative: "to judge a life as morally shabby or failing to realize its *telos* is not the same as judging it as incoherent or unintelligible."[186] However, as I have argued, the Kierkegaardian conception of a teleologically centered narrative is only made intelligible when a person has an overriding conception of their telos and brings their past, present, and future into a coherent whole. A person could not have any significant meaning making about their life as a whole without this narrative conception. Even if they can make their lives intelligible by understanding their actions without narrative, they will not actively develop themselves towards their telos simply by constructing intelligibility.

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[185] Ibid, 42.
[186] Ibid, 43.

Kierkegaard also makes clear at the outset of *Either/Or* that the main difference between A's letters and the Judge's letters is the narrative continuity, or lack thereof, that they hold. The editor of *Either/Or*, the pseudonym Victor Eremita, claims to have found all the letters jumbled together within the drawers of an escritoire that he bought at a used furniture store. When attempting to make sense of the letters by putting them together in order, Eremita explains that the Judge's letters were rather easily put together: "the papers themselves I then tried to arrange as best I could. With B's papers that was fairly easily done. One of the letters presupposes the other, In the second letter there is a quotation from the first. The third letter presupposes the two previous ones." Arranging the Aesthete's papers, on the other hand, "was not such an easy matter. I have therefore let chance determine the order, that is to say, I have left them in the order in which I found them, of course without being able to decide whether this order has any chronological value or notional significance."[187] The problem with the A's letters is that there is no chronology to indicate which came first and what follows. This is Kierkegaard's way of noting the lack of narrative unity within the aesthetic life, showing that there really is no way to understand the continuity within the life. However, the ethical life was very easily put in together in narrative order. Even though both lives could be made seemingly intelligible through the letters, the ethical has continuity while the aesthetic seems to lack any coherence and continuity from a strictly narrative perspective which, if A had a narrative holding his life together, would have shown through in the letters and would have given his life a more comprehensive intelligibility.

Lippitt's next significant objection to Kierkegaardian narrative selfhood is that "I am always moving towards my death, and this prevents me from ever grasping it as narrative

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[187] *Either/Or*, 31.

end…Our status as temporal beings resists any idea of human existence as unified or whole, because of our being-ahead-of-ourselves. We relate ourselves to what is not yet, coming to an end only at death."[188] Our personal death can only be perceived from outside of our lives, so it can only impact others' narratives and never our own. Since we cannot perceive our death, we can never have a truly unified, whole narrative. Not only will our life narrative be incomplete since our death lies in the future, but Lippitt even goes so far as to argue that "one can be conscious of oneself only as one was, not as one is…the phenomenon of self-consciousness…condemns the self to non-self-identity, to a necessary inability to coincide with itself, to gather itself up as a whole into its own awareness…When I reflect on my life at any given point and try to make sense of it as a unity, I necessarily leave out the future."[189] Leaving out the problematic conception of consciousness, which I will address in the next chapter, a narrative of the self not only can include future plans, it *must* include them. The whole point of repetition in a life narrative that guides teleological self-development is the idea that I can imagine a past ethical action and create an if-then strategy to implement that same action in the future. The evidence from neuroscience and psychology that I will provide in the next chapter will show that this is how consciousness and the mind work.

Lippitt then goes on to argue that not only is the future impossible to incorporate into a narrative, but the present also cannot be incorporated into a narrative. To show this, Lippitt quotes that:

> The self necessarily transcends any narrative it might be in a position to tell about itself, since any such narrative will always fail to include the moment of its own narrating, and the inclusion of that moment will necessarily fail to include the moment in or through which it is included, and so

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[188] *Getting the Story Straight*, 45.
[189] Ibid, 46.

on endlessly…any adequate conception of the self as a narrative unity must acknowledge that the self simultaneously and necessarily resists subsumption in a unified narrative.[190]

According to this understanding, the narrative self will fail because a person formulating a narrative cannot account for their narrative formation in the narrative. This idea, however, does not hold any impact on the narrative idea of selfhood. The Kierkegaardian conception of narrative self-identity is not something that is required to include every detail about a person's everyday doings. If I were to include in my narrative that I woke up this morning and made coffee, first by placing a filter in the holder and then filling it with coffee grounds, and then…so on and so forth, my narrative would indeed be detailed, but this episode of making coffee would have no impact on the teleologically centered notion of narrative as a method for self-development. Simply because I can add random and unnecessary details to my narrative does not make those details meaningful in my self formulation. For this same reason, just because I probably cannot narrate that I am narrating does not mean my narrative becomes incomplete or disunified. The narrative is formulated as a way to understand and hermeneutically interpret my past as a way to ground myself in self-continuity and direct future self-development towards my telos.

Another objection that Lippitt makes is stated as follows: "exactly where on the continuum do [narrative Kierkegaardians'] see their sense of 'unity' as sitting? Until I know what kind of 'unity' is intended, it is impossible to judge to what extent my life has at any given point attained it."[191] Lippitt argues that the lack of clarity on this point 'fuels the fire' for self-deception and false narratives. He argues that people can have a sense of unity simply by understanding themselves as individuals. Therefore, narrative unity in a person's life does not

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[190] Ibid, 46. Lippitt is quoting Stephen Mulhall
[191] Ibid, 51.

mean much in keeping the narrative honest. Lippitt argues that narrative unity is not even

possible for the Kierkegaardian conception of selfhood since we are temporal beings:

> According to *Purity of Heart*, which persistently downgrades the temporal in relation to the
> eternal, the reason that 'In truth to will one thing can…mean only to will the good' is that only
> 'the good,' a term that *Purity of Heart* tends to equate with 'the eternal,' is an 'essential' unity.
> 'To will one thing,' Kierkegaard insists, 'cannot mean to will that which by nature is not one
> thing.' As Jeremy Walker glosses this, 'all temporal existence, and therefore all actual objects of
> the will, must be mere contingent unities – if they are unities at all.' Thus the essential unity
> valorized by *Purity of Heart* is not narrative unity.[192]

Lippitt's claim here is that a narrative unity is temporal, and therefore, to will a narrative unity is

not willing the one thing with the purity of heart that Kierkegaard insists we do. However, for

Kierkegaard, the self *is* eternal. The continuum that narrative unity rests in is in the eternal

present of the self, and self-development necessarily consists of synthesizing the temporal and

eternal, which is why narrative unity is an essential means for self-development. The confusion

here is that Lippitt equates narrative unity with the human telos. However, the human telos is to

will one thing, which is what the narrative is directed towards. Willing the Absolute through a

life narrative is how a person develops in that direction since "the eternal dignity of man lies in

the fact that he can acquire a history."[193]

The objections raised by Lippitt against a narrative understanding of Kierkegaardian

selfhood do not hold when the conception of self-development, the ethical, temporal, eternal, and

teleology are all brought into the narrative understanding to create a holistic account of the role

narrative plays in the Kierkegaardian self. In this section, I have drawn out an extensive view of

the self as it relates to the telos in time. The eternal self posits the present, which allows us to

reflect on the past and make goal-directed decisions moving into the future. Narrative self-

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[192] Ibid.
[193] *Either/Or*, 554.

identity is essential for properly reflecting on the past and forming a conception of the future teleological self to orient self-development forward. To make this process even more effective, I argued that narrative-self-talk is the way we incorporate intentions and future oriented goals into the present actions and experiences we are having. By grounding our future in ethical repetition formulated through narrative and narrative-self-talk, a person can stave off the anxiety about the future that Haufniensis warns against. Just as narrative reflection brings the past into the present, narrative-self-talk brings the future into the present. Although a person cannot know for certain what their future holds in terms of physical circumstances, they can be sure about the type of person they wish to become and can constantly and consistently hold that in the present as they work towards developing the self. In the next section, I will expand on the effects of narrative-self-talk on brain development and habit formation. I will also take a neuropsychological approach to the brain and mind and synthesize it with the Kierkegaardian conception of selfhood to show that this ideal self is attainable.

V. Neuroscience and the Kierkegaardian Narrative Self

You presumably know that I am supposed to be something of a psychologist; and what you do not know is through how many sufferings and bitter experiences I have become that, if I have really become one at all. – Søren Kierkegaard[194]

It is so easy to trip the light fantastic of desire, but when, after a while, it is desire that dances with the person against his will—that ponderous dance! And it is so easy to give free reign to the passions—a daring speed, a person can hardly follow with the eye! – Søren Kierkegaard[195]

In this project, I have argued that Kierkegaard offers a comprehensive and consistent conception of the self and have shown that he provides a useful structure for developing the self. I have also argued that this conception of self-development is made more concise when viewed from a teleological perspective, and the approach is more constructive when narrative identity is used strategically for the development of the self. However, this conception of selfhood is only a viable approach to self-development if attaining the imagined goal of the self is possible within the structure of how the mind and brain operate. If current findings in psychology and neuroscience do not support the concept of Kierkegaardian teleological narrative selfhood, then it would be an impossibility for a person to actualize the self that has been laid out so far.

For there to be any actual self-development in the Kierkegaardian narrative understanding of selfhood, evidence from neuroscience should not negate the formulation of the self that Kierkegaard develops. Anti-Climacus begins *The Sickness unto Death* by asking: what

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[194] *For Self-Examination*, 44.
[195] *For Self-Examination*, 66.

is a self? He answers by explaining that "the self is a relation that relates itself to itself."[196] This

is understood as a relation between cognitive processes that I will develop further in section two.

He then explains that the relationships within the self are a relation that synthesizes the polarities

"of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity."[197] Since

there is currently no empirical evidence that neither proves nor disproves the infinite and eternal

to work from, I will be looking specifically at the relationship between freedom and necessity.[198]

The self is a relation between freedom and necessity that relates to the self, and the self relates

back to them consciously and synthesizes the relation through willpower and self-consciousness.

By looking at the evolution of the brain, how it develops and processes information, the

formation of schemas and memories, and the phenomenon of conscious experience, a clear

picture can be drawn of the relation between freedom and necessity within the self and the self's

relation in presiding over them both.

  This section will use empirical evidence from contemporary neuroscience and

psychology to show that the Kierkegaardian narrative scheme fits with how the brain and mind

operate. I will begin by reconstructing the brain's evolutionary development and relate it to the

concept of the self that was explained in chapter two. I will then explain how, according to

research in psychology, goal setting and ultimately having a teleological goal promotes self-

development and character transformation. Next, I demonstrate how narrative self-identity assists

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[196] *Sickness unto Death*, 13.

[197] Ibid.

[198] Current findings in neuroscience and psychology do not definitively prove either the conception of eternal or infinite parts of the self, however they also do not disprove their existence. As Dr. Gene Heyman says in his freshman lecture on the introduction to psychology at Boston College, "The evidence that consciousness and conscious experiences come from only material processes in the brain is not convincing. However, the alternative views are less convincing. There is no definite proof for either." I will be working with the concepts of freedom and necessity, which are much more straightforward. Freedom and necessity also imply the eternal and infinite in the Kierkegaardian scheme, but do not depend on them for the argument of their existence.

this goal-striving and how a narrative understanding of selfhood promotes eudaimonia, especially when we look at the neuroscience of memory, language, and schema forming. I end this section by responding to a strong objection against narrative identity, and then respond to an alternative conception of self-development popular in contemporary neuroscience, colloquially termed 'mindfulness.'

5.1 – The Evolutionary Development of the Brain, Will-Power, Memory, and Consciousness

The human brain has developed over the course of five-hundred-million-years since vertebrates first evolved brains, specifically in planarians, and continued to evolve up until around two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-years ago when the first homo sapiens made an appearance. [199] This extremely complex and intricate process that led to the formation of the human brain can be broadly reduced into a three-stage evolutionary development.[200] The first stage of human brain development is at the bottom center of the brain attached to our spinal cord. This early formation includes the basal ganglia, pons, and cerebellum, and is responsible for movement, homeostasis, and 'animal-like' behaviors. The second stage of development brought about the limbic system, which was an early mammalian development and is also referred to as the paleocortex. The limbic system is responsible for urges and drives that promote survival such as the fight or flight response, hormone regulation, and is involved in emotional drives and behavior initiation. The third and most relatively humanoid developmental stage was the formation of the neocortex, which is the wrinkly outermost part of the brain. It is the largest of

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[199] Harvey B. Sarnat and Martin G. Netsky, *When Does a Ganglion Become a Brain? Evolutionary Origin of the Central Nervous System* (Cambridge, MA: Elsevier Science 2002).

[200] Ludwig Edinger theorized that the brain evolved similar to climbing a ladder, ascending from lower to higher intelligence in a chronological series of evolutionary progress. This theory has been highly contested and proven to be inaccurate (for example: Northcutt, 2001; Butler and Hodos, 2005; Jarvis et al., 2005; Striedter, 2005; Reiner, 2009). However, although wrong about the exact process of evolution, Edinger's model of forebrain evolution is extremely helpful in understanding the evolution of the brain in three distinct stages: first the basal ganglia, then the paleocortex, and finally the neocortex, even though his understanding of this development was incorrect.

the three evolutionary groupings. The neocortex is responsible for higher order processing such as decision making, executive control, episodic memory, and is where the subjective experience of consciousness mostly appears. The three groupings of evolutionary process, although easy to separate and categorize, are all essential to the human brain and work together as a whole to allow us to do all that we do.

