Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism: Towards a Kierkegaardian personal identity theory


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Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism
Towards a Kierkegaardian Personal Identity Theory

By Patrick Stokes

Abstract
This paper attempts to situate Anti-Climacus’ ontology of selfhood in the context of contemporary personal identity theory. In important respects, Anti-Climacus can be read as belonging to a tradition, originating with Locke, that sees psychological continuity as conferring selfhood or personhood. However, the curious temporal characteristics of spirit presented in The Sickness Unto Death point to crucial differences between the Anti-Climacan approach to the question of self-constitution and that taken by mainstream neo-Lockean personal identity theorists.

Introduction
William James once memorably described personal identity as “the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal,” and the sheer volume of philosophical discussion that has attempted to deal with this puzzle lends James’ declaration no small amount of credence. A dizzying range of positions have emerged within the literature – Reductionism, Eliminativism, Animalism, Narrativism, Physicalism, “Closest Contin-

uer” theory, Memory-theory, and many others besides—all attempting either to locate the identity and persistence conditions of individual selves, or else show that talk of selves is either superfluous or incoherent. The concerns and approaches of theorists working in this area vary greatly, but the underlying questions they grapple with are perennial: what makes me the same self that I “remember” being yesterday or anticipate being tomorrow? What is a “self,” anyway? Are facts about personal identity just reducible to impersonal facts about various forms of physical and/or psychological continuity, or is there some “deep further fact” underlying such continuities? These may sound like dry, abstract, academic questions, but they connect with issues—crises of identity, alienation from the past and future, memory loss, personality change, regret, repentance, conversion—that form a real and tangible part of our lived, subjective experience.

It is therefore no surprise that the constitution and maintenance of selfhood should form such a key element in Kierkegaard’s articulation of subjectivity. “Selfhood” as a distinct problem within Kierkegaard’s authorship begins at its very inception with On the Concept of Irony and Either/Or and is the subject of a complex dialectical ontology in The Sickness Unto Death. Kierkegaard offers a distinctively active, normative account of the self as a state to be achieved rather than always-already given, something hard to attain and easy to lose. In the history of the philosophy of self, these are unique and innovative claims; moreover, they are couched in philosophically sophisticated terms and situated within a remarkably rich phenomenology of moral experience.


9 A key phrase in Parfit; see Reasons and Persons, p. 309.
Yet Kierkegaard’s work on the self is conspicuously absent in contemporary discussions of selfhood – even in writers such as Ricoeur who have sought to discuss personal identity in a way that draws on both the continental and analytic traditions.\textsuperscript{10} Anglophone philosophers of personal identity in particular have failed to regard Kierkegaard as figuring in the debate on selfhood, let alone as a potential resource for such discussions. Equally, Kierkegaard commentators have largely ignored the questions raised by analytic philosophers and how these might pose challenges for Kierkegaard. This mutual silence is perhaps understandable given the very different language and concerns of Kierkegaardian and analytic philosophers of personal identity: the effort necessary to understand each other and make ourselves intelligible appears daunting, and the risk of talking at cross-purposes is severe.

Moreover, there is an (admirable) corrective desire amongst commentators to avoid reading Kierkegaard in isolation from the Idealist/Hegelian intellectual context in which he is formed and against which his work needs to be interpreted. Yet even Idealist accounts of self and identity owe something to earlier moves in English and Scottish thought which have conditioned analytic discussions of the topic down to the present day. Both the Anglophone and German traditions can ultimately trace their origins to Locke’s rejection of Cartesian Ego-Substantialism, with Hume’s sceptical response to Locke a key influence on the development of German thought via Kant. Kierkegaard’s account of the self as the product of the “self relating to itself” can be understood as being as much a moment in the history initiated by Locke’s account of consciousness making the self “self to itself” as in the history of Hegelian and Idealist thought.\textsuperscript{11}

The neo-Lockean literature contains a number of perennial and important questions that go to the heart of what we mean when we talk about selfhood and identity. Would it not, therefore, contribute to our understanding of Kierkegaard’s model of selfhood to see how Kierkegaard might respond to some of these problems? Equally, mightn’t Kierkegaard’s work, with its richly-developed philosophical psychology, have something useful and provocative to say to live discussions of selfhood? The stage therefore appears to be set for a somewhat overdue dialogue

\textsuperscript{10} In e.g. Ricoeur \textit{Oneself as Another}.

between Kierkegaard and contemporary personal identity theory. My aim here is, in a modest way, to initiate such a dialogue.

In what follows, I attempt to situate the ontology of selfhood sketched by Anti-Climacus within the conceptual frameworks of contemporary personal identity theory, by showing the respects in which it both belongs to and differs radically from the standard neo-Lockean positions. I then focus on Anti-Climacus’ striking assertion that selfhood, once achieved, can be lost. This claim can be seen to amplify a number of metaphysical problems already familiar to the neo-Lockean literature. Explicating how such problems might arise for Kierkegaardian selfhood, and how Kierkegaard might deal with them, will serve to highlight both the respects in which Kierkegaard’s account is compatible with the neo-Lockean attempt to identify the identity and persistence conditions of selves, and the crucial respects in which it departs from that project.

\[ \text{I.} \]

*The Sickness Unto Death* outlines a distinctive, if initially opaque, relational ontology of selfhood. It is certainly an unusual ontology in that its object never is but is only ever coming to be (“every moment that a self exists, it is becoming \[ Vorden \], for the self \[ \kata \delta\nu\alpha\mu\eta \] does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence”), yet the task Anti-Climacus sets himself is clearly ontological in character. In the infamous opening paragraph, he seeks to distinguish between several components encountered within selves and specify the conditions under which those components constitute a self:

A human being is spirit [\textit{Mennesket er Aand}]. 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 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.\(^{13}\)

Note the rather tangled logic at work in this passage: the terms human, spirit, self and self-relation are all stated to be equivalent, but then “human” is defined as “synthesis” and “synthesis” is defined as not...

\(^{12}\) SUD, 30 / SKS 11, 146, translation modified.

\(^{13}\) SUD, 13 / SKS 11, 129.
being a self until it relates to itself (forholder sig til sig selv). The net effect is to claim that self is a product of the human being’s relating to itself in a particular way, and only when the human being relates to itself in this way can selfhood be said to exist. I don’t propose to say too much about the specific, phenomenal character of such self-relation here; for present purposes it’s enough to note that some form of self-relation on the part of the human being (which Anti-Climacus later identifies as self-consciousness), is the definitive condition for selfhood.

Discussions of this account of selfhood have tended to contextualise backwards, noting the obvious Hegelian overtones of the key passages in Sickness and trying to gauge whether these are offeredironically or parodically, or whether Kierkegaard takes this ontology seriously. It is, however, also possible to assess this ontology in another direction, by seeing where it fits among the competing positions within contemporary philosophy of selfhood. Traditionally, the question of the identity and persistence conditions of selves has been implicitly or explicitly understood as a question of re-identification across time: what criterion/criteria would need to be satisfied to licence us in saying that the person encountered at t₂ is the same person as the person encountered at t₁?¹⁴ There are good reasons for doubting whether the re-identification question is really the appropriate question for getting at what matters in selfhood; Marya Schechtman has argued that characterization rather than re-identification is the question that gets us closer to what we actually care about when asking about personal identity (e.g., survival, self-interested concern, moral responsibility, compensation),¹⁵ while Arne Grøn claims that we don’t re-identify ourselves in the criterial way we re-identify other objects.¹⁶ Still, if we bracket these quite legitimate concerns for the moment, the re-identification approach does at least help to bring into focus the question of what forms of continuity between the t₁-person and the t₂-person would constitute continuity of self, i.e., what has to persist in order for selves to survive. Various forms of continuity present themselves as candidates: biological/organism continuity, psychological facts such as memory, ongoing projects and concerns, dispositions, character, self-nar-

rative, and so forth. Animalism (according to which a self or person *just is* a particular human animal) is currently enjoying increasing adherence, while the argument that selves are brains retains a degree of appeal, but in general it has been “Psychological Criteria” or “neo-Lockean” theories, those that see personal identity as inhering in some psychological property or set of properties, that have been predominant.

Unfortunately for neo-Lockeans, each form of psychological continuity presents its own problems, and so-called “science-fiction” scenarios – mind-swaps, implanted memories, brain transplants, human fission and fusion, teleportation, “Branch Line” cases, and so forth – can be constructed that can appear to invalidate almost any criteria that can be posited, simply by appealing to our intuitive response to such scenarios. A classic example: if my brain is transplanted into my twin brother’s body, surely that’s “me” that wakes up on the operating table; but what if my brain was split and each half placed in the bodies of my triplet brothers’ bodies? They can’t *both* be me.\(^\text{17}\) The same applies if we simply copy the totality of my brain-information into the brains of others without performing any physical transplants at all. For reductionists such as Parfit, this demonstrates that there is no “further fact” about identity: if I know all the psychological and physical facts about a given human being, I know everything there is to know about her identity. If, once we have all these facts, we still want to ask a question about identity (“But is it still her?”), it will admit of no non-arbitrary answer. Identity does not go “deeper” than the (usually scalar) facts about continuity; there is no underlying (non-scalar) “core” fact unifying the other facts about persons.

In light of the above, what sort of identity theorist is Anti-Climacus, if indeed he can be read in these terms at all? Clearly his description of the human being as a “synthesis” of physical and psychological properties (which only becomes a self when it relates to itself) rules out any kind of physical-criterion approach. Nor is he any sort of Animalist, as selfhood is an achieved qualification that supervenes upon being a human being, but cannot be reduced simply to *being* a human (for “[a] human being is a synthesis” and considered *merely* as such “a human being is still not a self.”)\(^\text{18}\) It may seem then that there *is* a “further fact” about selfhood for Anti-Climacus, especially as selfhood is not merely the “negative unity” of the oppositions (both physical and psychological) that make up the human being but a “positive third” that unites them in its

\(^{17}\) Parfit *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 253–261.

\(^{18}\) *SUD*, 13 / *SKS* 11, 129.
Nonetheless, Anti-Climacus is not giving us some sort of Substantialist model; there isn’t, to use Anthony Rudd’s phrase, a “metaphysical pincushion” holding together each accidental property of the self. Anti-Climacus replaces the substantial res cogitans of the Cartesian rationalists with a relational process: “Self is not a substance, but a relation, or, to be more precise, self is a process: self-relating.” The Anti-Climacan “further fact” is thus to be found within the psychology of the human being, a fact about how it relates to itself, not something superadded to the facts of psychology.

It is therefore rather hard to state clearly whether the Anti-Climacan model is reductionist or non-reductionist. But what is clear is that if The Sickness Unto Death contains a genuine ontological claim about selfhood – and even if this is not Kierkegaard’s intention, it can clearly be read as such – it is one that belongs to the neo-Lockean, “Psychological Criteria” side of the personal identity debate rather than the Physicalist or Animalist side. Human beings are both physical and mental entities, but selves are the outcome of a distinctively psychological form of self-relation on the human being’s part:

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical [under Bestemmelsen Sjel] the relation between the psy-

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19 SUD, 13 / SKS 11, 129. I here follow the interpretation as given by e.g. John Elrod that “negative unity” here refers to the fact that the elements held in tension stand in opposition to each other and cannot be understood apart from one another. See John W. Elrod Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 30. This interpretation therefore says nothing about the way the self relates to the opposition. Other interpretations have been given, such as Hubert Dreyfus’ claim that “negative unity” refers to “denying one set of factors and acting as if only the other aspect of the self is the essential one.” This is an interesting reading, but it is not clear to me that it fits the text: this would be a form of despair i.e. a misrelation of spirit, whereas “negative unity” appears to describe an element in the sub-spiritual structure of personhood. Hubert L. Dreyfus “Kierkegaard on the Self” in Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard, edited by Edward F. Mooney, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 14.

20 Anthony Rudd “Narrative, Expression and Mental Substance” in Inquiry 48:5, October 2005, p. 419.

21 Grøn “Self and Identity,” p. 131.

22 Though arguably something is added in that the self-relationship depends on a relationship to God that can only be discerned through a gift of grace.
chical and the physical is a relation. If, however, this relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self. 23

Anti-Climacus uses sjel, “soul,” to mean something like “mental” (the Hong’s translation “psychical” is apt, if necessarily un-poetic), but the term is used here entirely without Substantalist connotations. As such it is closer to Locke’s use of “consciousness” than “soul.” Locke understands the latter term in the traditional sense of immaterial substance and thinks we can know nothing about it, and in any case asserts that it plays no role in the conferring of selfhood, for the one self could theoretically inhere in multiple substances and vice versa. For Locke, it is consciousness that marks the distinction between the identity conditions of the “man” (human) and the “self”:

For as far as any intelligent Being can repeat the Idea of any past Action with the same Consciousness it has of it at first, and with the same Consciousness it has of any present Action; so far is it the same personal Self. For it is by the Consciousness it has of its present Thoughts and Actions, that it is Self to it Self now, and so will be the same Self, as far as the same Consciousness can extend to Actions past, or to come. 24

Anti-Climacus, too, explicitly claims that the actualization of selfhood is a function of consciousness:

Generally speaking, consciousness – that is, self-consciousness – is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self [Jo mere Bevistedh jo mere Selv]; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also. 25

Because Locke was interpreted as claiming that the possession of memories confers selfhood, discussion immediately turned from consciousness to the persistence of memory, a criterion for identity that is famously fraught with difficulties. Yet Locke and Anti-Climacus are both making the claim that selfhood is the product of consciousness, understood in both thinkers as a sort of appropriative, active subjective process (note that Locke’s self is “self to itself” and describes self, the product of extended consciousness, as “a Forensic Term appropriating Actions and their Merit.”) 26 Hence Anti-Climacus has more in common with the

23 SUD, 13 / SKS 11, 129, emphasis added.
25 SUD, 29 / SKS 11, 145.
26 Locke An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, p. 296.
Lockean tradition – or at least with Locke – than might be immediately supposed.