The evolution of the human brain can be visualized by comparing it to a city established in the middle ages that has developed into modernity.[201] The first stage of development in late antiquity consists of establishing the city center with the building of churches, meeting halls, and university buildings, along with the layout and arrangement of the streets for the city's design. In the early modern era as the population grows, the city begins expanding outward, developing cultural centers, housing, stores, and connecting roadways to meet the needs of an urban population. In modernity, suburbs fill out around the city with paved roads, highways, and metro railways making travel in and out of the city center quick and efficient. Skyscrapers and technological upgrades are added in and around the ancient city center to make living and working more efficient, and land resources are repurposed to be more suitable for the demands of modernity. Each stage of development serves a specific purpose, and the layout of the city is still structured around the original layout. All stages of development depend on the others, and the final stage makes city living much more dynamic and efficient, and old structures are updated and upgraded with current technology. Similarly, the three stages of brain evolution are all interconnected and dependent on one another, and the development of the neocortex allows for

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[201] Daniel Bor, *The Ravenous Brain: How the New Science of Consciousness Explains our Insatiable Search for Meaning* (New York, NY: Basic Books 2012), 82. (hereafter cited as *The Ravenous Brain*). Bor compares the evolution of the brain to the development of Cambridge, United Kingdom. However, since I am not familiar with Cambridge, I alter the example to a hypothetical city for the comparison since it is a great way to visualize the evolutionary development of the brain.

sophisticated information processing in a much more advanced capacity than what the

mammalian limbic system could provide. Information travels back and forth through the brain in

a much more efficient and effective way when the final stage of development is complete. Just as

the city that evolved over time is one city, the brain with its developmental stages is a whole

human brain that has evolved to make human life more advantageous for survival.

One way to easily understand the mental inner workings that have resulted from the

evolution of the brain, how it processes information, and the phenomenon of conscious

experience in a whole brain approach is through categorizing brain processes as conscious or

nonconscious.[202] However, these terms are used in many different ways, so for the purpose of

this argument I am using them in a particular way. I refer to nonconscious cognition as those

mental processes which are fast, implicit, automatic, intuitive, reactive, and associative.

Conscious cognitive processes, on the other hand, are slow, explicit, controlled, reflective,

effortful, and enables our conscious experience of thought and cognition when we are

consciously aware of the processing, which goes beyond simply being awake or alert. Conscious

brain processing is associated with energy intensive cognitive tasks such as reasoning,

deliberation, critical thinking, and recollection. When viewed from an evolutionary standpoint,

the nonconscious mental processes can be found mostly in the parts that developed earlier and is

similar to animal cognition since much of its particular functions are held in common with other

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[202] I am using a formulation of brain operation and cognitive processing similar to those outlined by dual-processing theories. Dual-processing models of cognition are explanatory models for the co-existence of two distinct types of thought and there are many different ways that these models are structured (cf. Grayot, 2019; LeDoux, 2020; Newell, 2015; Sloman, 2014; Evans, 2013; Stanovich, 2004; Lieberman, 2003). I refrain from using the terminology 'System' and 'Type' to avoid the implications that these terms often suggest in neuroscience and psychology literature. In my account, I keep the distinction broad and argue for the whole brain (top-down and bottom-up) conception of dual-processing and avoid using the term 'dual-processing' since it brings unnecessary complications (such as parallel vs exclusionary processing, ambiguities in terminology, process initiation, etc.) that are not relevant to my argument.

animal species. Conscious cognition is relatively new evolutionarily speaking, and conscious

processes are found mostly in the neocortex and frontal regions.[203] However, these two cognitive

processes are not confined to only one or the other and depend on parts of the brain that are

found in both to operate properly.

Conscious and nonconscious cognitive processes are also not an 'either…or' relationship

when it comes to mental processing. Both systems work together to process sensation,

perception, and information in different ways that inform the other to produce our uniquely

human experience. For example, cognitive processing of visual stimuli from the visual cortex

depends heavily on both since visual information is taken in and processed by the nonconscious

before being sent to the prefrontal cortex to be made conscious and, as LeDoux explains, the

"prefrontal cortex actively re-represents the sensory cortex information and transforms the

nonconscious experience into a conscious experience."[204] This is an example of bottom-up

cognitive processing. The information being processed begins in the nonconscious and is then

sent to the conscious system to be reinterpreted so that we become aware of the information

being processed. The frontal pole is the forward-most area of the human brain and has very little,

if any, sensory inputs and is mostly connected with the prefrontal areas of the neo-cortex and

areas that are associated with memory and conceptual circuitry.[205] The frontal pole is a uniquely

human feature of the brain. Since it is not connected to sensory inputs, sensory information that

is processed automatically and quickly by the nonconscious is directed to the areas of the brain

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[203] There are many nonhuman animals that also have these brain regions. However, the specific workings of the human neocortex and frontal regions provide phenomenological conscious experiences that has not been shown as possible by neuroscience for other nonhuman animals to experience since the mental workings of human conscious experience itself has not been clearly identified or determined; only the specific brain regions that are active.
[204] Joseph LeDoux, *How Does the Nonconscious Become Conscious?* (Cambridge, MA: Current Biology Magazine *30*, Elsevier Ltd. 2020), 197.
[205] Ibid, 198.

that are connected to the frontal pole so that our conscious experience can make sense of the information as it pertains to our attention and what we deem necessary to be aware of at that time.

Nonconscious processing carries an extraordinarily significant amount of the cognitive load when it comes to sensation and perception. It has been estimated that the sense organs alone take in over ten-million bits of information per second, while conscious cognition can only process about forty bits of information per second.[206] For example, as I sit here and write this, I am touching my chair, my computer, my clothes, and my feet are on the ground. I can smell coffee and hear the slight hum of the heater. In my visual perception I see my computer with the document on the screen and my peripheral vision takes in the rest of my room, the view out of my windows I am sitting across from, and even my lap and all the books and notes on my desk. However, when I am thinking deeply and working without reflecting on all the sensory information, I am not consciously aware of anything except my screen unless something happens to grab my attention. I no longer hear the heater or see out the window or feel my position in the chair and on the ground. Regardless of only being conscious of my computer screen, all this sensory information is still being processed by my nonconscious and the information that I have deemed important in the moment is what I deal with consciously.

With all this information processing happening beyond my conscious awareness, it is no surprise, then, that nonconscious cognition plays a significant role in actions and behaviors. A clear example of nonconscious action initiation is found in a famous study conducted by Benjamin Libet on the role of conscious and nonconscious action and awareness. Participants in the study were asked to raise a finger while their neuronal brain activity related to the task,

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[206] Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Belknap Press 2002), 24.

known as the readiness potential, was recorded by the researchers. The participants also had to look at a clock and note the exact position of the second hand when they decided to raise their finger. Libet and his colleagues found that the readiness potential preceded the action by about 550 milliseconds, but the participants' report on when they made a decision to move their finger preceded the action by only 200 milliseconds. The researchers concluded that "the brain was initiating the volitional process un[non]consciously, at least 350 ms before the person was aware of wanting to act."[207] Nonconscious cognition both initiated the readiness potential and the conscious awareness of the decision to move prior to the action. Examples of similar bottom-up action initiation processes are found in reflexes and reactions to stimuli, such as a ball flying towards your head and you ducking away before realizing what it is you are moving away from or why you are ducking.

However, actions and behaviors also work top-down where conscious cognition informs and directs the nonconscious processing. In a follow-up study, Libet gave the participants the same instructions, except this time, after they decided to move and noted the time on the clock, he told them not to move their finger. Libet and his colleagues found "that the conscious function still had enough time to affect the outcome of the process; that is, it could allow the volitional initiative to go to completion, it could provide a necessary trigger for the completion, or it could block or veto the process and prevent the act's appearance."[208] This finding indicated that the conscious veto control of action does not necessarily depend on the simple awareness or readiness potentials brought about by nonconscious cognition, so the conscious processing in the case of action vetoing is acting independent from the nonconscious processes and was able to

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[207] Benjamin Libet, *The Timing of Mental Events: Libet's Experimental Findings and Their Implications* (Consciousness and Cognition Issue 11, 2002), 291.
[208] Ibid, 292.

block the action that was neuronally initiated. Also, as Walter Gannon notes, the artificial setting where the experiment takes place is not an accurate reflection of real-world decision making in which we act in response to social circumstances and environmental stimuli: "the role of nonconscious neural events in initiating actions is at most necessary but not sufficient for a satisfactory account of whether or how actions are performed."[209] This is because the process from forming an intention to the subsequent execution of the action involves a temporal framework that stretches much farther than what Libet's study could account for. Since conscious action planning can extend days, weeks, or months into the future, "these plans prepare the organism for future activity, and the organism engages both conscious mental and nonconscious neural processes to do this, [therefore] it is possible that distal intentions could influence the activity of readiness potentials in motor cortices at specific times."[210] To understand the role that conscious mental processes play in actions and behaviors over extended periods of time moving into the future, we need to first look at how the brain develops memories and schemas.

The development of memories and mental schemas are exemplary of both top-down and bottom-up interdependent mental processes that support a whole brain approach to conscious and nonconscious cognition. The formation of memories can be categorized in two distinct ways: explicit memory and implicit memory, and explicit memory can be separated into either short-term or long-term memory. Endel Tulving was the first psychologist to propose a distinction in explicit long-term memories: semantic and episodic. Semantic memories are acquired through experience and are concerned with facts you know about the world, and an awareness of these

[209] Walter Gannon, *Behavior Control, Meaning, and Neuroscience* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2018), 149.
[210] Ibid.

memories requires noesis. Episodic memories are the autobiographical memories of the specific episodes in which the semantic memories arise, which requires autonoesis to be conscious of since a person needs to understand that the memories belong to their specific self as a particular individual having these experiences. To explain autonoetic consciousness, Antonio Damasio coined the term extended consciousness and explains that "extended consciousness goes beyond the here and now of core consciousness, both backward and forward. The here and now is still there, but it is flanked by the past, as much past as you may need to illuminate the now effectively, and, just as importantly, it is flanked by the anticipated future."[211] Long-term explicit memories enable extended consciousness which allows for the retrieval of memories and events in a life to be understood as happening to a specific person as a conscious individual, and this awareness brings about the realization of a future that the person is moving towards and can plan accordingly by making judgments and decisions based on what was learned from past memories.

Short-term explicit memory, also called working memory, is how consciousness navigates in the present. Working memory is how we bring explicit long-term memories into our present consciousness and is also how we are able to focus on specific tasks that require memory recollection and introspective interpretations of long-term memories. Mary Clark explains the brain regions involved in working memory as both a top-down and bottom-up system of cognition:

> Our remembering is linear; that is, we go from one view to the next…Our conscious attention is brought about by a region in the prefrontal cortex, the 'thinking-region,' that is connected to the cingulate gyrus [in the limbic system]. Known as the 'executive processor,' this region directs our attention and inhibits other signals; it organizes the sequence of things we attend to; it plans tasks to think about; it monitors our progress; and finally, it helps us remember where we are in a thought sequence.[212]

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[211] Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company 1999), 195. (hereafter cited as *The Feeling of What Happens*).

[212] Mary E. Clark, *In Search of Human Nature* (New York, NY: Routledge 2002), 154. (hereafter cited as *In Search of Human Nature*).

The activation of memory brought into present conscious awareness is made possible by working memory. The nonconscious is neuronally activating signals that our consciousness can veto or allow depending on what is necessary in the moment which is mediated by the 'executive processor.' Conscious cognition can also direct nonconscious processes to initiate recollection of specific long-term stored memories. Explicitly stored long-term memories can be recalled when our conscious brain systems are activated and working memory is directed to the thing being remembered. Studies conducted using fMRI brain scans show how visual stimuli is processed in nonconscious and conscious awareness through working memory to be retained in long term memory. LeDoux explains:

> When stimuli are reportable [i.e., remembered long-term], areas of the visual cortex and areas of the general cognitive cortical network that underlies working memory are activated, especially areas of the prefrontal cortex. But when a verbal report cannot be given, only the visual cortex is activated…Such results indicate that in order to have phenomenally conscious and verbally reportable experience of visual stimuli, sensory processing in the visual cortex has to be further processed by cognitive control networks underlying working memory.[213]

Focusing attention in working memory on specific stimuli results in the formation of long-term explicit memory storage. Without both top-down and bottom-up cognition processes taking place, long term memories cannot be encoded into our extended consciousness.

However, we cannot be consciously aware of and process every stimulus we encounter since we take in over ten-million bits of sense data alone per second and are only conscious of around forty bits. Nonetheless, our brains are still processing and encoding what we are not consciously aware of and are storing relevant and important information into implicit long-term memories. These implicit memories, which include procedural memories, allow us to understand and navigate the world by categorizing information gained through experience and create

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[213] *The Deep History of Ourselves*, 272.

concepts that organize new information. The main way implicit memories are stored is in mental

schemas, and as Asaf Gilboa and Hannah Marlatte explain:

> Schemas serve as general-form reference templates against which new information can be compared, binding multiple features that consistently co-occur; their elements are nonspecific, reflecting commonalities among experiences, and have considerable overlap and interconnectedness. Importantly, schemas are dynamic structures constantly evolving with new experiences and memories through processes dubbed assimilation and accommodation.[214]

Schemas are the categorization and consolidation of information that allows us to better

understand and thrive in the world we live in, and the development of schemas relies on both

conscious and nonconscious cognition in a top-down and bottom-up feedback system. An

example at the most basic level is the schema for dog. As a child, when you see a dog for the

first time and are taught to associate the word dog with that hairy four-legged creature you are

seeing, your brain begins to categorize the information and associations. As you see more dogs

of different breeds and various sizes, the schema develops to include these differences and the

concept expands. Then one day when you see a cat, you think 'dog' since the association of furry

four-legged creature fits with what you are seeing. When you are corrected that the animal is not

a dog but is actually called a cat, the brain evolves schematically, and a new category of 'cat' is

produced. These schemas are stored implicitly so that when you encounter a dog or cat in the

future, you know that the animal is a dog or a cat; you do not have to sit there and deliberate

about all the attributes of the animal to try and determine what exactly it is, taking time and

energy in every moment you encounter an animal.