It could be objected here that Anti-Climacus’ reference to “more self” is antithetical to the traditional understanding of identity as a strict, all-or-nothing logical relation: the phrase “more identical” seems as incoherent as “slightly pregnant.” Already, here, we can begin to discern respects in which what Anti-Climacus is offering is something different to the self that is sought in the neo-Lockean tradition. But it does seem clear that *Sickness Unto Death* develops an ontology that in many respects is recognizable as belonging to that tradition, thematically if not genealogically, in that it takes self as arising from consciousness itself rather than from the inherence of accidents in a substance or the persistence of biological or physical facts about human beings.

Anti-Climacus also implicitly seems to adopt a distinction that is commonly encountered in the contemporary literature (though not limited to neo-Lockeanism) between a *narrative self* (a self-image or self-conception that is diachronically constituted) and a *core* or *minimal self*, the present locus of consciousness which relates to the diachronically-extended narrative self.27 This is most apparent in his discussion of the “man of immediacy,” who has only the dimmest conception that he may be more than the sum of his external relations, who fundamentally:

...has no consciousness of a self that is won by infinite abstraction from every externality, this naked abstract self, which, compared with immediacy’s fully dressed self, is the first form of the infinite self and the advancing impetus in the whole process by which a self infinitely becomes responsible for its actual self with all its difficulties and advantages.28

The person of immediacy has a minimal degree of interaction between his minimal and narrative self to the extent that “[h]e appropriates what in his language he calls his self, that is, whatever capacities, talents, etc, he may have,” but only does so “in an outward-bound direction” that loses itself in absorption into the world.29 Accordingly, the notion of a self stripped of all external determinants, such as we might become in the afterlife for example, proves baffling for such an outwardly-turned individual:

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28 *SUD*, 55 / *SKS* 11, 170.
29 *SUD*, 56 / *SKS* 11, 171.
“The question of immortality has often occupied him, and more than once he has asked the pastor whether there is such an immortality, whether one would actually recognise himself again – something that certainly must be of very particular interest to him, since he has no self.”\textsuperscript{30} The absence of self here is ambiguous: the minimal self is always present and is the condition for the subject asking questions about itself at all, yet insofar as it does not relate (non-despairingly) to the moments of its narrative self, it is not a self in the \textit{true} sense. And this closes off any potential return to a pre-Lockean Substantialist account of the self. The minimal self is a necessary condition for the actualization of selfhood, because only it can disentangle itself from externality and relate itself to something transcendent (namely the “power” which established it). Yet insofar as to be a self is not \textit{merely} to have a minimal self, i.e., to be a single point of consciousness, the minimal self does not constitute a subject to which the accidental qualifications of the narrative self inhere.

At the other extreme, it is the awareness of the “naked abstract self,” the “infinite self” or self in “the most abstract form” that makes the despair of willing to be oneself despairingly possible, “severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it” \textit{and} from its concrete determinants, wanting \textit{ex nihilo} “to compose his self by means of being the infinite form.”\textsuperscript{31} Yet such a self can find nothing more to compose itself out of than its existing concrete facticity (“no derived self can give itself more than it is in itself by paying attention to itself”)\textsuperscript{32} and cannot cease \textit{being} that facticity; in other words, the minimal self can never succeed in divesting itself of its narrative self. It “remains itself from first to last; in its self-redoubling it becomes neither more nor less than itself,” and “[i]n so far as the self in its despairing striving to be itself works itself into the very opposite, it really becomes no self.”\textsuperscript{33} The minimal self, when it denies its facticity, is reduced to “a king without a country, absolutely ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{SUD}, 56 / \textit{SKS} 11, 171.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{SUD}, 68 / \textit{SKS} 11, 182. For a recent discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of subjectivity’s desire to “compose” or posit itself under its own power, see K. Brian Søderquist \textit{The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard’s On the Concept of Irony}, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2007.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{SUD}, 69 / \textit{SKS} 11, 183.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{SUD}, 69 / \textit{SKS} 11, 183.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{SUD}, 69 / \textit{SKS} 11, 183.
A final point of apparent congruity between neo-Lockeanism and *The Sickness Unto Death* is the discussion, relatively late in the book, of continuity (*Continueerlighed*) and consistency (*Conseqve nts*). Psychological continuity as a constituent of self is a discernible theme throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship beginning with the emphasis on “continuity” of self in *On the Concept of Irony*. The ironist loses himself in a series of disconnected moods, which, as K. Brian Söderquist puts it, “remain internally unconnected and thus the inner continuity which binds a self together is lacking.” The idea of a self being “bound” together via the internal connectedness of psychological states across time is, of course, the standard neo-Lockean picture of personal identity, and it is a key factor in Kierkegaard’s claim that psychologically atomised subjects such as the ironist are not, in fact, selves. Such deliberate ironic atomization of psychological moments is also a key feature in the aesthete’s flight from boredom in *Either/Or*, most clearly evident in “The Rotation of Crops” where the capacity to become absorbed in disconnected trivia (such as a bead of sweat running down an interlocutor’s face) is lauded. For the fully-developed aesthete, “No part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he cannot forget it any moment he wants to,” and accordingly, a stable continuity of memory, mood and disposition is rendered impossible. Anti-Climacus diagnoses this condition in most people, the great mass of “spiritless” individuals living lives of “endearing childish naiveté” or “shallow triviality” whose lives lack any deep connecting thread between incidents:

Their lives...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. That is why they are always talking among themselves about the particular, particular good deeds, particular sins.

Locke speaks of sameness of consciousness as conferring personal identity, and Anti-Climacus too speaks of extended consciousness as the condi-

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35 *CI*, 284 / *SKS* 1, 320.  
36 Söderquist *The Isolated Self*, p. 160.  
37 *EO1*, 299 / *SKS* 2, 288.  
38 *EO1*, 293 / *SKS* 2, 282.  
tion for the consistency and continuity across time that constitutes self-
hood:

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; they are spirit of sorts for an hour one day a week – which, of course, is a
rather crude \textit{bestialsk} way to be spirit. But eternity is the essential continuity
and demands this of a person or that he be conscious as spirit and have faith.\footnote{SUD, 105 / SKS 11, 217.}

Self-consciousness issues in a qualitative “consistency” which amounts to
existing \textit{qua} spirit.\footnote{SUD, 107 / SKS 11, 219.} Yet this consistency is not a function of psychological
continuity \textit{per se} but of the self-relating activity that constitutes selfhood,
an active appropriation rather than mere succession.\footnote{This is arguably true of Locke too; see my “Locke, Kierkegaard and the Phe-
nomenology of Personal Identity.” However, see also Grøn “Self and Identity,”
p. 133: “Locke’s account of memory oscillates between simple re-identification
and ethical appropriation. Or, rather, he does not see the difference, which
means that he cannot account for what appropriation is.”} Selves qualified as
spirit have “an essential interior consistency and a consistency in some-
thing higher, at least in an idea,” and actively cultivate such consistency
and guard against its dissolution whereby the subject would “be torn
out of the totality in which he has his life” and plunged into “a chaos
in which there is no agreement within itself, no momentum, no \textit{impetus}.”\footnote{SUD, 107 – 108 / SKS 11, 219.}
The stakes are high: to lose consistency is to face an “infinite loss” which
is the loss of selfhood itself, the loss of an integrated, coherent and spiri-
tually qualified totality that “[i]mmediate individuals, the childlike or
childish,” lost in a succession of disconnected particularities, never have.\footnote{SUD, 106 / SKS 11, 218.}

This active, appropriative function of self-consciousness marks an es-
sential difference between continuity of spirit, with its “essential continui-
ity of the eternal through being before God in faith,”\footnote{SUD, 105 / SKS 11, 218.} and the \textit{merely}
psychological continuity of sinfulness which gains its own “increasingly
established continuity”\footnote{SUD, 106 / SKS 11, 218.} as it persists over time. Just as moments of,
say, anger can be said to be expressions of a continuous disposition of
short-temperedness that exists outside of the individual incidents, so
“[i]n the deepest sense, the state of sin is the sin; the particular sins are
not the continuance of sin but the expression for the continuance of sin; in the specific new sin the impetus of sin merely becomes more perceptible to the eye [sandselig mere til at bemærke].” For the demonic personality, for whom there is a kind of self-conscious wilfulness in his sinning, it is only the continuity of sin that binds him into a self; “the state of sin is what holds him together deep down where he has sunk, profanely strengthening him with its consistency.” For present purposes it is important to note that this analysis of the sinner is a classic neo-Lockean picture of a self constituted by the persistence of psychological states. Anti-Climacus endorses one type of continuity (spirit, religiously-qualified active self-appropriation) as self-constituting and denies another (sinfulness) that status, but choosing between forms of continuity in this way seems to wed Anti-Climacus to the foundational neo-Lockean claim that at least some form of psychological continuity across time is what constitutes selfhood. Or so, at first blush, it appears.

Yet if Anti-Climacus does take some form of psychologically-mediated continuity across time to be constitutive of selfhood, his account will run into the same serious problems that psychological identity theorists since Locke have never entirely managed to overcome. We now turn to a consideration of some of these problems.

II.

Perhaps Anti-Climacus’ most innovative contribution to the philosophical discussion of selves is his claim that selfhood is something to be achieved rather than always already given, and moreover, something that can be lost. As we’ve seen above, Anti-Climacus claims that a distinctive, active form of appropriative self-consciousness (one that relates to itself as it relates to the power which established it) creates a continuity or consistency that unifies the disparate moments of the subject’s psychological experience into a coherent whole. Yet taken together, two claims made in The Sickness Unto Death – that self-consciousness confers selfhood, and that most people are only intermittently self-conscious – suggests that selfhood may be fragile and easily lost. Anti-Climacus acknowledges this as a very real danger:

47 SUD, 106 / SKS 11, 218.
48 SUD, 108 / SKS 11, 220.
...it may not be detected that in a deeper sense he lacks a self. Such things do not create much of a stir in the world, for a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having. The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife etc. – is sure to be noticed.49

There is an important ambiguity in the way Anti-Climacus speaks of loss of self, because in another sense the subject cannot get rid of itself: it cannot rid itself of what it finds itself to be, and so death cannot save the despairing person from despair,50 and the self cannot get rid of itself even in a state of despairing misrelation:

For despair is not attributable to the misrelation but to the relation that relates itself to itself. A person cannot rid himself of the relation to himself any more than he can rid himself of his self, which, after all, is one and the same thing, since the self is the relation to oneself.51

Note the curious claim at work in this passage and others that once selfhood has been achieved it can never completely slip back into spiritlessness: “for that the self is too much self.”52 Yet Anti-Climacus discusses loss of self often enough to suggest that he takes the possibility of achieved consciousness being forfeited seriously, and the equation of self-consciousness (which he admits is usually sporadic) with selfhood would seem to commit him to the claim that selves can be lost – and, presumably, regained.

It seems clear that Anti-Climacus takes it that some sort of psychological condition (namely non-despairing self-relatedness) has to be sustained across time if selfhood is not to be lost. The problem, as generations of psychological-criterion identity theorists have found to their cost, is that it seems almost impossible to specify any significant form of psychological continuity that holds across a long enough period of time to ground our intuitions about the unitary identity of individual persons. Consciousness itself, of course, is not continual, nor is memory; this leads to difficult questions about how identity can be maintained over periods of forgetfulness or sleep. Our standard intuition is that the person who woke up this morning is the person who went to sleep last night. Yet any theory that sees personal identity as conferred by continuity of

49 SUD, 32–33 / SKS 11, 148.
50 SUD, 21 / SKS 11, 136.
51 SUD, 17 / SKS 11, 133.
52 SUD, 62 / SKS 11, 177.
consciousness would seem to furnish no more grounds for saying this than for saying that every night we die, and every morning a new person is born in the bed ‘vacated’ by the previous day’s person. To the extent that Anti-Climacus implicitly identifies self-consciousness as the form of psychological continuity that is constitutive of selfhood, he will have to account for how the self can survive even the basic stretches of unconsciousness that punctuate our lives. That, in itself, needn’t be a decisive objection to Anti-Climacus: perhaps a consciousness-based account could be defended by stipulating that there is an intuitively permissible level of disruption and discontinuity that doesn’t compromise or destroy selfhood.

Yet precisely because Anti-Climacus offers such a distinctive candidate for the psychological property which must persist in order for selves to be constituted, the problems his account faces are correspondingly more severe than those of the more orthodox neo-Lockean positions. Anti-Climacus self-relation is a remarkably rigorous process of appropriation: the self wills to be itself in the fullest sense, taking responsibility for its entire history, concretion and situation. Insofar as each moment of self-relation takes the whole self up into itself as itself, the self-relating subject somehow “appropriates” all moments of its past and future. Each “life-moment” as we might call it – each set of psychological, physical and social facts pertaining to the human being in question at each moment – forms part of the self. Yet if such self-relation can cease, and then subsequently re-start, then so do selves, and we thus find ourselves with a metaphysical conundrum: how can something cease to exist and then come back into existence? Or more accurately, what could license us in saying that the same self comes back into existence rather than that a succession of selves arise, each lasting as long as the period of self-consciousness? How could we avoid saying that Anti-Climacus, like Galen Strawson, endorses a picture where human beings have not one self but a succession of short-lived selves that arise and pass away as a function of the psychological state that produces them?