Since schemas are implicit nonconscious stored memory processes, this cognition is fast

and automatic. When variables are added to the schema, such as an encounter with a different

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[214] Asaf Gilboa and Hannah Marlatte, *Neurobiology of Schemas and Schema-Mediated Memory* (Trends in Cognitive Science *Vol. 21* Elsevier Ltd. 2017), 618. (hereafter cited as *Neurobiology of Schemas and Schema-Mediated Memory*).

breed of dog, the recollection of the schema influences how you interpret the new experience. Neurocognitive models of schema retrieval and representation suggest that they "(i) are mediated by interactions between the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and posterior neocortical structures with possible hippocampal contributions; (ii) influence processing of incoming information; (iii) exert their influence rapidly; and (iv) are sustained within a defined context."[215] The first point shows that while nonconscious cognitive brain regions are schematizing information quickly and automatically, conscious cognition can deliberately mediate the formation and encoding of schemas into the nonconscious. Once a schema has been established, the next three points explain that schemas affect our perception of certain encounters, are activated within certain contexts, and the activation and retrieval of the schematic interpretation happens automatically in nonconscious processes. This whole sequence is essential for our survival. For instance, if I am in the woods alone and encounter a hairy four-legged creature, the schema for 'wolf' will be activated instead of 'dog' since the relevant context determines which schema is activated, and cognitive processing of the situation happens quickly to enable fight or flight and alert conscious awareness that I need to get away. Without schematization of experience, I would need to spend time looking at the creature to determine that it is in fact a wolf and not a domesticated dog, and by that time it could be too late to get away.

Working memory, explicit memory, and schemas are all developed beginning in childhood and are either adjusted or maintained throughout our life. The ability to adapt, interpret, learn, and navigate the world over a lifetime, especially during childhood and early adolescence, is due to the neuroplasticity of the human brain. Beyond mere genetics, the human brain is shaped significantly by experience and has been evolutionarily developed to adapt and

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[215] Ibid, 622.

thrive in all kinds of environments and situations. For comparison, a baby chimpanzee's and a

human baby's brain have a similar volume of around 350cc at birth. The chimpanzee's brain will

grow to about 450cc when they reach adulthood but the human's brain, however, grows to

around 1,400cc by the time they reach adulthood.[216] Although species' brain sizes are genetically

determined, this growth rate difference between chimps and humans is not only because more

brain cells and neurons are being generated, but mostly because the neurons that are there are

continuously growing more axons and dendrites to form new connections throughout the brain as

new experiences, memories, and schemas develop.[217]

Neurobiology has shown that the brain is exceptionally malleable in childhood and

continues to develop and form new neural connections throughout adolescence. The National

Research Council and Institute of Medicine states:

> The scientific evidence on the significant developmental impacts of early experiences, caregiving
> relationships, and environmental threats is incontrovertible. Virtually every aspect of early human
> development, from the brain's evolving circuitry to the child's capacity for empathy, is affected
> by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning
> early in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years.[218]

Experience shapes how the brain develops and those experiences within the environment

ultimately form a person's selfhood. As Darcia Narvaez explains, "connections among neurons

are modified by experience in structural and functional ways, making the brain a highly dynamic

organ, constantly balancing external and internal worlds."[219] Neural connections in the brain

form neural networks and "neuronal circuitry is formed by what is activated most frequently

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[216] *In Search of Human Nature*, 194.

[217] It used to be theorized that you are born with all the brain cells you will have. This has since been disproven. However, the number of new brain cells that come about throughout life is a tiny number compared to what a person is born with.

[218] National Research Council (US) Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, *Early Childhood Development and Learning: New Knowledge for Policy* (National Academies Press U.S. 2001), 10.

[219] Darcia Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture, and Wisdom* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company 2014), 29.

based on experience."[220] The plasticity of the brain is necessary for survival, and repetition of experiences makes stronger connections and develops deeper schemas in the brain to help a person better navigate and operate in their environment. Developmental plasticity and the neural connections being formed in childhood start out as nonconscious processes. The nonconscious processes are at work before the conscious processes and, as Matthew Dixon and Carol Dwek explain, nonconscious cognition:

> plays a key role in 'teaching' the slower developing PFC [prefrontal cortex] about the world and what is important to the individual. Furthermore, amygdala [located in the limbic system] lesions have a severe and persistent effect on socioemotional behavior that is more pronounced when the lesions occur early in development. Similarly, experiencing early-life adversity (e.g., low-quality caregiving) disrupts the typical development and functioning of the amygdala and has persistent effects on behavior and well-being (e.g., heightened anxiety) that are not remediated by PFC development.[221]

Nonconscious cognitive processes are not only developing and creating schemas in childhood, but they are also influencing the development of conscious cognitive processes that eventually effect how a person processes information and sees the world later in life.

These connections that are formed through experience and learning as we live in the world eventually shape our self and our character. When it comes to neural connections in the brain, the adage of 'cells that fire together wire together' is how neural networks are strengthened to automatize actions and behaviors that are repeated. Just as repeated experiences shape schemas in the nonconscious to better process information, repeated actions are automatized by the nonconscious to make living and acting in the world easier. The brain has evolved to promote survival and the automatization of repeated actions frees up conscious brain activity so that more can be accomplished. Nonconscious automatization promoting survival can

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[220] Ibid, 64.
[221] M. L. Dixon and C. S. Dweck, *The Amygdala and the Prefrontal Cortex: The Co-construction of Intelligent Decision-Making* (APA *Psychological Review* December 2021), 16.

be viewed as the brain asking, 'is this action important? if so, then I'll make it automatic,' so repeated neural connections are strengthened and automatized. If conscious awareness had to perform every single action through conscious brain processes, actions that are repeated throughout life would be extremely difficult every time we attempted them. This could risk our livelihood when actions that are necessary for survival continually take time and effort, so nonconscious automatization was an evolutionary advantage for early humans and nonhuman animals.

Actions such as driving a car, riding a bicycle, playing an instrument, or even something as simple as flipping on a light switch when you walk in a room would remain extremely difficult and time consuming. As Wayne Wu explains, "various features empirically associated with automatization appear on the [evolutionary] scene such as the reduction of dual task interference (you can have a conversation with someone as you enter the room and merely flick on the light), an increase in efficiency (you find the light faster), the absence of an explicit intention to turn on the light (you don't need to think about the light) and so forth."[222] By automatizing certain repeated actions, the brain allows for these processes to be cognized by the nonconscious which frees up the resources and availability of conscious networks so you can focus on other tasks and not be constantly striving to relearn and effortfully attempt each task.

The automatization of actions through nonconscious processes is how we form habits and habitual behavioral responses in certain situations. Humans and animals both form habits by reinforcement learning when successful attempts at past actions are recalled and the relative schemas are associated with the present context to accurately predict and select the actions that

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[222] Wayne Wu, *Action Always Involves Attention* (Oxford, England: Oxford Academic *Analysis* Volume 79, Issue 4, 2019), 701.

would be most successful to receive the greatest value in the outcome. LeDoux explains the formation of habits in nonconscious cognition by saying humans "use cells, synapses, circuits, and molecules in their nervous system to do this. A key player in these neural computations of value is dopamine, which, when released onto neurons forming associations between stimuli and between stimulus responses, strengthens the connections."[223] Habits are developed through trial-and-error learning from past experiences that are stored in procedural memory. Successful attempts strengthen nonconscious neural networks that initiate action so constant deliberation is not needed each time a task is repeated. "Implicit or procedural memories, which do not rely on conscious awareness…underlie behaviors learned as conditional responses, habits, skills, or procedures."[224] Habitual responses are initiated by nonconscious processes, however, as the follow up Libet study showed, conscious processes can intervene to redirect, veto, or allow these initiations to take place so long as we are explicitly aware of them.

5.2 – Kierkegaardian Necessity, Freedom, and the Brain

As we age and gain experience through life, we form habits to initiate and guide repeated actions, develop schemas to better process information that is relevant to our surroundings, and acquire memories that produce an extended consciousness of ourselves to better understand our history, our present selves, and the future we are moving towards. These developments result from both top-down and bottom-up conscious and nonconscious cognitive processes. During childhood, external circumstances such as our race, gender, family, society, culture, and the time we are born into generally determine our early experiences. These circumstances provide the earliest context for memory and schema formation, which influences how we see the world and

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[223] *The Deep History of Ourselves*, 221.
[224] Ibid, 294.

the types of habits we form and will eventually produce what our character becomes. Since we are physically limited by these external circumstances, the possible decisions we can make about our future will also be constrained by them, and therefore unrestricted free will is not possible in the absolute sense. When Kierkegaard explained the concept of unrestricted abstract free will in his journal entry as "a fantasy, as though a person at every moment of his life had this continual abstract possibility," it is an accurate portrayal of how neuroscience has shown the brain to work. He continued by saying "the will has a history, a continuous history. It can even come to the point where a person finally loses the ability to choose,"[225] and this can be understood as reaching a point where actions and schemas are initiated entirely by nonconscious brain processes, which come about through the history of a person forming these connections that are strengthened over time, and nonconscious neural initiation eventually becomes so strong that conscious cognitive processes are not used to override them.

We can lose our ability to choose since the habits that come about through repeated experiences operate in the nonconscious and are expressed automatically. For example, when a person learns to shoot a free-throw in basketball, there is significant conscious effort involved in the process. The person must learn each step, first to hold the ball correctly, then bend the elbows and knees, then how to extend the elbows and knees simultaneously and release the ball at the right moment all while looking at the hoop to guide the ball on its way out of their hands. Each one of these steps takes considerable practice to become proficient at shooting a free-throw. With enough practice, the person is no longer consciously aware of each step in the process and the shot becomes automatic. Once it is automatic, conscious awareness of the steps can actually interfere with the fluidity and accuracy of the shot. The brain has evolved to make repeated

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[225] *Papers and Journals*, 524.

behaviors and actions, like shooting a basketball, automatic by strengthening the neuronal circuitry required to do the task. Our experiences within the world, although much more complex and operating in a different way than shooting a free-throw, have a similar effect on brain plasticity.

Once processes become automatic in the nonconscious as habits, they are often expressed in action through impulses initiated automatically. For example, if a person repeatedly experienced success when a confrontation eventually led to them yelling at the other person, their impulse would lead them to go straight to yelling the moment an interaction became confrontational since that is what has worked before. The neural connections that succeed the most will be the ones that are strengthened, and those connections lead to actions that become automatic impulses. These automatic impulses shape a person's character and the person who always yells during a confrontation will be viewed as having an erratic and volatile character, even if they did not consciously will that behavior.

Kierkegaard refers to the history of the self that has developed these impulses, schemas, and habits through experiences in our unchosen external circumstances as the necessity of the self. Anti-Climacus explains the limiting aspects of necessity on our selfhood by saying, "necessity is the constraint in relation to possibility…The self is kata dunamin (potentially) just as possible as it is necessary, for it is indeed itself, but it has the task of becoming itself. Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility."[226] Since the self is a synthesis between freedom and necessity, necessity is needed to constrain our freedom, which it does by virtue of being innate and implicit in our brain's cognitive processes that have evolved to promote survival. The self that exists as necessity

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[226] *Sickness unto Death*, 35.

before consciously working out the synthesis with freedom in the process of becoming is mostly

shaped by circumstances outside of our control. It is essential to work out the synthesis between

freedom and necessity so that we do not allow necessity to be our entire self, since then we

would lose the possibility to make free choices. "To lack possibility means either that everything

has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial."[227] The processes of

becoming in possibility begins with the spirit being posited, which is a deep self-conscious

awareness of the habits and schemas within the self and understanding that there is freedom to

change these habits, patterns, and schemas.

This reflective self-conscious understanding of the self is what the Judge describes as

choosing the self when he says, "the individual is then aware of himself as this definite

individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by

these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world."[228] Choosing

yourself means gaining an awareness of how the nonconscious implicit information stored and

categorized as schemas and habits over the course of your life has shaped the person you are

now. Just as habits and schemas are developed over time and strengthened through repeated

actions and experiences, ridding the self of these nonconscious neural networks to change the

habits and schemas takes more time and significantly more conscious cognitive processing than

it took to develop what was initially shaped by necessity. However, since the nonconscious brain

processes are taking in and processing an incredible amount of information compared to the

small amount of information conscious cognition can process, it is difficult to know our

aptitudes, instincts, habits, and overall necessity perfectly. This is why a relation to God is

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[227] Ibid, 40.
[228] *Either/Or*, 542.

essential for developing the freedom for inward self-development. An awareness of the freedom of the self and the possibilities that lay ahead become essential for synthesizing the self and developing an ethical character. The conscious effort and will power that it takes to work on transforming the self is a process much like Anti-Climacus describes as "the more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self."[229] Anytime people are disciplining themselves to create a new habit, they first must be conscious of the habit they wish to change and consciously work on developing the willpower to follow through with the process of creating and re-shaping neural networks and connections that formed the previous habit.

The ability to develop more will and consciousness in this way can be illustrated by a study conducted by Jeffrey Schwartz who is a psychiatrist and researcher that had several patients under his care suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder in the late 1980's. Schwartz disagreed with the standard behavioral approach to OCD treatment at that time since he believed that it treated OCD patients as nonhuman animals and did not account for the self and the human will. Around this same time, researchers began using PET and fMRI scans on OCD patients to show that these compulsive thoughts were originating from overactive neural networks in the orbital prefrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate gyrus, and the caudate nucleus, three brain areas known to mediate executive functioning and control over things such as impulses, reward anticipation, attention, and procedural learning.