The problem here is the familiar Parfitian one that we seem to be asking re-identification questions that can only have trivial or arbitrary answers. If a group forms to re-constitute a club or society that hasn’t existed in several decades, and claims to be the original club, the identity ques-

tion – is this the same club or a different one? – doesn’t seem to admit of a meaningful answer.\textsuperscript{55} We could, following Nozick, hold that the self that arises in a moment of Anti-Climacan self-consciousness is the same self as the one that existed in a previously concluded moment of self-consciousness insofar as it is the “closest continuer” of that previous self.\textsuperscript{56} But this certainly appeals to no “deep further fact” about selfhood; in effect, the individual subject’s self would have the same sort of identity as the monarch of England: a succession of different individuals but all fulfilling the same role. Anti-Climacus often mentions the self as being (or having something) eternal, but under this scenario the self would only be “eternal” in the sense that the English monarch never dies, only the individuals fulfilling the role.

A closely related problem that besets neo-Lockean theory concerns transitivity. Consider the following diagram. The circles represent the consciousness existing at that time (i.e., the “core” or “minimal” self). The arrows represent the range of past and future life-moments each moment of consciousness relates to itself. At \( t_4 \) the self relates itself to its entire history; hence all life-moments from \( t_1 \) to \( t_n \) are part of the self. At \( t_5 \) this self-relation is lost, and is subsequently regained in another moment of self-relation at \( t_6 \):

\[
\text{Self A at } t_4 \quad \text{No self at } t_5 \quad \text{Self A at } t_6
\]

\[
t_1 \quad t_2 \quad t_3 \quad t_4 \quad t_5 \quad t_6 \quad t_7 \ldots \quad t_n
\]

Note the effect this has on each life-moment: life moment \( t_3 \), for instance, is part of Self A at \( t_4 \), not part of Self A at \( t_5 \) and part of Self A at \( t_6 \). Hence faced with the question “Is the life-moment \( t_3 \) a moment in the life of Self A?” we cannot give a tenseless “yes” or “no.” Yet because identity is classically regarded as a transitive logical relationship (\( A = B \) and \( B = C \) entails \( A = C \)), identity questions always ask for tenseless answers, and when these can’t be given, the criteria upon which identity is claimed to obtain are called into question. Thomas Reid offers a classic example of this objection. A young boy is beaten for stealing fruit from

\textsuperscript{55} Parfit \textit{Reasons and Persons}, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{56} Nozick \textit{Philosophical Explanations}, pp. 29–69.
an orchard. As a youth he becomes a soldier and bravely captures a standard in battle. As an old man, he becomes a General. At the time of the battle, the young soldier remembers his childish transgression and the subsequent punishment. As an old man, he remembers capturing the flag, but he has forgotten the orchard incident completely. If memory is taken as the criterion for, rather than merely as evidence of, personal identity (as Reid, perhaps unfairly, thought Locke took it to be), then we are left with the logically intolerable consequence that while the boy and the young soldier are the same person, and the young soldier and the old general are the same person, the old general and the boy are not the same person: A=B, B=C, C≠A.\(^{57}\) This will apply to any form of psychological continuity that does not hold uniformly across an entire human life, not just memory, and it seems doubtful we could find any forms of continuity that do so hold (what sort of significant psychological connections could hold between an infant and adult, for example?)\(^{58}\) Anti-Climacan self-consciousness, which is presented to us as frequently intermittent, clearly wouldn’t fit the bill.

There only appear to be two things we can say about the situation depicted in the diagram: either Self A successively comes into, goes out of, and comes back into existence – in which case, as we’ve seen, we have strong metaphysical grounds to doubt whether there’s any force in the declaration that the self at t\(_6\) is the same self as the self at t\(_4\) – or we admit that two (or more) selves exist which appropriate exactly the same life-moments. This would apparently involve multiple selves supervening upon the same life-moments, such that we will find it hard to say how many selves exist at any given point t\(_1\), t\(_2\)...t\(_n\). There is a parallel here with the well-worn “fission” thought-experiments offered throughout the neo-Lockean literature. Suppose Person X somehow splits, amoeba-like, into two distinct persons, Y and Z, both of whom then claim to “be” X by dint of having X’s memories, character, commitments etc. When faced with the question “is Y and/or Z the same person as the pre-fission person X?” then the one-one, transitive character of the logical relation of identity would force us to conclude either a) X has died and Y and Z have come into existence, or b) in the pre-fission state there were three, indis-


tinguishable persons, X, Y and Z, “inhabiting” one body.\textsuperscript{59} And this seems plainly untenable.

These problems are bad enough for identity theorists who do not posit self as something to be achieved and something that can be lost. With Anti-Climacus, who makes this further move, the problems are accordingly amplified. One response might be a quasi-reductionist one: to read “self” as simply another name for, rather than a product of, self-consciousness, and so see Anti-Climacan selfhood as the name for a state which individual human beings are in some of the time. The effect of this move would be to divorce meaningful questions about personal identity from questions of selfhood: it’s not selves (which would be temporary psychological states) who bear moral responsibility or who are the objects of our self-interested concern, but human beings. Yet this is clearly a long way from what Anti-Climacus wants to claim for the self: for him, it’s surely selves that are called to answer morally and eschatologically. In short, Anti-Climacus wants there to be a “deep further fact” about selfhood underlying the disparate moments of psychological experience, wants this deep further fact to be psychological in character, and wants it to inhere in a state of consciousness that, by his own admission, is not always achieved and can be intermittent in character. How, then, do we get out of the apparent logical contradictions and incoherencies his account throws up? The answer is to be found in the distinctive temporal character Anti-Climacus assigns to self-experience, something that marks a crucial point of differentiation from the neo-Lockean tradition within which we have sought to situate him.

\textit{III.}

An interesting feature of the contexts in which Anti-Climacus discusses loss-of-self is that he appears to conflate loss of self with never having had a self, or the loss of an already-achieved state with never achieving that state in the first place. The major discussion of loss of self concerns the person of immediacy who has “emasculated oneself in a spiritual sense” through thoughtless immersion in a finite world that “has no understanding of the reductionism and narrowness involved in having lost oneself, not by being volatilised in the infinite, but by being completely finitized, by becoming a number instead of a self, just one more man,

\textsuperscript{59} Parfit \textit{Reasons and Persons}, p. 257.
just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei*.“\(^{60}\) Caught up in the stream of finite factors against which it never differentiates itself, the finitised subject offers no resistance and takes no risks:

Not to venture is prudent. And yet, precisely by not venturing it is so terribly easy to lose what would be hard to lose, however much one lost by risking, and in any case never this way, so easily, so completely, as if it were nothing at all – namely, oneself. If I have ventured wrongly, well, then life helps me by punishing me. But if I have not ventured at all, who helps me then? Moreover, what if not by venturing at all in the highest sense (and to venture in the highest sense is precisely to become aware of oneself) I cowardly gain all earthly advantages – and lose myself!\(^{61}\)

The person of immediacy is ground “as smooth as a rolling stone,”\(^{62}\) allowing it to pass through the social and commercial world easily and without friction. In what sense does this count as *losing* a self? Interestingly, this is not so much to lose a state that has already been attained, as to lose the *possibility* of becoming a self, like a raw material that is simply ground down rather than ground into the shape that it was intended for.\(^{63}\) Compare Anti-Climacus’ claims here with the image of the “inner being” being “stillborn” in the veronymous discourse “Strengthening the Inner Being”: if the “concern” for transcendent meaning whereby the subject comes to differentiate itself from the world leads that person to “have in mind deciding this matter once and for all and then being finished with it,” then “the inner being would only be stillborn and would vanish again.”\(^{64}\) Here too the ontological status of the inner being is ambiguous: it vanishes “again,” yet it is also “stillborn,” suggesting that it is both simultaneously something that has been lost and something that never came into being in the first place. In the same way, “secular” or “philistine-bourgeois” persons of immediacy, who never tear themselves out of finitude’s prudential calculations of probability to relate themselves to something infinite and transcendent, “have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God”\(^{65}\) and yet such a self “has lost his self and God.”\(^{66}\) In the first instance it appears clear that the self has never existed (the self of immediacy hasn’t degenerated

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\(^{60}\) *SUD*, 33 / *SKS* 11, 149.

\(^{61}\) *SUD*, 34–35 / *SKS* 11, 150.

\(^{62}\) *SUD*, 34 / *SKS* 11, 150.

\(^{63}\) *SUD*, 33 / *SKS* 11, 149.

\(^{64}\) EUD, 87 / *SKS* 5, 94.

\(^{65}\) *SUD*, 35 / *SKS* 11, 151, my emphasis.

\(^{66}\) *SUD*, 41 / *SKS* 11, 156, my emphasis.
into bourgeois thoughtlessness, but has always existed within it), and yet the self has at the same time been lost.

This curious conflation of the self’s having been lost with its never having existed at all also features elsewhere in Anti-Climacus’ descriptions of despair. When the “philistine-bourgeois” finds himself confronted by adversity, then he despairs: but this reveals that he was in despair already, in that he lacked “faith’s possibility of being able under God to save a self from certain downfall.” To despair is to be revealed as having been always in despair: “for whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has been in despair his whole life….Despair is a qualification of the spirit, is related to the eternal, and thus has something of the eternal in its dialectic.”

This “eternal” element here amounts to despair being always present at all points in the life of the subject up to the despair-event that discloses it.

The other side of this eternal element in the dialectic is that being saved from despair is somehow to be permanently saved. Anti-Climacus tells us that not being in despair is different from not being lame, for the non-lame person can still become lame in the future, whereas to be saved from despair is to lose the very possibility of despairing itself: “Not to be in despair must signify the destroyed possibility of being able to be in despair; if a person is truly not to be in despair, he must at every moment destroy the possibility.” If the self is cured of despair, then it thereby continually destroys the possibility of ever despairing again, and, as a corollary, if the self does despair again this shows that it was always in despair all along and was never in fact saved. As despair is equivalent to loss of self, and to be saved from despair is to acquire a self, this amounts to the claim that to lose the self is never to have had a self in the first place, and to gain a self is to gain it once and for all.

This is surely puzzling and decidedly un-Kierkegaardian. If salvation from despair depends upon a particular state of consciousness, one that can be punctual and intermittent and that must be actively maintained, how could it be the case that we lose the possibility of sinking back into despair? If selfhood is achieved through such a precarious and fragile

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67 SUD, 41 / SKS 11, 156.
68 SUD, 24 / SKS 11, 140.
69 SUD, 15 / SKS 11, 131.
70 Importantly, being saved from despair is always a redemption, so while the despairing self was always in fact in despair, it is not the case that the self saved-from-despair was always in fact saved.
mental state, how could it be the case that selfhood is never lost – and if it is never lost, why use the strong, distinctive phrase “loss of self” at all? Why not simply talk about selfhood never being achieved, or about the capacity for selfhood being squandering,\(^71\) rather than saying repeatedly that the \textit{self} can be lost?

The answer is perhaps to be found by following a suggestion made five years earlier in \textit{Either/Or}. In his discussion of the category of the “first love,” Judge William cites the claim in Hebrews 6:4–6 that those who have been converted and subsequently relapse can never be saved again: “Here, then, the first acquired its whole profound meaning. In the first, the whole profound Christian life proclaimed itself, and then the person who blundered in it was lost. But here the eternal is drawn too much into temporal qualifications.”\(^72\) The final sentence suggests that we make a category mistake if we consider questions of salvation in temporally schematised terms; William’s attempt to dismiss a potentially disturbing theological problem depends upon a denial that we can fully apply temporal categories such as duration, pastness and completion to questions of faith and salvation. In \textit{Sickness Unto Death}, this idea manifests itself in the curious temporal characteristics of despair. Both despair and selfhood have something of the “eternal” in them, but this is not presented to us as simply infinitely extended temporal duration. Rather, the eternality of despair can be read as an expression of its resolutely “present tense” character:

Every actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair he \textit{is bringing} it upon himself. It is always the present tense; in relation to the actuality there is no pastness of the past: in every actual moment of despair the person in despair bears all the past as present in possibility.\(^73\) This present-tense character is rarely attended to in the critical literature,\(^74\) and this is perhaps understandable given all the ways in which \textit{Anti-Climacus} seems to emphasise continuity and consistency across time – precisely the characteristics which, as we’ve seen, suggest that \textit{Anti-Climacus} belongs to the psychological criteria school of personal identity theory. And undeniably, \textit{Anti-Climacus} \textit{does} present sin and despair as states which can be described in terms of temporal extension, states with histories across time. It is perfectly possible to narrate histories

\(^{71}\) Another term \textit{Anti-Climacus} employs e.g. \textit{SUD}, 31 / \textit{SKS} 11, 147.
\(^{72}\) \textit{EO2}, 41 / \textit{SKS} 3, 48.
\(^{73}\) \textit{SUD}, 17 / \textit{SKS} 11, 132–33.
\(^{74}\) It is discussed briefly in Dreyfus “Kierkegaard on the Self,” p. 15.
of immediate persons: “Meanwhile, time passes...a self he was not, and a self he did not become, but he goes on living, qualified only by immediacy...he dies, the pastor ushers him into eternity for ten rix-dollars – but a self he was not, and a self he did not become.” Yet this is essentially the history of the human being, the synthesis of polar opposites which, when it relates to itself, becomes a self. What I wish to claim here is that, in Anti-Climacan ontology, the temporal character of selves differs from the temporal nature of human beings. Humans are things in the world, things that (as Heidegger famously said in his introductory lectures on Aristotle) are born, work and die, things that carve out spatio-temporal paths through the world and whose durations can be measured with stopwatches and calendars. With selves, it’s not so simple. And the key to this complication is the self’s qualification as eternal.

IV.

As noted above, the lives of immediate people can be quite successfully narrated from the outside, lives with more-or-less definite beginnings, middles and ends. Yet Anti-Climacus insists that such things are not automatically selves, but can only become selves through a sort of self-conscious appropriation of themselves over and above any facts of psychological continuity their lives may have. The reach of this appropriative self-relation is extensive: all moments of facticity are brought into selfhood through this mechanism. In this way it becomes clear that such self-relation is something more than just affective identification with psychologically similar parts of our lives, something that we notoriously can lose over time (consider the reformed criminal who looks back at his past and can no longer identify with the self he remembers being, lacking as he does what Schechtman has called “empathic access”). The subjective character of such self-relation must therefore be something quite distinctive in that it can appropriate a totality that may incorporate significant psychological change across time. And this distinctiveness finds its expression partly in the temporal character of subjective self-experience.