Schwartz found that showing his patients the PET and fMRI scans, with high neural activity levels in these areas, allowed the patients to separate their self from the overactive neurons in their brain. By separating their self from the feelings that accompany a compulsive

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[229] *Sickness unto Death*, 29.

thought, OCD patients were able to become mentally aware and mindful of their obsessive thoughts. Next, Schwartz had his patients view the compulsive thoughts as unnatural messages generated by a brain disease, which in turn fortified the awareness in the patients that it was not their true self having these thoughts. Conscious awareness of the thoughts and viewing them from an alternative perspective reinforced and strengthened the patients' belief that these thoughts and urges were separate from their will and their self. The patients then had to willfully change their behavior. Whenever a patient was mindfully aware of their compulsive thought, and attributed the thought to faulty brain wiring, they had to focus their attention on a specific task, such as gardening, which took their mind away from the intrusive thought. By refocusing their attention away from a thought, OCD patients began creating and strengthening new automatic neural circuitry in their brain while simultaneously weakening the old, OCD circuitry. Finally, the patients were told to separate the self and brain even further by using internal dialogue to view the disturbing thoughts as "senseless, false, errant brain signals not even worth the grey matter they rode in on, let alone worth acting on."[230] With the help of functional neuroimaging, Schwartz was able to show that through this process the patients' brains were rewired, and brain structures were modified.

For the OCD patients, this was a long and grueling process that took courage and a strong will. They were willing to put in this effort because they were in despair over their disease and wanted nothing more than to rid themselves of it. This desire strengthened their will to achieve their goal of rewiring their brain. The more consciously aware they became of the disease, the more will they had to conquer it, and the more will they had, the more self they developed. In

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[230] Jeffery M. Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (Los Angeles, CA: Regan Books 2002), 88. (hereafter cited as *The Mind and the Brain*).

Kierkegaardian terms, the OCD was not something the patients had chosen since it was a condition brought about by necessity. They were able to understand that their self was transcendent to the disorder so that they were not defined and determined by the faulty brain circuitry, and consciously separated their necessity from their transcendence through their spirit. The spirit is their conscious awareness of their immanent brain and transcendent self as two distinct things and makes the willing to refocus their attention and talking themselves through the compulsive thoughts possible through freedom. As people become more self-aware of their necessity and freedom, they will be able to develop more will in their spirit to shape themselves towards the person they wish to become and will grow more consciously aware of themselves as a synthesis between freedom and necessity.

5.3 – Goal Directed Self-Development and Habit Formation

Through conscious awareness and a focused will, a person can change the neural connections in the brain that have been strengthened overtime to make actions and behaviors automatic. Changing these connections by being consciously aware of the implicit actions and vetoing the nonconscious initiated processes before they can be fully realized in action weakens the connection of that neuronal circuitry, especially when the vetoing of the action initiation is replaced by a new conscious response to similar stimuli that activated the process before. Cells that do not fire together will not wire together. This is how a person can form new habits in the brain, replacing the old and unwanted neural circuitry with new connections that are strengthened through repetition and discipline. Habit formation is more effective when people have a goal they are striving for and know in advance exactly what character they want to develop. Goal directed self-development is extremely effective since it works with how the brain is structured, and not against it. Much research has been done in neuroscience and psychology on

the effects of goal setting for self-development and self-regulation. For example, the nonconscious wires neural connections based on goal outcomes to better pursue goals that had positive results, even when no conscious awareness of the goal or conscious intention of pursuing the goal is present. As Esther Papies and Henk Aarts explain, "the pursuit of nonconscious goals can be initiated and regulated in a highly effective fashion, without the recruitment of conscious awareness, by the interplay of situational cues, mental representations of desired states, and routinized behaviors that can be executed in an efficient yet flexible fashion."[231] The nonconscious brain is constantly asking the questions 'is this important' so that it can make beneficial operations such as goal attainment automatic, and even does so without the assistance of conscious brain processes.

The nonconscious brain develops neural connections quicker when actions and behaviors are goal directed. The nonconscious brain processes are already promoting goal striving, however consciously initiated goals that are planned and pursued in conscious awareness make that specific goal attainment all the more important to the nonconscious and connections are formed quicker. In one study, Elliot Berkman et al. were able to show that goal maintenance—which is the ability to maintain a cognitive representation of a specific goal, performance monitoring—which is the ability to remain vigilant about the goal to avoid lapses in progress, and response inhibition—the capacity to deny behaviors that are contrary to the goal, activate neural circuitry in the brain to make goal attainment more efficient. They conclude that "goal maintenance, performance monitoring, and response inhibition recruited a broad network of prefrontal, parietal, and subcortical structures. The components interacted to alter the neural

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[231] Esther Papies and Henk Aarts, *Nonconscious Self-Regulation, or the Automatic Pilot of Human Behavior* (New York, NY: Guilford Press 2011), 136-37.

response in a subset of those structures."[232] The study demonstrated that participants who

established a specific goal regarding a task before attempting it performed better than

participants who attempted the task with no prior goal established. When a goal is consciously

established, more areas of the brain are activated to help attain the goal that would otherwise not

be activated during the task.

For this reason, understanding that the self is in the process of becoming and consciously

directing our nonconscious processes towards our conceived goals of character and development

makes having a conception of our telos essential. Having a telos for the self to develop towards is

crucial for deliberate self-shaping. A prior teleological conception of what the self is supposed to

be while it is in the process of becoming helps guide actions and inhibit unconscious automatic

behaviors that are antithetical to the goal. In Kierkegaard's conception of the human telos

explained in chapter three, the telos is to become a single individual that imitates Christ's

intentions. When a goal is broad and long term, such as imitating the intentions of Christ,

nonconscious cognitive processes prime the brain to respond in goal-directed ways. As

Moskowitz and Li explain, "implicit cognition plays an important role in preparing the individual

to act, in allowing the individual both to detect goal-relevant stimuli in the environment and

shield one from distractions that could potentially derail attempts at self-control. Such automatic

thought includes processes of spreading activation and inhibition as well as attentional

selectivity."[233] What Moskowitz and Li were able to show through their experiment was that

people who had an explicitly conscious long-term goal of being egalitarian, what they call

[232] Elliot T. Berkman et al., *Interactive Effects of Three Core Goal Pursuit Processes on Brain Control Systems: Goal Maintenance, Performance Monitoring, and Response Inhibition* (San Francisco, CA: PLoS ONE 7(6): e40334 2012), 10.
[233] Gordon Moskowitz and Peizhong Li, *Implicit Control in Stereotype Activation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2010), 354.

chronic egalitarianism, showed no difference between nonconscious initiated responses, measured by reaction time, to words related to "the stereotype of African Americans"[234] and unrelated control group words compared to participants that had not made explicit long-term egalitarian goals. Even when the researchers primed the chronic egalitarian group to slow down their reaction time to these stereotypically charged words, nonconscious cognition inhibited the primed responses from interfering with the goal of remaining egalitarian.

Similar to the general goal of becoming egalitarian, imitating Christ's intentions, by loving others and following the beatitudes, conditions the nonconscious cognitive processes by making these intentions important. Through goal-directed responses in different situations, circumstances, and interactions, habits are formed to make these intentions automatic, so that goal striving is easier and more attainable. Goal-directed forms of self-development eventually become habits that construct a person's character. However, Kierkegaard has worries about a person forming habits or relying on habitual responses when acting as a single individual. In *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, the author Inter et Inter explains that a person who lives by habit is in danger of being ingenuine and inauthentic:

> Oh, how rarely is there a person, to say nothing of a generation, that does not indulge in the fraud of habit, so that even if the expression is not changed, yet this unchanged expression becomes something else through habit, so that now this verbatim sameness nevertheless sounds very weak, very mechanical, very flat, although the same thing is said. Oh, there is a lot of talk in the world about seducers and seductions, but how many indeed are those who are self-deceived through habit, so that they seem unchanged but yet are as if emaciated in their inner beings…Of all sophists, time is the most dangerous, and of all dangerous sophists, habit is the most cunning. It is already difficult enough to realize that one changes little by little over the years, but the fraud of habit is that one is the same, unchanged, that one says the same thing, unchanged, and yet is very changed and yet says it, very changed.[235]

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[234] Ibid, 366.

[235] S. Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of and Actress*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1997), 314-15. (hereafter cited as *Christian Discourses*).

In *Either/Or*, the Judge writes in his second letter to the young man that "'habit' is used properly only of what is bad, either through demonstrating persistence in something which in itself is bad, or through denoting a repetition of something in itself innocent but with an obduracy that makes the repetition bad on that account. 'Habit' therefore designates something unfree."[236] Kierkegaard explains his worry about habit in his *Christian Discourses*, writing under his own name, saying that "in the customary pursuits of daily life, how easy it is, in the spiritual sense, to doze off; in the habitual routine of sameness, how difficult to find a break!"[237] Kierkegaard's worry about habits and habit formation is that people will not recognize their habituated responses, and the mindlessness of habit can even turn something good into something negative. This leads to an inauthentic life with no self-reflection since a person does not recognize the imperceptibly subtle development of habits that can inhibit true self-development.

For Kierkegaard, habits indicate a lack of freedom since they do not require conscious effort to bring about a particular action. What has been shown, however, is that habit formation is one way in which nonconscious brain cognition operates, and therefore it is impossible to rid the brain of habits completely. The term 'habit' is simply a way to label one of the functions of the brain's many evolutionary cognitive operations. Since the brain has evolved to form habits in order to navigate and survive more easily, habits can be helpful and positive just as easily as they can be harmful or negative. Habits viewed as harmful and negative is the most common association we have with the term in our culture and Kierkegaard's alike. A view that would be more suitable to fit with Kierkegaard's concerns is that a person remains aware of the habits they are forming and works at them deliberately and intentionally through conscious discipline. This

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[236] *Either/Or*, 454-55.
[237] *Christian Discourses*, 254.

encourages people to continuously view themselves as a single individual with their temporal necessity and their freedom to shape themselves, along with the responsibility as single individuals to become ethical selves. Remaining consciously aware of the self, the telos, and consciously willing certain habits that we see as helpful is one way in which Kierkegaard's concerns about habit formation can be avoided.

5.4 – Narrative, Neuroscience, and Kierkegaardian Self-Development

To remain consciously aware of the self as a single individual developing towards a telos, with deliberate and disciplined habit formation, can ease the concerns raised by Kierkegaard. Narrative self-development is an exceptionally useful method for ensuring that a person maintains a conscious awareness of their status as a single individual with the responsibility to align with Christ's intentions as their telos. Conscious narrative self-development helps avoid the nonconscious formation of potentially negative habits, which is one reason there has been an increased interest in narrative identity over the past several decades in contemporary philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology. Much work has been done in these areas to explore the effectiveness and potential influence that narrative has on self-development. In the early twentieth century, Austrian neurologist Viktor Frankl developed one of the original psychotherapies by using a narrative structure of self-identity from his own search for meaning in life after surviving the holocaust.[238] He based his method on Kierkegaard's notion of 'will to meaning,' and argued that meaning is found through the narratives we create about ourselves. Frankl called his therapeutic method Logotherapy, claiming that finding meaning in life is essential to human flourishing, and his practice helped patients construct their own narratives to give their life meaning.

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[238] Cf: Frankl, 1959; Ameli et al., 2013; and Haukenfrers, 2016.

One reason narrative theories of self-identity hold a strong influence in contemporary identity theory is due to the significance of language in human evolution and the role it plays in forming narratives. As Evan MacLean explains, the development of language in early humans was a key factor in human cognitive evolution. Humans are social animals, and language allows for cooperation by communicating intentions and desires, transcending competitive natural impulses through understanding another person as another mind. Language became an evolutionary advantage for humans, and in the first few years after being born, "human children begin to experience the world not only through their own eyes, but also together with others, and these abilities for reasoning about others' minds provide children with powerful mechanisms for acquiring and sharing cultural information, including language, social norms, and societal beliefs."[239] Cecilia Heyes termed the evolutionary advantage of language communication to understand the thoughts and feelings of others as 'mind reading.' "The cultural evolutionary account [of mind reading] suggests that humans do not genetically inherit mechanisms that are specialized for the representation of mental states" however, "many of the neurocognitive raw materials for explicit mind reading are inborn."[240] Humans have developed an evolutionary capacity for language to communicate mental states that other nonhuman animals are not able to communicate through nonverbal symbols and vocal sound cues. The development of language allows for the preservation of culture across many generations through stories about history that can be represented in cognitive processes and shared with others.

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[239] Evan L. MacLean, *Unraveling the Evolution of Uniquely Human Cognition* (U.S.: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences June 2016), 6349.
[240] Cecilia Heyes and Chris Frith, *The Cultural Evolution of Mind Reading* (American Association for the Advancement of Science, *Science* June 2014, New Series, Vol. 344), 1357.

Humans not only use language to communicate with others but also to communicate with ourselves in inner speech. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky popularized the contemporary understanding of the use of language in thoughts, and as LeDoux explains, "language and deliberative thought, and even consciousness, are closely entwined…Language allows thoughts to wander in novel directions and yet stay connected as a 'train.' It provides words to label external objects and to characterize and recognize our perceptions, memories, concepts, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and feelings."[241] Inner speech requires the use of both conscious and nonconscious brain cognition to articulate, comprehend, inform, and produce thoughts as language. PET scans have shown that brain areas such as the premotor cortex, supplementary motor area, anterior cingulate, prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and especially Wernicke's area and Broca's area are all essential to the formation and understanding of inner speech.[242] These brain areas process thoughts in both top-down and bottom-up cognition to think about our memories, understand our perceptions, formulate our beliefs, and articulate our desires and feelings.

Since humans have communicated internal concepts using language, and cultural traditions have survived through stories conveyed in language, humans have become natural story tellers. Narratives allow us to make better sense of ourselves, experiences, memories, and our world by formulating an identity using inner speech to link episodic memories together as a coherent story. Narrative self-identity incorporates schemas, explicit memories, and extended consciousness to shape and hold together ourselves that are extended in time. Narrative holds the extended consciousness together since "without the narrative we would have no knowledge

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[241] *The Deep History of Ourselves*, 234-35.
[242] Sean A. Spencer, *The Actor's Brain: Exploring the Cognitive Neuroscience of Free Will* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2009), 89-90.

whatsoever of the moment, of the memorized past, or of the anticipated future."[243] However, our implicit procedural memory causes us to perform actions automatically or through habits, so narrative is also an effective tool for understanding actions and giving meaning to our habits and character. As Joseph LeDoux explains, "to maintain a sense of organismic unity in the face of such [implicit actions], consciousness must have some sophisticated way of rescripting one's history to account for responses that it did not intentionally will…for example, when your action is at odds with what you think about yourself, you can generate an explanation that rationalizes you to yourself."[244] Conscious constructions of narrative meaning making provides explanations for seemingly discontinuous actions. This is essential for self-identity since "these narrative moves reduce dissonance and help maintain a sense of control and personal unity."[245]

Narrative construction of experience and perception is a practical way of making sense of all the information we are absorbing and the continuity we perceive through time. As Dan Lloyd explains, narratives help make sense of our world since "an important component of cognition is narration: it informs effective action by attempting to spin true or likely stories about the events represented in perception or memory…Thus, when we pose to ourselves the question 'what's next?' we are asking for plot, not proof."[246] Paul Harris explains that narrative cognition is a routine activity that helps us understand our temporal sequences by saying, "there is now a wealth of evidence that when [people] process a connected narrative, they construct a mental model of the narrative situation being described. Moreover, as the narrative unfolds, they update that situation model so as to keep track of the main developments in the plot."[247] Narrative is a

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[243] *The Feeling of What Happens*, 218.
[244] *Deep History of Ourselves*, 274.
[245] Ibid.
[246] Dan Lloyd, *Simple Minds* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1989), 225.
[247] Paul Harris, *The Work of the Imagination* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing 2000), 192.

valuable tool for holding a sequence of events together to allow for a deeper comprehension of what is taking place.

Narrative self-identity is an effective way to remain conscious of the self as an individual and understand who we are. Constructing a comprehensive story about ourselves requires introspection and self-reflection on our habits, schemas, and personal character that brings in our temporal necessity and the freedom we have to shape the self moving into the future. In addition to simply understanding and gaining an awareness of the self, narrative also serves as an effective method for changing and developing the self towards our telos. An essential part of attaining the telos by cultivating habits that align with it is by changing and developing our implicit schemas that affect actions and behaviors in the future. Using the term gist to refer to narrative elements that are critical for coherence, Giboa and Marlatte explain that "neural networks of narrative comprehension and gist extraction are similar and involve" similar brain areas, including the medial prefrontal cortex which is involved in conscious cognition of the self and goal-directed pursuits. However, when the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which is involved with nonconscious learning and decision making relating to affects, is recruited for gist extraction, it "could reflect schema reinstatement when relevant preexisting schemas serve as scaffolds for interpretation of the gist specific events."[248] This explanation shows that conscious and deliberate narrative comprehension of past events avoids the implicit activation of schemas that could potentially affect our perception of certain encounters and experiences.

Narrative also influences how new schemas are encoded into implicit memory. In a study where participants viewed the first half of a movie either intact or temporally scrambled and then watched the second half the next day during brain scanning, the researchers found that "having

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[248] *Neurobiology of Schemas and Schema-Mediated Memory*, 619.

an intact prior narrative induced greater intersubjective synchronization in the vmPFC during encoding of the second part and weaker mPFC-MTL functional connectivity during encoding and post-encoding rest. Greater vmPFC-hippocampal crosstalk in this case may be necessary to compensate for the poorly organized prior knowledge to support consolidation or schema mediated gist extraction."[249] The participants who saw the movie in a temporally correct narrative formation were able to better encode schemas related to the meaning that was extracted from the movie. When participants did not have an accurate narrative of the first half of the movie, it took considerably more conscious effort to make sense of the movie, and the conscious deliberation recruited schemas stored in nonconscious cognition to fill in the missing gaps of information. This implies that a person who does not accurately understand their life as a narrative and still does not attempt to make sense of it consciously could have a harder time making meaning out of their memories and experiences and may not have a conscious awareness of their schema formation.

In a similar way, changing our habits and developing new ones that align with our telos takes significant narrative conscious awareness of what habits we currently have that need to be changed and for understanding how they were formed and when they are activated. Habits are often goal-directed by either conscious or nonconscious cognitive processes, and as Talia Lerner points out, "while there may be a push-pull between habitual and goal-directed behavior with learning, the two circuits may also develop and influence behavioral output in parallel."[250] For this reason, centering narrative identity and self-development on an explicit telos is essential for breaking old habits and forming new ones. Remaining consciously aware of our telos in a

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[249] Ibid, 627.
[250] Talia Lerner, *Habits* (Journal of Neuroscience Research 2020), 984.

narrative conception of self-identity is made easier from what was explained in chapter four, section five, as narrative-self-talk. Narrative-self-talk enables people to be consciously aware of their telos directed behaviors and intentions as they go about their daily lives so that they do not become complacent and fall into the old routines and habits they wish to break from. The conscious awareness that arises from consistent narrative-self-talk brings in all the elements of Kierkegaardian selfhood, such as freedom, teleology, ethics, and awareness of the self as a single individual that is responsible for self-development.

Sports psychologist James Hardy has employed a similar construction of self-talk to help athletes perform better and learn quicker. He defines self-talk as "(a) verbalizations or statements addressed to the self; (b) multidimensional in nature; (c) having interpretive elements association with the content of statements employed; (d) is somewhat dynamic; and (e) serving at least two functions; instructional and motivational, for the athlete."[251] Hardy et al. distinguish between two types of self talk, one that arises from nonconscious cognition and the other from conscious cognition: "(a) an intuitive type of self-talk that comes to mind spontaneously, focuses awareness on current experiences, and represents the immediate, emotionally charged reaction to a situation ("Dang it, I messed up"); and (b) a rational type of self-talk ("Calm down, it was not entirely your fault") based on reason, which is emotionally neutral."[252] The conscious self-talk is associated with goal directed cues and nonconscious self-talk is generally associated with spontaneous cues that are not goal directed. Therefore, effective self-talk needs to be explicit, flexible, broadly applicable, instructional, motivational, and consciously controlled using reason.

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[251] James Hardy, *Speaking Clearly: A Critical Review of the Self-Talk Literature* (Psychology of Sport and Exercise 7, 2006), 84.
[252] James Hardy et al., *Speaking Clearly…10 Years on: The Case for an Integrative Perspective of Self-Talk in Sport* (APA Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology 2019), 357.

The way a person addresses their self in self-talk also plays a role in its effectiveness. In three studies conducted on the difference between using first person (I) and second person (you) pronouns to address the self during self-talk, Sanda Dolcos and Dolores Albarracin found that using second person pronouns during self-talk resulted in better performance on the task and a more positive attitude towards the task. They concluded that "self-talk using *You* strengthens task performance and behavioral intentions and increases positive attitudes more than self-talk using *I*…the current research showed that second-person self-talk strengthens both actual behavior performance and prospective behavioral intentions more than first-person self-talk, and that these effects are mediated by attitudes."[253] Second person pronouns in self-talk can be understood through Kierkegaard's formulation of selfhood as two orders of relationships: the lower being the relation between immanence and transcendence, and the higher being a relation between spirit and the lower order relation. The spirit, which is the self, would direct self-talk cues to the you that constitutes the lower order relationship. This formulation is similar to Schwartz's patents who were able to separate their self from their brain with second person relational words.

Structured in this way, which has been proven to be an effective structure of developing the self, narrative-self-talk is performed with telos directed explicit language cues that fit a person's narrative structure, apply to many different circumstances, inform actions through preplanned intentions, and are self-addressed from spirit to the immanent and transcendent self using the second person pronoun. For example, if a person consciously understood their telos to be imitation of Christ's intentions, a narrative-self-talk structure would look as follows: "I know that I want to imitate Christ's intentions and how he interacted with other people so I can live an

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[253] Sanda Dolcos and Dolores Albarracin, *The inner speech of behavioral regulation: Intentions and task performance strengthen when you talk to yourself as a You* (European Journal of Social Psychology 44, 2014), 641.

authentic and fulfilling life and be happy with who I am as a person. In my own narrative

formulation of my identity, I understand that in the past I have been an exceptionally angry

person and still am today. Hermeneutically, I know that my angry impulses, tendencies, and

behaviors have come about through my own self-absorbed view of my life, believing that no one

understands me or can comprehend my struggles that have made me angry and hateful.

Therefore, I bitterly lash out at people and have offended them simply because I was irritated and

wanted to offend them so they would be equally as miserable as myself. My angry state of mind

makes me selfishly believe that everyone is against me, especially since I have been wronged in

the past, so I have believed I was justified in my retaliation against them. I understand now that

the anger is narcissistic, thinking only about myself and not about how I affect others when they

have not caused my anger. I allowed the anger to build up and have formed myself into a person

with angry habits and indignant reactions to almost every situation I am in, and even implicitly

process information through this skewed conception. As a single individual standing in a direct

relation to God, I now know that Christ has said that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister

will be subject to judgement. This means that as spirit I am responsible for my anger and have

the duty to transform my intentions. My anger stems from what has happened in my past and the

habits that have been formed over a long period of time, but I have the freedom to change and

make myself a peaceful person. From the awareness I have gained through self-reflection, I

know that most of my anger comes from me viewing others as having ill intent toward me and

wanting to take advantage of me. Even so much as a look that I do not like sets off my anger.

Therefore, when I encounter others, I will remind myself through narrative-self-talk cues to

always give the benefit of the doubt and extend peace to others. By telling myself 'you must be

compassionate' and 'you must extend kindness,' I can approach any interaction, whether it be at

work, at home, at the store, or wherever, with the conscious awareness of both my angry personality and my freedom to change it. I am responsible as a single individual existing as spirit to shape my necessity, so I will also tell myself 'you are accountable for this interaction.' I will give myself the self talk cues before and during every interaction, willing it consciously through hard work and discipline, and reflect on them afterwards so that I can be a better person with better intentions."

Narrative-self-talk requires extended consciousness and a consciously constructed life narrative that draws in the past and present while moving into the future, understanding that the necessity of the self has and does change, and the freedom to choose possibilities in the future will be conditioned by necessity. The spirit, however, is consistent throughout all stages of the narrative, so a cohesive and meaningful narrative self-identity is an effective way for the spirit to work out the synthesis between freedom and necessity. Once a telos has been established, the spirit can begin working out self-consistency in the self and freely will repetition to have continuity in the self, enabling proper self-development. The actualizing of the telos, which requires self-consistency and continuity, comes through repeating properly oriented actions and behaviors to develop habits and schemas that will shape the self into the telos.

Johannes Climacus clearly explains existence and the importance of continuity in the self that has been outlined so far in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments.* Climacus says that existing cannot be done without passion. He compares the passion of existence to the driver of a carriage that is led by both a Pegasus and a decrepit old horse and being told to drive. He explains that "eternity is infinitely quick like that winged steed, temporality is the old [horse], and the existing person is the driver, that is, if existing is not to be what people usually call existing, because then the existing person is no driver but a drunken

peasant who lies in the wagon and sleeps and lets the horses shift for themselves. Of course, he also drives, he is also the driver, and likewise there perhaps are many who—also exist."[254] The existing person who is not conscious as spirit is asleep at the wheel, allowing the carriage to drive itself by developing habits that form the character without conscious awareness. Since the carriage is in motion, awareness of the motion needs to be recognized by the driver. To take the reigns as a conscious driver in motion is to establish continuity in existence that holds the motion together. Establishing continuity of the self is essential to the self's existence. Climacus explains this by saying, "the difficulty for the existing person is to give existence the continuity without which everything just disappears…For an existing person, the goal of motion is decision and repetition. The eternal is the continuity of motion, but an abstract eternity is outside of motion, and a concrete eternity in the existing person is the maximum of passion."[255] Existing with earthly passion is being asleep at the wheel since earthly passion changes existence into the momentary and does not establish continuity. Existing with eternal passion is the ability to take control of the carriage and establish narrative continuity in the temporal life through decisions and repetition that depend on a conscious awareness of the eternal.

However, Climacus makes clear that it is not possible to establish an absolute continuity of the self. As he explains, "for an existing person, passion's anticipation of the eternal is still not an absolute continuity but the possibility of an approximation to the only true continuity there can be for an existing person. Here one is again reminded of my thesis that subjectivity is truth, because the objective truth for an existing person is like the eternity of abstraction. Abstraction is disinterested, but to exist is the highest interest for an existing person. Therefore, the existing

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[254] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 312.
[255] Ibid.

person continually has a telos."[256] The telos of the self is to work towards establishing continuity; however, since we are also temporal, this continuity will not be absolute in the same way that eternal continuity is absolute. Nonetheless, using a narrative to establish self-identity brings a person's self-continuity close to the eternal since narrative unity exists in the eternal present spirit, which is the self. This is why narrative is necessary for Kierkegaardian selfhood.

5.5 – Objection Against Narrative Self-Identity

With the popularization of narrative theories for selfhood and identity in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience, they have been met with criticism from those who are skeptical of the strong claim that narrative is necessary for a human life. Galen Strawson's article *Against Narrativity* is one of the more prominent philosophical works in opposition to the narrative view of selfhood and is cited by many people who have argued against Kierkegaard being a narrative author.[257] Strawson takes the position that humans do not naturally place their lives within the context of a broader narrative or story to make sense of it and that having this narrative cohesion is not necessary for a person to understand their life. He argues that understanding life as a narrative sequence of events unfolding across time and held together by a central unity to make meaning out of it will "hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts."[258] He makes this claim by differentiating between a diachronic life and an episodic life, saying that diachronic consciousness views life in a temporal manner, moving from past to present and into

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[256] Ibid, 313.
[257] Galen Strawson, *Against Narrativity* (Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy 17 (4): 428–52, 2004). (hereafter cited as *Against Narrativity*). This article has been cited over 280 times, notably by John Lippit in *Getting the Story Straight*.
[258] *Against Narrativity*, 429.

the future, while episodic consciousness views life as the self being continually present, and the past does not exist as an actuality but rather just an idea that informs the present. He claims that both are valid ways of living however episodic life is more authentic.