75 SUD, 52 / SKS 11, 167–68.
In the quote given above, despair, as the self’s despairing misrelation to its facticity, has the curious quality of compressing the past into the present: “in relation to the actuality there is no pastness of the past: in every actual moment of despair the person in despair bears all the past as present in possibility.” This interesting formulation (related, I would suggest, to the phenomenology of *Samtidighed*, “contemporaneity” that Kierkegaard develops across his authorship), places the emphasis on the present moment, removing the temporal distance and alterity conferred by pastness and bringing the self’s past into full presence in the present moment. What this suggests is that the experience of temporality in self-relation, whether despairing or non-despairing, differs radically from that which applies when regarding human beings as human beings. Rather than diachronic continuity, self-relation apparently involves an experience of self in robustly present-tense, *synchronous* terms.

This present-tense character of all moments of the self is a function of the transfiguring effect of the self coming to relate itself to the eternal, to that which transcends time. Anti-Climacus insists in several places that the self has something of the eternal in it, something it can never rid itself of, and this language naturally invokes the idea of an eternal soul or immaterial substance underlying all moments of selfhood. It is indeed possible to make a prima facie case for the eternal as a form of “unchangeability,” which as Mark C. Taylor notes is a consistent referent of Kierkegaard’s use of the term eternal, which would bring us back to continuity across time. However, if we accept that Anti-Climacus rejects Substantialism, it becomes difficult to see what could count as an unchangeable element in the “stuff” of human existence that remains. We have noted that sin has a kind of continuity and temporal extension to it, and accordingly it is easy to assume that the “continuity” of sin and the “continuity” of non-despairing selfhood are the same thing. In that case, if we could point to one human and say he is in despair and then point to another and say she is saved from despair, we would simply be offering soteriologically evaluative descriptions of their respective underlying psychological continuities: *this* temporally-extended psychology is in a state of sin, *that*

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78 *SUD*, 17 / SKS 11, 132–33.
79 On this topic, see my “‘See For Your Self’: Contemporaneity, Autopsy and Presence in Kierkegaard’s Moral-Religious Psychology” in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming), and “Locke, Kierkegaard, and the Phenomenology of Personal Identity.”
temporally-extended psychology is not in sin and has therefore achieved selfhood. Yet the curious temporal characteristics we’ve come across so far – the presence of all moments of the past in despair, the apparently “once and for all” character of despair and selfhood – suggest that the continuity conferred by the eternal appears to be something radically different from these forms of straightforward psychological continuity.

The move out of unconscious despair into self-relation involves a progressively greater awareness of the individual’s relation to the eternal, and this results in a synchronic rather than diachronic experience of time. The person of immediacy lives purely in temporal flow and has nothing of the eternal other than the structural potential for eternity inherent in all humans. As despair becomes progressively more self-conscious, it attains to a correspondingly greater relation to the eternal, to that which transcends temporality. Hence the person trapped in self-including despair “goes on living horis succesvis [hour after hour],” yet “even if not lived for eternity, his hours have something to do with the eternal and are concerned with the relation of his self to itself – but he never really gets beyond that.”81 This self has at least some sort of relation to the eternal – in that he rejects it – but is nevertheless still embedded in time experienced as a mere succession of moments. Yet even though the self caught in this sort of despair tries to reject the eternal as the non-temporal that transcends and transfigures time, spirit (self-relation) is always a relation to the eternal and so its despairing self-(mis)relation is always present-tense:

...to despair is a qualification of spirit and relates to the eternal in man. But he cannot rid himself of the eternal – no, never in all eternity. He cannot throw it away once and for all, nothing is more impossible; at any moment that he does not have it, he must have thrown it or is throwing it away – but it comes again, that is, every moment he is in despair he is bringing his despair upon himself.82

The despair of Indeslutteredhed (“inclosing reserve” or “withdrawal”) therefore shows up clearly the two divergent experiences of time proper to the human being (the person regarded simply as a synthesis of opposing elements), and to spirit (the synthesis’ relating to itself). It also demonstrates just how maddeningly complex the dialectic of self-as-human and self-as-spirit is. To the extent that the despairing subject relates itself to itself, it relates itself to the eternal, in a movement that takes the temporally-extended synthesis that constitutes the human being up into a to-

81 SUD, 64 / SKS 11, 179.
82 SUD, 17 / SKS 11, 133.
tality that relates itself as a totality to something transcendent. It cannot successfully “throw away” the eternal because this cannot be done once and for all: to throw away the eternal is to be throwing it away and thus relating oneself to it: “every moment he is in despair he is bringing his despair upon himself.”

Despair, in Alastair Hannay’s terms, is “an action of the spiritual subject unwilling to conform to its true self,” and to the extent that despair is thus a qualification of spirit, it therefore fundamentally relates to the eternal. Hence despair does not properly belong to the successive time in which the self tries to remain immersed; it still retains a covert, self-effacing relationship to the eternal that it is actively trying to avoid. In the most conscious forms of despair, the despair of defiance, this reaches the level of consciously railing against eternity and willing to remain in the concrete and temporal:

... he is afraid of eternity, afraid that it will separate him from his, demonically understood, infinite superiority over other men, his justification, demonically understood, for what he is. – Himself is what he wills to be. He began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and now he has finally become so concrete that it would be impossible to become eternal in that sense; nevertheless, he wills in despair to be himself. What demonic madness – the thought that most infuriates him is that eternity could get the notion to deprive him of his misery.

Yet to defy the eternal in the self in this way is not to get rid of it, but in fact to actively relate to it in every moment. Insofar as defiance represents such a conscious, willful misrelation within the spirit, it is “the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self” or “despair through the aid of the eternal”; for this reason it is simultaneously “very close to the truth” and “infinitely far away.”

It is also suggestive that, as we are told in a footnote, children (who Kierkegaard claims in Johannes Climacus do not possess self-consciousness) cannot despair because they only have the eternal present in them in potentiality. Children are clearly human beings, yet to the extent that they are not self-relationally conscious they are not (at least according to Anti-Climacus!) selves. Yet if eternity is only present in them to

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83 SUD, 17 / SKS 11, 133.
85 SUD, 72 / SKS 11, 186.
86 SUD, 67 / SKS 11, 181.
87 JC, 168 / Pap. IV B 1, p.145.
88 SUD, 49 / SKS 11, 164.
the extent that selfhood is, this implies that eternity is a function of self-consciousness, not a pre-existing condition of human beings. Once again, this works against a Substantialist reading of Anti-Climacus: the “eternal” in the self is no sort of immaterial soul that persists throughout human life. But if we posit a moment in human life where the eternal “begins” (without seriously suggesting consciousness arises in a single, discriminable moment)\(^89\) we can have at best only a concept of the eternal as infinitely extended duration rather than atemporality – otherwise, how could the eternal have a \textit{beginning}? Again, the idea seems to be that when self-consciousness begins, the self relates to something radically different from the temporality in which it has its (merely) human existence.