Strawson claims that he himself lives life episodically. He has knowledge of his personal past, but "I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have any great deal of concern for my future."[259] He claims there is no need for understanding that the present self is necessarily linked to the past self since "I have no significant sense that *I*—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past. And it seems clear to me that this is not a failure of feelings. It is, rather, a registration of a fact about what I am—about what the thing that is currently considering the problem is."[260] Strawson says that he does have memories 'from-the-inside' character that allows him to experience an autobiographical account of some past event, however, he argues that his present awareness of himself is entirely different from the past self. Using (*) to note the present experience of conscious self-awareness, he argues that "it does not follow from this that I experience them as having happened to me*, or indeed that they did happen to me. They certainly do not present as things that happened to me, and I think I'm strictly, literally correct in thinking that they did not happen to me*."[261] The point here is that the current conscious awareness of the self is different from the conscious awareness of the self during the past event, therefore the past events did not happen to the self that is currently in conscious awareness.

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[259] Ibid, 433.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid, 434.

From what has been demonstrated and explained in this chapter, Strawson's account that the present self can be entirely separated from the past self is simply not possible. So long as he did not suffer any significant damage, lesions, or illnesses in his brain, the past nonconscious cognitive brain processes that have developed schemas, habits, and implicit procedural memories will inform and direct action and behavior in the present. As Leslie Thiele summarizes what I have previously argued, "neurons that fire together, wire together. The synaptic circuits formed by this process produce a neural inventory of life. The worldly experiences that constitute an individual's existence, coupled with the internal reactions of the individual to these experiences, are laid down as tracks in the mind. This interactive scheme of brain maps produces a sense of self."[262] As LeDoux argues, these connections create the self: "you are your synapses…Your 'self,' the essence of who you are, reflects patterns of interconnectivity between neurons in your brain."[263] These connections are constantly being formed throughout life. Strawson's current understanding of his present conscious self is only known in this way because the past connections developed his brain to be this way beginning before birth and continuing all the way up to the present moment. The past self is the present self insofar as it is the same brain that has developed to better understand and navigate the world, which happens whether a person is consciously aware of the processes or not.

The point of narrative self-understanding and identity is not to claim that past events absolutely determine a person but rather to know the self and explain why the self has these certain dispositions, habits, schemas, and character traits that have been neurologically wired in

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[262] Leslie Paul Thiele, *The Heart of Judgement: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press 2006), 204.

[263] Joseph LeDoux, *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York, NY: Penguin Books 2002), 2.

this way. Without understanding the causes of these developments and what situations and circumstances activate them in the present, a person will have an extremely difficult time trying to change these aspects consciously, if at all. It also does not make sense to claim that people can remain absolutely detached from their past selves and claim that metaphysically the past selves do not exist at all. A deleted scene from *The Office U.S.* perfectly demonstrates the absurdity of this claim. The character Ryan Howard left work for a while when he went through a fall from grace after he lost his job due to embezzlement, served a short prison sentence, and had to attend rehab for his drug addiction before coming back to work at the office. Upon his return, Ryan admits that when he was angry one day before he lost the job, he knocked the mirror off someone's car while leaving in a rage. Kevin Malone, another employee at the office, approaches Ryan telling him that it was his car that was damaged, and asks if he will pay for it. The scene plays out as follows:

> Ryan: That guy did a lot of things I'm not proud of.
> Kevin: Wait, when you say, 'that guy,' do you mean you?
> Ryan: I mean the guy I used to be. I'm Ryan 2.0 and, if it makes you feel any better, that guy did a lot of messed up stuff to me too.
> Kevin: You mean *you* did a lot of messed up stuff to you too…
> Ryan: Look, I feel you, that guy took no responsibility for his actions.
> Kevin: But are you going to pay for my mirror?
> Ryan: If I have to answer for everything that guy did, I'm never going to move on.
> Kevin: It was like two hundred dollars.
> Ryan: We're never going to get what we need from that guy.[264]

This scene is a great representation of the confusion a person feels when someone claims that they have nothing to do with their past self and are not responsible for the narrative history of the past. This confusion is similarly felt in Strawson's argument when he says, "I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical

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[264] *The Office US.* 2008. Season 5, Episode 3, "Business Ethics." Directed by Jeffrey Blitz. Aired October 9, 2008, on NBC. The scene was cut from the original airing but added later in the release of "Super-Fan Episodes" on Peacock Streaming Service.

fact."[265] To claim that the past has nothing to do with the present and argue therefore that a person was not there in the past is a misconception.

Strawson shifts the argument towards the end of the article and claims that since explicit memories are fallible, and that not every aspect of life can be remembered and articulated into a narrative, then narrative self-identity is a mistaken understanding of control and self-awareness in life. He claims that for this reason, narrative always does more harm than good for a person:

> The narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature…It turns out to be an inevitable consequence of the mechanisms of the neurophysiological process of laying down memories that every studied conscious recall of past events brings an alteration. The implication is plain: the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you are likely to move away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being.[266]

The objection laid out here is that since memories can be altered or misunderstood, then we should not attempt to make sense of them or use them to form our identity. This objection is countered by a hermeneutical approach to narrative that was argued for in chapter four section three, but Strawson claims that for this reason, narrative is not necessary for an examined life, and an examined life is not necessarily a good thing. He continues saying that "people can develop and deepen in valuable ways without any sort of explicit, specifically narrative reflection, just as a musician can improve by practice sessions without recalling those sessions."[267] This point is not incorrect. People can develop through nonconscious brain cognition. When people practice an instrument, they are working on creating nonconscious connections in the brain to make playing the instrument automatic so that conscious cognitive

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[265] *Against Narrativity*, 434.
[266] Ibid, 447.
[267] Ibid, 448.

processes do not get in the way to slow down or interfere with the playing in the same way shooting the free throw in basketball is automatized through practice.

However, developing the self exclusively through nonconscious processes is what Climacus described as being asleep at the wheel while driving. With no conscious awareness, conscious intention, or conscious discipline, the development of the self will move about in whichever directions the environment and circumstances pull, and the nonconscious processes will strengthen connections that form habits and character independent of Strawson's I* willing it. If the aim is simply to exist, living an episodically conscious life devoid of narrative continuity is acceptable; however, as I have argued in this project, humans flourish when there is an explicit goal to develop the self. Developing the self towards a goal is only possible when conscious cognitive processes are active to inform and direct nonconscious cognitive processes that create habits. Narrative plays a key role in self-development when a person truthfully wants to develop their self towards a goal. Even in the example of practicing an instrument, developing those skills begins with the conscious and explicit awareness of a defined goal to play the instrument well, and reasons are given to the self for wanting to play the instrument. The person who sets out to learn an instrument and play it well would think something like "I want to play the piano, I think it is a beautiful instrument, and some of my best memories are sitting and listening to my grandmother play when I was a child. In order to learn to play the piano properly, I first need to learn the notes of the keys, then learn to read sheet music, then practice simple scales, and eventually work my way towards more complicated pieces." This process requires a narrative structure to make sense of why a person wants to learn an instrument, understand what it takes to do so, and remind them why they are doing each step in the process. Even though the ability to play the piano is neurologically wired in nonconscious cognition so that it becomes

automatic, fast, and intuitive, the conscious narrative holds the process together in unity

providing meaning and coherence to the project. Where Strawson's objection falls short is in the

misunderstanding that narrative is not simply a way of perceiving the self, but also serves as a

tool for developing the self efficiently.

5.6 – Attention Based Mindfulness or Teleological Narrative in Self-Development

A different objection to the narrative appeal to self-development, which is rooted in a

neuroscientific understanding of the self and aims at changing the self, is found in the practice of

mindfulness. Mental mindfulness is a therapeutic approach to self-development based on, and

informed by, mindful meditation practices in the Buddhist tradition. However, the linking of

therapeutic mindfulness practices to Buddhist meditation that has occurred over the past two

decades has been challenged and resisted by practicing Buddhists, so for this section I will be

looking only at mindfulness as it is defined and implemented in approaches from neuroscience

and psychology.[268] The purpose of mindfulness-based therapy approaches is to change the brain

through focused attention. This approach has gained a significant popularity in psychology,

psychotherapy, clinical psychology, behavioral medicine, and neuroscience for its effectiveness

to change neural connections in the brain. Yi-Yuan Tang and Michael Posner describe the

success of the practice in these fields, claiming that "mindfulness neuroscience is a new,

interdisciplinary field of mindfulness practice and neuroscientific research; it applies

neuroimaging techniques, physiological measures, and behavioral tests to explore the underlying

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[268] The journal *Contemporary Buddhism* released a special volume with articles directly addressing and responding to this concern with the aim to separate the two, so to avoid those objections I will only use mindfulness as it is defined and used in therapeutic practices in psychology and neuroscience. (Cf: *Contemporary Buddhism, Vol. 12, No. 1, May 2011*).

mechanisms of different types, stages, and states of mindfulness practice over the lifespan."[269] This new wave of mindfulness based therapeutic practice, sometimes referred to as contemplative neuroscience, is endorsed by many psychologists and neuroscientists for its effectiveness in developing the self.

The foundation of mindfulness is the willful ability to consciously direct what the mind is attending to. There have been many neuroscientific studies showing that deliberate conscious awareness shapes neural networks and connections in nonconscious cognition by simply focusing our attention. Using fMRI scans, researchers were able to demonstrate that regarding visual stimuli, "selectively focusing attention on target images significantly enhances neuronal responses to them…Neurons that respond to a target (the image attracting your attention) fire more strongly than neurons that respond to a distraction. The act of paying attention, then, physically counteracts the suppressive influence of nearby distractions."[270] Selective attention can strengthen or weaken cognitive processing in the nonconscious visual cortex. For example, if a person were asked to pay attention to the shape and color of an airplane, neural networks in brain areas that process visual information about shape and color would be highly active. On the other hand, if a person were asked instead to pay attention to the speed of the plane, neural activity that processes information about motion would become active and the shape and color networks would be suppressed. This is interesting since "the visual information reaching the brain hasn't changed. What has changed—what is under the observer's control—is the brain's

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[269] Yi-Yuan Tang and Michael Posner, *Special Issue on Mindfulness Neuroscience* (Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 8(1), 2012), 2.
[270] *The Mind and the Brain*, 328.

response to the information."[271] When a person shifts their attention, different regions of the nonconscious brain are activated to process the attention specific information.

Over time, the objects, concepts, patterns, or thoughts that we specifically attend to with conscious attention rewires neural networks in the brain and changes nonconscious cognition by telling it that what we are attending to is 'important.' As Jeffrey Schwartz explains, deliberately selected attention "can redraw the contours of the mind, and in so doing can rewire the circuits of the brain, for it is attention that makes neuroplasticity possible. The role of attention throws into stark relief the power of the mind over the brain, for it is a mental state (attention) that has the ability to direct neural plasticity. In so doing, it has the power to alter the very landscape of the brain."[272] Daniel Bor describes the power attention has in rewiring the circuits of the brain by saying, "in relation to awareness, multiple factions of neurons competitively interact, with two kinds of feedback—a positive form that can rapidly boost neuronal activity, and a negative form that can rapidly inhibit it. The complex interplay between these two opposing feedback loops at the level of local neurons can dynamically tune" nonconscious information processing brain cognition.[273] In an equivalent way that habits, schemas, and goal directed behaviors become automatized through the concept of 'cells that fire together wire together,' selective attention allows for deliberate firing to happen in response to stimuli for faster wiring.

The research in neuroscience and psychology that has brought the power of conscious attention to light is what inspired the production and promotion of mindfulness as a therapeutic practice in cognitive behavioral therapy. As Sharon Begley describes it, mindfulness or mindful awareness is "the practice of observing one's inner experiences in a way that is fully aware but

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[271] Ibid, 329.
[272] Ibid, 339.
[273] *The Ravenous Brain*, 126.

nonjudgmental. You stand outside your own mind, observing spontaneous thoughts and feelings that the brain throws up, observing all this as if it were happening to someone else."[274] From a study conducted in 1992, this method has been shown to be effective in treating people who suffer from depression. By instructing patients suffering with depression to observe their depressive thoughts as a nonjudgmental third-party viewer and not dwelling on them any longer than the moment they arose, researchers were able to help the patients break off the connection between unhappy thoughts and the memories, associations, and patterns of thinking that eventually lead the thought from sadness into depression. By training the brain to adopt new thinking circuits, the mind was able to change the brain more effectively than antidepressant drugs since "cognitive-behavior therapy works from the top down, and drugs work from the bottom up, modulating different components of the depression circuit. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy keeps the depression circuit from being completed."[275]

The results from this study set in motion the development of mindfulness practices and methods in various disciplines to help treat and improve all sorts of mental conditions, and the scope of successful mindfulness treatments includes "depression, anxiety disorder, attention deficit disorder, severe pain management, schizophrenia, and a host of others."[276] B. Allen Wallace, one of the leading researchers in mindfulness, wrote a practice manual for mindfulness meditation titled *The Attention Revolution* in which he says "as with any skill, such as playing the piano or learning a sport, we can, through drills, repetition, and habituation over time,

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[274] Sharon Begley, *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain: How a New Science Reveals Our Extraordinary Potential to Transform Ourselves* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books 2007), 139. (hereafter cited as *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*).
[275] Ibid, 150.
[276] *The Ravenous Brain*, 263.

develop capacities presently beyond our reach."[277] He outlines ten stages of attentional development and claims "the stages start with a mind that cannot focus for more than a few seconds and culminates in a state of sublime stability and vividness that can be sustained for hours[…] Upon reaching the ninth stage, your mind is finely honed, freed from the subtlest imbalances."[278] Mindfulness through focused attention depends on repetition and practice, like most nonconscious cognitive training. Once a person masters the practice, they can free their mind from weaknesses and imperfections. Sharon Begley articulates this notion saying that "willfully induced brain changes require focus, training, and effort, but a growing number of studies using neuroimaging show how real those changes are. They come from within."[279] The results from neuroscience have shown that mindfulness is an effective form of development and is especially helpful in treating divergent mental conditions.