What the self comes into contact with in its engagement with the eternal is the possibility of eschatological judgment, which collects the \textit{totality} of a life into a single object of assessment:

And when the hourglass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then...eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not.\(^90\)

In the face of this eschatological scenario, one is either in despair or one has repented of despair and been saved. In the former case, “eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you – or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it binds you to yourself in despair”;\(^91\) in the latter case, one is judged as \textit{not} being in despair, \textit{whatever} has gone before. Hence the soteriological status of the totality depends entirely upon the \textit{present moment}’s mode of self-relation; and it is for \textit{this} reason that we can speak of despair making it apparent we have \textit{always} been in despair, or of being saved from despair as removing the very possibility of despair. Across the course of a human life it is entirely possible to slip back into despair or lose acquired selfhood; but the viewpoint of spirit is \textit{entirely present tense} because entirely oriented towards how the totality to which I relate myself will be judged in eternity. There is no question of whether I \textit{have been} in despair or how \textit{many} times I have achieved self-


\(^{90}\) \textit{SUD}, 27 / \textit{SKS} 11, 143.

\(^{91}\) \textit{SUD}, 28 / \textit{SKS} 11, 144.
hood; from the viewpoint of spirit, concerned for its salvation, there is only the present-tense question of whether *I am in despair.*

None of this is to suggest that the non-despairing self somehow lives “outside time.” Rather, the non-despairing self lives in a present moment that is transfigured by contact with the eternal. It simultaneously relates itself to what is temporal – the diachronically extended or “narrative” self and its environment – and the eternal. To employ the language of Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonym with whom Anti-Climacus is most closely aligned, the non-despairing self lives in the Moment (*Øieblikket*), the point where time and eternity intersect: “The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time.”

It is through this contact with the eternal, as Haufiniensis puts it, that the division of time into past, present and future “acquires its significance,” by relating temporally schematised events to an eternal, transcendent goal. As Taylor notes, Anti-Climacan selves are “tensed”: “The past is the self’s actuality, the future is its possibility, and the present is the moment in which freedom can be exercised by actualizing possibilities.” Yet only in relation to the eternal, with its possibility of final judgment, does the past appear as the actuality for which I am responsible, the future as the stage for possibilities which I am to actualise, and the present at the place where I relate this totality, from birth to death, to the eternal beyond.

V.

What these admittedly incomplete observations on *The Sickness Unto Death* give us is a picture of Anti-Climacan selfhood that is at once closely aligned with and profoundly different to the contemporary neo-Lockean picture of selfhood. The alignment is reasonably clear: insofar as he takes self-consciousness to confer selfhood, Anti-Climacus belongs in the “psychological theory” camp in the debate over personal identity. To the extent that he, and Kierkegaard generally, provides lucid and compelling phenomenologies of what it is to experience co-identity with one’s remembered past and anticipated future – and what it is like *not* to do so

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92  *CA,* 89 / *SKS* 4, 392.
93  *CA,* 89 / *SKS* 4, 392.
94  Taylor *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship,* p. 7.
– Kierkegaard stands, I believe, as a valuable source of insight and observation for theorists working in that tradition. Kierkegaard is a rich seam that philosophers of personal identity and moral psychologists have barely begun to mine.

Yet it is important to keep clear that Anti-Climacus is trying to answer a fundamentally different question to contemporary personal identity theorists, and this makes his picture of selfhood crucially different too. To reiterate, “orthodox” neo-Lockeans ask a question about the criteria for re-identifying selves at different points in time (other types of neo-Lockeans, such as narrative theorists, arguably ask a question about “characterization” instead).95 They seek to answer a purely metaphysical question, albeit one that has crucial ethical and eschatological implications to do with responsibility, self-interested concern and survival (indeed, the metaphysical question is standardly motivated by the ethical questions, and Locke himself seeks an account of identity that will hold everything the self will be judged for on “the great Day, wherein the Secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open”).96 Yet ultimately the moral facts are taken to supervene upon the metaphysical ones, which in themselves are morally neutral.

Anti-Climacus, too, starts from a moral-religious question about selfhood, but develops his account of self-consciousness as self-constituting from an internal perspective that is essentially morally normative. Despite the somewhat professorial character of his writing, he does not step back to impersonally consider the identity and persistence conditions of selves as such. Rather, he remains on the level at which the question is asked in the first place: the question of my selfhood, where this is a question of what Johannes Climacus earlier called my infinite, passionate interest in my eternal happiness. And as Anti-Climacus shows, this question can only be asked from the inside; unlike the traditional question about identity, it cannot be asked tenselessly or impersonally, but only here, now and for me. Hence I cannot ask “is A at t₁ the same self as B at t₂,” at least not if we are asking about selves in the Anti-Climacan sense; the only question I can ask – and given the moral and eschatological basis for the concern for selfhood that Anti-Climacus is starting from, the only question I should rightly be concerned about – is “is the self I remember being one that I am to take responsibility for?” And given that there will only rarely

95 Schechtman The Constitution of Selves, pp. 73–92.
96 Locke An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, p. 294.
be occasion to ask such a question, this really comes down to the question “have I taken responsibility for my past and future?”

This may seem unsatisfying for personal identity theorists, but it does have the (perhaps philosophically dubious) merit of excusing Anti-Climacus from having to answer the difficult questions that have plagued that debate since its inception. If the question of the selfhood created by self-consciousness can only be asked from the here-and-now, then questions about the persistence of selves, and accordingly questions about unconsciousness, amnesia, fission, fusion, etc. all dissolve into questions about the persistence conditions of human beings – an interesting metaphysical problem, certainly, but quite irrelevant to the question of the self in Anti-Climacus’ terms. And in an important sense, it’s also finally irrelevant to the concerns for responsibility, self-interested concern and survival that motivate us to ask questions about personal identity in the first place. These concerns all imply a self that I cannot stop asking about or caring about even after being shown that my human persistence conditions won’t furnish any non-trivial “deep further fact” about identity. It’s this self, the incorrigible locus of self-concern, that is at the heart of Anti-Climacus’ account, and which has its being in the moment in which it appropriates its life in its entirety as all that it is answerable for. How long such moments of self-conscious self-appropriation happen to last, a question about psychological continuity which a neo-Lockean would naturally ask, actually has no bearing upon the question of selfhood as Anti-Climacus sees it. As a psychological state, self-constituting self-relation may persist for just an instant or an entire lifetime, but in the fundamental sense, selves only exist in one moment: the Moment. Right now.

This is a difficult thought, and I am not sure I have explained it as clearly as I could have. Much remains to be worked out. Nonetheless, Anti-Climacus, and Kierkegaard generally, stands as someone with important and challenging things to say to contemporary analytic philosophers of personal identity – both about the phenomenology of personal identity and the nature of the questions that should motivate any such inquiry.97

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