However, since mindfulness meditation requires that people view their own thoughts as an objective observer "without reacting to them by deed, speech or mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc.), judgement or reflection," [280] it can be viewed as an entirely anti-narrative approach to self-development. The aim of mindfulness is to disconnect the mind from the self to the farthest extent possible, which includes detaching and eventually distancing the self from a personal narrative. The reasoning for this approach is that narrative thoughts about a person's past can prompt unwanted emotional responses and, as Darren Good et al. explain, "reduced reactivity to emotional stimuli may be explained by shifts in emotional appraisal fostered by mindfulness… [A]s mindful individuals more objectively observe their

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[277] B. Allen Wallace, *The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications 2006), 4. (hereafter cited as *The Attention Revolution*).
[278] Ibid, 6 and 9.
[279] *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*, 254.
[280]Ibid, 139.

experiences, a decoupling of the brain networks underlying sensory processing and narrative self-processing appears to occur, providing a degree of psychological distance."[281] Mindfulness practices distance the self from a personal narrative and weaken neural connections associated with a personal narrative. Promoters of mindfulness theory see this as a good thing since "mindfulness practice corresponds with deactivation in brain regions linked to self-referential narratives, suggestive of reduced influence of the narrative self." [282] They claim this is important since, for example, if a person was transitioning from a one stage of life to another, "experiential processing may influence typical narrative self-based reactions to the transition, such as stress or attachment to old aspects of identity."[283]

Mindfulness meditation wishes to rid the self of narrative thoughts. It does so first by dismissing those thoughts, while simultaneously attempting to redirect attention away from narrative-based identity thoughts about the self. From a Kierkegaardian approach to teleological self-development, this practice leads an individual toward inauthenticity. Kierkegaard would not agree with this account of selfhood, and, as Wojciech Kaftanski explains Kierkegaard's movements of selfhood and becoming a single individual in *Repetition* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, we see that "human selfhood is understood as a task. An individual must consciously and continuously produce personality." This process requires two movements; first, "to have one's personality awaken, one must transcend one's facticity in an imaginative act that produces a number of imaginary self-representations that, when abstracted, can be scrutinized and evaluated," and the second movement "requires that the individual *returns* to himself and

[281] Darren Good et al., *Contemplating Mindfulness at Work: An Integrative Review* (Sage Publishing, *Journal of Management* Vol. 42 No. 1, January 2016), 131.
[282] Ibid, 133.
[283] Ibid.

implements these constructed personalities in his concrete life."[284] Understood from

Kierkegaard's view, developing a self and a personality requires actively attending to the

narrative-based thoughts, confronting and contending those thoughts, and consciously

implementing those traits that a person views as best for their self in attaining their teleological

goal. The mindfulness approach aims to distance the self from these narrative thoughts, rather

than managing and dealing with them, and can potentially lead to the fragmentation of character

and personality. The person that detaches from these thoughts by not directing them into a

concrete and actualized selfhood but rather tries to keep them away, as Constantin Constantius

explains, "is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape is invisibly

present and therefore is not satisfied to cast one shadow, but the individual has a variety of

shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being

himself."[285] When there are many possibilities, and a person dismisses them and does not

choose, the self is in discontinuity and fragmented. Genuine selfhood requires reflection on the

personality and conscious discipline to work at reshaping the self towards an explicitly

understood telos for proper authenticity.

    If narrative identity is understood as bringing together language, the experience of time,

episodic memory, future planning, and self-evaluation into a coherent self-narrative, then

mindfulness identity can be viewed as focusing on the present, momentary experience, where a

concrete sense of self-identity is replaced by the phenomenon of the self experiencing itself, and

this is viewed as the proper identity. In a study conducted by Yair Dor-Ziderman et al., narrative

identity was compared to mindfulness identity, which they call the narrative self (NS) and

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[284] *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity*, 51.
[285] *Repetition*, 154.

minimal self (MS) respectively, to see which brain areas are involved in the cognition of both forms. The researchers concluded that "the main finding of the present study is the beta-band network underlying MS processing, clearly dissociable in the frequency domain from the well-documented gamma-frequency network underlying NS."[286] The beta-band network is in the motor cortex which is mostly involved in nonconscious brain cognition. The gamma-frequency network stretches more broadly across brain areas and is involved in emotion regulation and processing which is a conscious cognitive process since, as LeDoux explains, "the idea of nonconscious emotion is an oxymoron: If you don't feel it, it's not a feeling, not an emotion."[287] This implies that training in mindfulness is aiming at limiting conscious cognition and conscious control while narrative approaches strengthen and support conscious cognition. Dor-Ziderman et al. explain the conscious versus nonconscious cognitive roles in these two forms of identity by saying "as predicted, frontal, and especially medial prefrontal, high gamma-band decreases in oscillatory activity resulted from attenuating the narrative mode of processing toward a minimal experiential mode. The link between NS attenuation and reduced mPFC activity, is, as noted, supported by virtually all fMRI research and review studies regarding self-referential processing."[288] When participants in the study reduced their narrative identity by working towards a minimal mindfulness identity, conscious cognitive processes were significantly decreased.

These findings imply that mental mindfulness can be helpful for severing unwanted nonconscious neural circuitry, such as those nonconscious cognitive processes that initiate and

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[286] Yair Dor-Ziderman et al., *Mindfulness-induced selflessness: a MEG neurophenomenological study* (Frontiers in Human Neuroscience Vol. 7, 2013), 12. (hereafter cited as *Mindfulness-induced selflessness*).
[287] *Deep History of Ourselves*, 351.
[288] *Mindfulness-Induced Selflessness*, 10.

activate depressive thoughts; but it is not effective for developing the self towards an explicit goal or telos. Also, the methods for applying mindfulness versus applying a narrative approach to self-development happen in radically different environments. As Wallace explains, people who lead busy lives with career and family commitments may never successfully attain a stage higher than stage four of the ten developmental stages, and "this level of professional training may seem daunting and unfeasible to most readers of this book…only a small number of individuals have the time, ability, and inclination to devote themselves to such training."[289] Mindfulness requires solitude and a major time commitment set aside from daily life to work out and develop properly. Narrative-self-talk, however, enables a person to work towards their self-development continuously throughout all situations during the course of a day, creating new habits and developing new schemas in real life interactions to guide nonconscious brain processes in applicable situations.

For this reason, narrative self-identity and narrative-self-talk are a better approach to developing the self. When a person understands that they are a synthesis of immanence and transcendence with their self existing as spirit, possessing the power to direct and lead the synthesis, and they have established a conscious telos that they are directing the self towards, narrative identity and narrative-self-talk serve as effective tools for all that this process requires. The ability to reflect on the history of the self by understanding why you have these habits, dispositions, and character traits, while also recognizing when and where these traits are active, and by remaining consciously aware of the self as a single individual that is responsible for all of these factors, it can all be made coherent under a narrative view of the self. When evidence from neuroscience and psychology are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that Søren

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[289] *The Attention Revolution*, 9.

Kierkegaard was correct in both his formulation of the self and his instruction for properly developing the self in the process of becoming. The human brain is extremely complex and operates on preestablished evolutionary rules, so a proper mode of self-development will also be complex, take time, effort, and significant awareness to achieve, and Kierkegaard understood this. Narrative self-identity and the use of narrative-self-talk is a significant way in which this complex process of self-development can be made consistent, comprehensible, and meaningful. When a person employs these methods that I have laid out in this project, they can attain eudaimonia in the sense of feeling fulfillment as an ethically responsible individual in control of their self and capable of appropriate actions and behaviors through a more robust consciousness and stronger willpower.

VI.   Conclusion

When through leveling by means of skepticism of association the generation has eliminated individualities and all organic concretions and has substituted humanity and numerical equality among men, when the generation momentarily has entertained itself with the broad vista of abstract infinity, which no elevation, none whatsoever, disturbs—that is when the work begins— then the individuals have to help themselves, each one individually. It will no longer be as it once was, that individuals could look to the nearest eminence for orientation when things got somewhat hazy before their eyes. That time is now past. They either must be lost in the dizziness of abstract infinity or be saved infinitely in the essentiality of the religious life. - Søren Kierkegaard[290]

Søren Kierkegaard lived in the city of Copenhagen, Denmark, during its transition into modernity in the mid-nineteenth century. He witnessed the shift towards contemporary urban life firsthand, where the public press released daily newspapers, public conversation and discourse were increasingly transpiring, and, with everyone living so closely together with no imminent need for maintaining personal survival, leisure was sought to a greater extent in the theaters, taverns, and city squares. The public leisurely activity and opinions shared through the press, and public discourse gradually shaped the identities and selfhood of his fellow citizens, mostly without anyone's explicit awareness. Kierkegaard was a keen observer of this phenomenon and critical of where it may lead. In one of his final works as an author, he explained what it means to be a self and how inauthentic selfhood can lead a person into despair. According to his viewpoint, the self is a relation between our temporal, finite existence that includes the reality

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[290] S. Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age – A literary Review*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1978), 108. (hereafter cited as *Two Ages*).

that was not chosen—such as race, gender, family, and culture that shape a person's history and existence in the world—and the eternal, infinite being that can make free choices moving into the future that has not yet been determined. The spirit is the self-conscious awareness of the relationship that makes up the self. The spirit relates itself to the relationship through conscious awareness and works towards synthesizing these two polarities.

When there is instability between these two poles of the self, meaning either too much dependence on our existence in the world or too much emphasis on our freedom and possibilities, the self is in the psychological state of despair. To bring the poles of the self into equilibrium and leave despair, the self must rest in God, who established the spirit of self-conscious awareness and created the self as a relation between the two opposites. To rest in God means the spirit not only relates to itself as a synthesis but also relates to God to guide the synthesis of the self towards complete stability. This relationship requires a recognition of the self as a single individual existing before God, which involves embracing personal responsibility for the actions and direction of development the self makes. This movement begins with choosing the self as a task, taking on the awareness of the history that the self has acquired, including our habits, dispositions, attitudes, and impulses, and understanding the duty required in freedom to become a self that is ethical by shaping these details that make up the self.

In this project, I argued that Kierkegaard has a teleological understanding of self-development. There is a specific goal that the self works towards becoming: recognizing the self as a single individual and then imitating Christ's intentions to guide interactions and choices that are made moving into the future. Since the self is temporal, and the movement of becoming the telos is done over time, I argued that a narrative approach to self-development is necessary and helpful in creating the balanced synthesis within the self and for attaining the telos. A narrative

perspective of self-identity allows a person to link the episodes of their past together into a coherent whole by bringing their past self-history into the present to make sense of their extended and eternal self being the same self through all these changes and challenges that have made up the person's identity and personality. I then argued for a new idea that I call narrative-self-talk, which enables a person to also bring their future into the present by guiding self-development to the telos through explicit awareness and use of simple goal-directed phrases in order to stay on the right track to attain the goal.

Neuroscience and psychology have shown that Kierkegaard's conception of the self is accurate, especially when looking at his distinction between the polarities of freedom and necessity. Over millions of years, the brain has adapted to promote survival by automatizing repeated thoughts and behaviors in nonconscious cognitive processes to save time and valuable energy, which is why getting swept up into and shaped by public opinion and discourse can be so subtle. However, we can also take command of these cognitive functions and guide them according to our will through conscious awareness. Although this is possible, it requires significant effort, focused attention, and self-conscious awareness of the self and the goals that the self aims to achieve. A person must be disciplined and effortful in their development. This much has been shown through evidence in neuroscience and psychology. However, when it comes to the infinite, eternal, and the relationship between the self and God, the words of Vigilius Haufniensis aptly pertain: "further psychology cannot go, but this far it can reach."[291]

Now, two hundred years later, our times are similar to those Kierkegaard was living through in Copenhagen. Unfortunately, the problems that Kierkegaard observed in modernity are now growing more complex, and the potential consequences of these problems have more severe

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[291] *Concept of Anxiety*, 55.

implications. Public opinion and discourse can now extend anywhere in the world that an

internet connection can reach, almost every new technological advancement aims to provide a

life of relative ease by making basic survival nearly effortless which provides a remarkable

amount of free time, and a whole industry for leisure activities proliferates through capitalizing

on the amount of free time that has been made available to us. Public opinion and discourse

exacerbate these problems, and with the internet and social media, we are constantly connected

with everyone. In a study relating satisfaction with life to money, people with less money

reported less satisfaction with life, and "these findings suggest that when we think about our

overall lives, we tend to compare ourselves with others—and when it comes to social

comparison, the sky is the limit."[292] With excessive free time comes reflection where people can

think about and compare themselves to others, and "one things is sure, reflection, like

knowledge, increases sorrow, and beyond a doubt there is no task and effort more difficult for

the individual as well as for the whole generation than to extricate oneself from the temptations

of reflection."[293] Kierkegaard recognized both the diagnosis and cure for this modern human

condition and they are more befitting in our time than ever.

Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the modern human condition is despair, which is universal but

can go undetected since it is "hidden—not only that the person suffering from it may wish to

hide it and may succeed, not only that it can so live in a man that no one, no one detects it, no,

but also that it can be so hidden in a man that he himself is not aware of it."[294] It seems surprising

that despair, whether hidden or recognized, underlies humanity in modernity since conditions are

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[292] Paul Bloom, *The Sweet Spot: The Pleasure of Suffering and the Search for Meaning* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing 2021), 21. (hereafter cited as *The Sweet Spot*).
[293] *Two Ages*, 76.
[294] *Sickness unto Death*, 27.

markedly better now than they have ever been. In his book *Enlightenment Now*, Steven Pinker

provides data showing that things are much better when it comes to life expectancy, food

availability, literacy, education, and leisure time, which have all increased to their highest in

history, while child mortality, poverty, sexism, and racism have all decreased significantly in our

time. [295] On the face of it, people should be more happy and satisfied, and yet Kierkegaard's

diagnosis seems to be accurate. Suicide rates in America have risen by 30% since 2000, and the

opioid crisis has been referred to as 'slow-motion suicide' with deaths from overdose

quadrupling since 2000. As mentioned in the introduction, these deaths are deaths of despair, and

the numbers indicate that despair is a significant affliction in our modern human condition.

The underlying despair in our age can be attributed to a lack of meaning and purpose for

individual's lives that has resulted from these circumstances in modernity. The renowned

psychologist and author Paul Bloom explains that human beings do not want ease of life,

freedom from hardship, and excessive leisure, but rather we thrive and find meaning from

struggle. Bloom argues in his latest book *The Sweet Spot*, that "under the right circumstances and

in the right doses, physical pain and emotional pain, difficulty and failure and loss, are exactly

what we are looking for."[296] Bloom defends a broader picture of human nature, arguing against

the claim that humans care only about pleasure, suggesting that "it turns out that we are inclined

toward something deeper and more transcendent."[297] A famous quote from Agent Smith, a

computer program in the movie *The Matrix*, captures this notion perfectly when he tells

Morpheus how the simulated world they are experiencing came to be:

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[295] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York, NY: Viking Publishing 2018).
[296] *The Sweet Spot*, xii.
[297] Ibid, xiv.

Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program; entire crops [of people] were lost. Some believed that we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world, but I believe that as a species, human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. So, the perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from.[298]

Hardship, suffering, pain, distress, loss, and failure all provide sources of meaning and purpose when approached and dealt with in an appropriate way, and meaning is essential for fulfillment.

Kierkegaard's proposed cure for the condition of despair gets to the heart of the problem, offers meaning and purpose, answers the human desire for something transcendent, and provides a framework for dealing with life's hardships appropriately. When his strategy for treating the modern human condition is understood as both having a narrative methodology and a teleological aim, self-development out of despair and into eudaimonia becomes practical and possible. This approach to selfhood has been proven to provide meaning and satisfaction in life. For example, Emily Smith analyzed both the responses to Will Durant's *On the Meaning of Life*, in which he asked more than one hundred and fifty prominent people in the 1930's to explain the meaning of life, and the responses to the same question proposed by *Life* magazine to over one hundred people in the 1960's. Smith summarizes the findings from her analysis of almost three hundred responses in her book *The Power of Meaning*:

Each of the responses to Durant's letter and *Life's* survey was distinct, reflecting unique values, experiences, and personalities of the respondents. Yet there were some themes that emerged again and again. When people explain what makes their lives meaningful, they describe connecting to and bonding with other people in positive ways. They discuss finding something worthwhile to do with their time. They mention narratives that help them understand themselves and the world. They talk about the mystical experience of self loss.[299]

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[298] *The Matrix*, directed and written by Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, (1999, Warner Bros. Pictures) 1:32:00.

[299] Emily Smith, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life that Matters* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing 2017), 40-41.

Smith organizes the book around four main themes that continuously show up in the summaries; Belonging – connecting and bonding with others, Purpose – pursuing worthwhile goals, Storytelling – forming narratives that bring order to a person's life, and Transcendence – mystical experiences of self-loss.

Similar findings have been reported by Frank Martela and Michael Sterger, who argue that "meaning actually involves at least three separate and more clearly defined facets: coherence, purpose, and significance."[300] They explain that coherence helps people make sense of their life and world by fitting their self and history into a narrative structure. Purpose in life is mostly found when people are directing their self towards a goal. Significance in life arises from viewing that goal as worthwhile and understanding the importance and value of their life narrative. In their article *Beyond Bentham: The Search for Meaning*, George Loewenstein and Niklas Karlsson come to a similar conclusion, stating that there are three factors in determining meaning for a person's life: "Meaning as a resolution of preferences or goals… Meaning as an expansion of the self through time or across persons… [and] Meaning as an interpretation of one's life."[301] Similar to Smith, Martela, and Sterger, they claim that people must figure out what they are aspiring toward, bind themselves to a broader group of people or past and future generations, and create a narrative of their life to interpret and understand their life in relation to the other two factors. All of these are crucial for a person to find and make meaning in their life.

Kierkegaardian narrative self-development that is directed towards a telos meets these requirements for meaning and purpose making in a person's life. Throughout this project, I have

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[300] Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger, *The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance* (The Journal of Positive Psychology 11:5, 2016), 540.
[301] George Loewenstein and Niklas Karlsson, *Beyond Bentham: The Search for Meaning* (Society for Judgment and Decision Making, Newsletter June 2002), 9-10.

outlined a method for Kierkegaardian self-development that emphasizes the importance of these requirements for meaning in life. Purpose in a person's life results from creating a worthwhile goal to pursue, and a teleological approach to Kierkegaardian selfhood provides the purpose for each person: to become the single individual and imitate Christ's intentions. This purpose is universal in that becoming aware of the self as a single individual requires personal self-reflection, and the imitation of Christ's intentions can be implemented in every circumstance and interaction no matter how unique they are from other situations. Coherence and storytelling that make a person's life meaningful comes through narrative self-identity. Not only to create a coherent story of a person's past to understand their present self, but also narrative-self-talk creates coherence moving into the future aimed toward the purposeful telos. Meaningful connections with other people and a sense of belonging are also developed in this framework. By relating as a single individual to God, a person is instructed in their interactions with others, and by imitating Christ's intentions, the single individual loves others as they should, which creates meaningful relationships of all kinds. The narrative reflection of these relationships provides a deeper coherence and appreciation for the bonds and connections we make with others.

The most impactful point that this method provides is the transcendence that Bloom and Smith argue are essential to a meaningful life. Bloom explains that since "meaning involves the pursuit of significant and impactful goals, meaning will inevitably come with suffering—with difficulty and anxiety and conflict and perhaps much more…one might not wish for or welcome suffering. But it always comes along for the ride."[302] He claims, as noted earlier, that we pursue these goals that inevitably involve suffering because, as humans, we are inclined toward something transcendent that makes it all worth it. In our times, things are relatively easy, and

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[302] *The Sweet Spot*, 169.

innovations aim to limit suffering as much as possible, so these transcendent experiences become

lacking, and people are not able to deal with the suffering when it inevitably comes. In his

Christian Discourses, Kierkegaard gives a perfect answer to transcendence in the face of

suffering, trial, and hardship. Part two of the discourses is titled *States of Mind in the Strife and*

Suffering, and in the beginning of that section, he says, "One suffers only once—that is

tantamount to saying of someone that he was sick only once in his life, was unhappy only once

in his life—that is, throughout his whole life…Christianity begins right there where human

impatience, whatever actual suffering it had to lament over, would find this to be infinitely

increased—by the consolation—indeed, by consolation to the point of despair, because from the

worldly point of view Christian consolation is much more to despair over than the hardest earthly

suffering and the greatest temporal misfortune. *There* begins the upbuilding."[303] He continues by

explaining the idea that suffering happens only once since temporality is only a single moment:

"Temporality futilely wants to make itself important, counts the moments, and counts and

adds—when the eternal is allowed to rule, temporality never gets further than, never becomes

more than, the one time. Eternity is the very opposite…of the whole of temporality, and with all

the powers of eternity it resists temporality's becoming more."[304]

This understanding of suffering is entirely subsumed by the transcendent and provides

meaning to life's inevitable suffering in a profound way in which the pursuit of merely earthly

goals is not able. In part three of the discourses, he beautifully articulates that:

> In the dark night of despair, when every light has gone out for the sufferer, there is still one place
> where the light is kept burning—it is along this way the despairing one must go, which is the way
> out: *when* you love God. In the fearful moment of disconsolateness, when there is no more talk or
> thought of any concluding clause, but humanly speaking the meaning is ended—there is still one
> clause left, a courageous clause of comfort that intrepidly penetrates into the greatest terror and

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[303] *Christian Discourses*, 97.
[304] Ibid, 98.

creates new meaning: *when* you love God. In the dreadful moment of decisiveness, when humanly speaking no turn is any longer possible, when there is everywhere only wretchedness wherever you turn and however you turn—there is still one more turn possible; it will miraculously turn everything into the good for you: *when* you love God.[305]

The experience of suffering can seem fatally destructive to the self. However, a transcendent view of meaning and purpose can mitigate the suffering and enable a person to persevere towards their goal. In this way, physical and emotional pain, difficulty, loss, and failure can strengthen our character and enhance our sense of self. Kierkegaard himself found this transcendence transformative in the meaning of his own life and work, writing in his *Point of View* that "if [the single individual] was the right category [to aim my writings], if all was in order with this category, if I perceived correctly here, understood correctly that this was my task, even though by no means pleasant, comfortable, or appreciated, if this was granted to me, although involving inner sufferings such as probably you seldom experienced, although involving external sacrifices such as a person is not every day willing to make—then I stand and my writings with me."[306] Kierkegaard viewed writing to the single individual as his calling in life, where he was guided by Governance to reach that single individual. Through all the inner sufferings and external sacrifices, he was able to transcend and see the significance, purpose, and meaning in his life's work.

In our contemporary times, most of these factors that contribute to the meaning of life largely go unrealized. In the last fifty years, the advancements we have made as a species have provided almost all the necessities for survival and comfort we need, especially in America. Like Nozick's experience machine, people can live as far removed from pain, struggle, and adversity as they wish. In some instances, a lifestyle like this is promoted and desired. Kierkegaard

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[305] Ibid, 195.
[306] *The Point of View*, 154.

explains one of the problems in modernity that leads to this issue, saying that "zealousness to

learn from life is seldom found, but all the more frequently a desire, inclination, and reciprocal

haste to be deceived by life. Undaunted, people do not seem to have a Socratic fear of being

deceived, for the voice of God is always a whisper, while the demand of the age is a thousand-

tongued rumor, not an all-powerful call that creates great men but a stirring in the offal that

creates confused pates, an abracadabra that produces after its kind as is the case with all

production. Even less do people seem to have above all a Socratic fear of being deceived by

themselves."[307] Nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously, people still sense the underlying

emptiness of despair that eventually allures them to seek meaning and some manner of

transcendence, even if they are not necessarily religious.

Kierkegaard understood this desire and made it clear that a person could become spirit

without being a Christian. C. Stephen Evans explains Kierkegaard's view on this by saying that

"it is possible to have a kind of spirituality that Kierkegaard finds admirable, one that shows a

genuine religiosity, one that can be found in non-Christian religions and even in people who do

not possess anything that resembles traditional religious faith. It is, I think, appropriate to call

this 'Socratic spirituality,' since Socrates was for Kierkegaard an exemplar of it."[308] Evans

concludes by precisely articulating just how far the reach of God's transcendence and meaning

for life stretches out to all humans from every walk of life and personal circumstance:

> Genuine spirituality always involves a relation to an ideal that is truly divine; it is rooted in a
> reality that Kierkegaard describes as infinite or eternal or absolute, and thus requires no relative
> comparisons to other humans. Rather, the higher ideal has an ethical character; the self
> understands that what is ultimately important is not whether one is rich or poor, white or black,
> male or female, but whether one strives for moral ideals such as honesty, justice, and compassion.
> On Kierkegaard's view, the call to live in this way is a call from God, though the call can be

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[307] *Two Ages*, 10.
[308] C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2019), 44.

recognized without realizing that God is the source of the call, though recognizing the call as coming from God provides a clearer and more penetrating understanding of the task.[309]

This explanation from Evans summarizes the universality of transcendence that is possible for all human beings to attain. Since transcendence is an essential component for meaning making, a loving God extends this capacity for transcendence to any individual who seeks it.

The method of Kierkegaardian self-development I have argued for in this project aims to surmount the troubling problems in modernity that induce despair. The despair in our generation is palpable, and it is now just as decisively crucial that we open our eyes to recognize the correct path out as it was in Kierkegaard's time. Although the Kierkegaardian method I have outlined requires significant effort, a strong will, resolutely focused attention, and the demanding task of self-conscious awareness regarding the self that is explicitly sustained over time, these difficult actions provide meaning to life and help liberate a person from the modern human condition we find ourselves in. The challenging task of becoming a self, which is the greatest privilege bestowed upon humankind, is demanded of us now more than ever. With an awareness of the significance for belonging, purpose, transcendence, and coherence in life, which are brought about through narrative-identity, the task of becoming a self is made accessible to all who are determined and willing to undertake the inevitable pain, hardship, struggle, suffering, and sacrifice that the development of a meaningful self demands. Becoming a self is eternity's goal, and each person must "let the goal become for you what it is and should be, become so important that there is no question about what the path is like but only about reaching the goal, so that you

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[309] Ibid, 196-97.

gain the courage and understand that whatever the path is like, the worst of all, the most painful

of all—if it leads you to the goal, then it is prosperity."[310]

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[310] *Christian Discourses*, 154.

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